

Stepney Underwood

Interview with Stepney Underwood

—*John Morgan Smith*

THE COURT JESTER

"Yassuh, I was a slave. I was tin year' old whin de war begin." Uncle Stepney spoke the words between intermittent jerks of an uncontrollable voice. The nervousness which resulted from hard work and a long struggle for existence had not only given him palsy, but had left him with an upheaving diaphragm. Thus he shook and shivered while stuttering so constantly as to be almost unintelligible.

"My mammy belonged to the Johnstons and my pappy was owned by the Underwoods," he continued; "dey lived next to each other on two big plantations in Lowndes County. Dey was good peoples —dem Underwoods. I remembers dat dey use to think I was as funny as a little monkey. De massa usta laugh his head off at me, and when dere was parties, de guestes would always say: 'Whar Stepney? We wants to see Stepney dance.' I usta cut many a [...] pigeon wing fur 'em.

"One day atter I finish' my chores, I slip off an go across de line to see my mammy. When I was a-comin' back th'ough de woods, I met up wid two pattyrollers. Dey stop me and say: 'Nigger, who you belong to?'

"'Massa Jim Johns'on,' I answers.

"'Whut you a doin' out here, den?' dey say, all de time a slippin' a little closer so's to grab me.

"I don't take time to gib 'em no mo' answers kaze I knowd dat dis meant a beatin'. I starts my legs a-flyin' an' I runs through de fores' lak a scar't rabbit wid dem pattyrollers right behin' me. My bare feets flew over dem stones an' I jus' hit de high spots in de groun'. I knowed dem two mens didn't have no chance to kotch me, but dis sho meant a whuppin' when I got home.



Stepney Underwood, [TR: Birmingham], Alabama

"But I didn't go home dat night. I stay out in de woods and buil' me a little fiah. I laid down under a sycamo' tree a-tryin' ter make up my min' ter go an' take dat beatin'. I heered de panthers a screamin' a way off in de fores' an' de wildcats a howlin', an' how I wished I coulda been wid my mammy. Eve'y now and den, I could see eyes a shinin' in de darkness an' rustlin's in de bushes. Warn't no use of me a-cryin' kaze I was a long wayfum home an' dere warn't no one to could hear me. Eve'y thing seem to be agin' me. Far off across de ridge I heered a screech owl a-callin', an' I knowd dat meant death. I was glad I had my overalls on so's I could turn my pockets inside out'ards to stop him. Atter I done dis, he sho-nuf stopped. Den my lef' ear it commence to ichin', and I knowd dat someone was a-sayin' somethin' mean about me. Probably dat oberseer dat was a-goin' to whup me when I got home. Soon I fell slap to sleep on a bed of moss. De nex' day I was awful hongry, an' long 'bout de time de sun was a-comin' ober de ridge, I heerd some mens a-comin' through de brush. It was de massa, de oberseer an' some mo' mens. I runs toward de massa and I calls as loud as I could: 'Massa Jim, here I is.'

"He come up wid an awful frown on his face and de oberseer, he had a big whup in his han'.

"'You little bur-head Nigger debil', de massa say, 'I teach you ter run away fum yo' place. Come on home; I'se gwine give you a good breakfast an' fix you up in some decent clothes. I'se got visitors a-comin' an' heah you is out in de woods when I needs you to dance.' Den de massa, he smile lak I ain't done nothin' wrong. 'I guess you wants yo mammy, you little lonesome pickaninny. Well, I s'pose I hadda go ober and buy her. You little debil you—now git on home.'"