Behind the Cane Curtain

Chapter I

By PATSY SIMS

It could be a day in late January or February. No matter the month. One day just leads into the next, and one's cold and gray as another now that the curtain of green cane that shot up during the summer and lined Highway One all August and September is gone.

The cutters and tractors—stilts caked with sticky black clay—are off somewhere under a roof, and the long trailers spilling over with stalks of cane no longer creep up and down the highway between Raceland and Napoleonville like a steady stream of ants after molasses. There are just muddy rows of khaki-colored attilles—leftovers from this year's crop, beginnings of the next—and shacks sticking up on the now barren land, a half-dozen or so of them way off from the highway, basted along side a road, dirt in summer, turned to mud by endless days of rain. The two of them, Henry and Edna Cook, and three of their four children—all except a married daughter—live in a bed with a lumpy mattress and the shredded insides of a quilt pulled over it take up most of what is the living room. That and a redwood chifforade, a section of an old sofa, a TV set, an organ like you buy at Kress, a small table of jelly glasses and figurines. Framed pictures of John and Robert Kennedy with Martin Luther King in the middle and one of the Last Supper are nailed up over the bed.

There's a gas heater, too, with two straight-back chairs and a broken child's rocker pulled up beside it, turned so you can watch the TV, and, coming from behind the red-and-white-checkered curtains that separate the living room and the kitchen, the smell of white beans cooking.

HENRY HAD COMPLAINED about them back in December. "Sho, I got tired eating 'em but I got to put 'em in the pot," he said that day after he had pulled the tractor into the front yard and stopped long enough to come in for lunch. Across the road, trailer trucks—each crammed with maybe twenty, thirty tons of cane—were lined up waiting to unload at the mill and head back to the fields for more.

And soon as he was through eating, Henry would be out there, too—rain or no—till five-thirty, six o'clock... get the cane in out of the fields and to the mill before it went sour. Come Saturday next, he'd have a nice fat

EDITOR'S NOTE: After weeks in the cane country, talking to both workers and plantation owners, reporter Patsty Sims and staff photographers G. E. Arnold and Ronald LeBouef tell the story of the Louisiana sugar cane worker. Because of the worker's fear of reprisal from their employers, most of their names have been changed.

second from the end, in a shack the Historical Society could put a plaque on, it's so old. Just old planks turned gray as the sky by decades of wind and rain and sun. A rotting porch sag under the weight of an old Sears Roebuck washing machine, a one-piece porcelain sink and drawerbox, a wooden case of some kind and a bicycle, without any wheels, turned upside down. Underneath are some old tires and a power mower.

Some wire and a couple of clothespins stretch between the posts that hold up the rusted tin roof. A few feet out back, there's a path worn to an ethouse of the same gray planks, an empty pig's pen and a pile of hall-chewed tin cans and milk cartons.

-beans.
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paycheck, or as far a one as he'd live to see.

"When you are working, you try to put enough food in the house to last. But the

Henry had said firmly, "cause the week in done, it gone ... and you don't git nothing ... just suffer com-

in'. Sometimes you git thirty or forty dollars for two weeks, but that's all.

Edna and Locust, their seventeen-

year-olds, were sitting in front of the

heater, basting scraps from out of a

eardrobe box and waiting for Henry, when Edna Mack, an instructor from the

Pianistic Adult Education Program, and I got there.

"WE MAKING hikers, new hikers for them quilts," Edna exclaimed, and then putting on an old dress of Locust's out of the box: "This ain't no more future for them. Why I take'em to make quilts.

The TV set was going full-blast, some daytime soap opera, but neither was paying much attention to it. It was more for company, to interrupt the monotonous drudgery of chores.

Edna, her face sunken in from milti-

ing jet black, and her grayed hair pulled

into a pony tail over each ear and elastic wound around her forehead. Indiana style, could be forty or fifty years old. It's hard to say, and Edna explained, "I don't know ... I done foregone my age. I got a birth cri-

buck, but my daughter-liveth in heaven- she git it. And my husband, ain't got tell you how old he is either.

Nor could she remember how long she'd been married or ever being any different.

"I BEEN JINX like this," she stalked

out of the room. She had a habit of

thanking her, but she was at home, and

Henry being together, she slighly, "Don't. It's no business... and I've been a year comin. I married. She got married on a Thursday ... it was the twenty-fourth, like Thursday. Married right on that month comin. Up. It's as long now, but my only

that boy married.

There was the smell of something burning, and Edna hurried to the kitchen, found some pots and came back to her rocker.

"Then," she said, digging back into the

scraps. "Her and Locust's clothes—she was one they could put them a little better than the ones they were making into quilt. Edna had a wife of j_UNUSED

dress over a long-tailed white cloak and snug-sitting black trousers, and Locust, a pretty yet thin-faced girl who dropped out of school and stuck

ned only once, and then with the Piantistic Adult Education Program, wore a black and white striped dress.

"SCHOOL TEACHER put me in the hall when I was 16. She stopped me in the second grade," Edna recalled, tearing a print dress apart. "I didn't learn no reading... and I count. But it may be right and it may be wrong. My husband he counts on the money and he tell me. He teachin' me how much to make.

"All my brothers and my sisters got the same家里... they got good trair-

nies. I was the only one. I have two trair-nies and I'm glad. I'm glad who got a trap-nie. I was the only one.

By then it was time to check the rice

again. Edna led me through the red and white curtains into the kitchen. One wall of the jalousie was red as

they were on the outside — paneled with panels from magazines and lined with black-and-polka dot paper and paper hanging from nails.

There was a wadboarded in the cor-

ner and a Number Three galvanized

htub for bathing and doing the laundry

under the window to catch drags from a faucet that stuck out through the wall.

"I got a sink, and I ain't got nobody to make it, to put it in," she explained, standing the unwashed rice.

"We eat different things, like beans and greens," she said. "I had a garden, but I never could git it to git up. Meat not much. I had a hog and kid it. I done it, I done it up my own.

SHORING OFF the rest of the house, Edna added or, "You're welcome in case I don't like nuttin'. If we ain't get nuttin', we ain't get nuttin'. That's just on ever since we married.

She started for the pantry, some rice, marinated in jasminec, and some rice, and her fourteen-year-old girl, was at school, and the one in the kitchen. She was old, as far as she could, and I was eleven.

"She was got it," she explained, going on to say Now Clarence's mom was actually supposed to be a bath. The owner of the house had a bath on the walls before grouting, but that was far back in the kitchen.

"What do you do when its cold and rainy?" I asked.

"What do we do?" she repeated the question, then realized, "I don't know. Right here. We use a pot pan, got, 'm eating it out. At night I washin' it all over again."

Edna rubbed her shoulder and adjusted her face a little. "What I git, this here, I never git rid of it. I got it forever... like everlast and I never git rid of it.

"I GOTTEN GO to the dentist too. I don't go there now," she said, showing me what teeth she had left. all done and rotten and some of them were almost enough to laugh. "Yeah, they hurt, but I've had to."

When I went to school, I had to walk. I was a new one at school that day. Edna explained, confiding "he was gone in school, but she says he ain't old enough.

Clarence didn't say anything or even

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smell as bad when it hit but. He grinned, like he could smell it now, all the way in the from the house.

"I git a dollar thirty-five an hour doing gardens." —Beaude August in January—and I made out pretty good then. For it was the half, I buy clothes for the kids and food—get a little food stamps," he continued and then added Edna's name: "Flatt bushes, beans, spinach, marrows, and spices. I'm going to sell you when I have time—out weekends, that's all.

"Ever been there?" I asked.

Henry shook his head and smiled, a long look of spite. "About years, I guess it's been, since I did. Can't afford it. I'm too old."

"But I say," he continued, "the work is gone. It is; but you just don't get nuttin' comin' in.

When Henry had finished his beer, he brushed off the knee of the orange rubber overshoes he was over a gray shirt and trousers, and wandered, even to himself, why he stayed on the plantation, why he worked year after year for nothing more than a shank and an outhouse and three- toed or so dollars.

"I got no chance," he shrugged, and of. He could not, he could not, then July, nineteen-twenty-one—It is better for me to git any kind of job. If I was young, I be off a long time."

He nodded toward Clarence. "That's

the reason I keep my boy in school, so

he can git off the farm and git a good job.

"MY DADDY took me out of school and I HAD to work, and I'm sorry he took me out of school. My brother in New Orleans and my sister, one who stays in Hermes, and the brother that was killed, well they didn't quite finish. One went high as teeth and two up to seventh. But the rest of us had to work.

"When I went to school, I had to walk," he remarked, leaning over with his elbows resting on his knees and kind of enjoying remembering he had once gone to school, even if just for a little while. But then the smile left. He still couldn't read and he couldn't write, but he sure wished he could.

"Maybe some day," he reckoned, putting his cap on and heading out the door to his tractor. "Maybe I might just take it back up."