

Stuart Gentling
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Rough outline

Tom Ramey's train bringing him from the University of Texas is just pulling into his final destination, the depot at Natchez. It is early in August of nineteen thirty-two. Tom who is twenty years old had the day before received a telegram from a man previously unknown to him, a Mr. Fortesque, a prominent lawyer in Natchez who informed him in this telegram that Octavia Dochery and Dick Dana had been arrested for the murder of Jenny Merrill. The boy has the telegram in his pocket as he steps from the train onto the hot platform. It is Sunday in Natchez. There are no people about. Infact only a few disembark at the station and the train waits only a few minutes before moving out of Natchez for Vicksburg.

Since there is nobody to meet him, Tom Ramey takes his grip and and walks to the Aeola Hotel where he gets a room. Then he proceeds by foot out to the murderscene, an old pre-Civil War house just outside of Natchez. He walks the three miles in solitude except when he stops and buys a watermelon from two negroes who tell him what they know of the killing. It is nearly noon when he reaches Glenwood, the old house. There is a guard standing by the gate who refuses him entrance inspite of his explanation about his relation to the case. The guard is about tp take the youth to town for questioning when a man appears at the door of Glen~~xxxxx~~ wood. He stares for a minute then walks over and introduces himself. He is John R. Fortesque. At the lawyer's demand the guard lets young Ramey by and both of the men walk back into the house together. M Mr. Fortesque is a quiet man, a very unpretentious man more than sixty years old who, though then unknown ~~xxxx~~ to Ramey was the District Attourney for Natchez.

There is very little to diguss about the case. Fortesque can not however bring himself to believe that the couple committed murder. He does not tell who the murdered woman is, though by this time he is sure that Ramey knows . To Fortesque the facts, certain facts which he as district attourney can not devulge, should not devulge but because of his lack of pretentiousness, his desire to get at the truth instead of just winning a case forces him to tell these facts.

The old house looks as though people surely could not have lived there. Goats, chickens, cats and dogs run about in the rooms eating the firniture or nesting in it or deflicating on it. The house is a wreck. It seems impossiblg that human beings could have lived in such filth, so Fortesque exclaims. It irritates Ramey. The district Attourney knows and refrains from talking about it. Ramey asks the attourney if he has seen all the rooms. All but one he says. It is locked and since it is Sunday they are waiting for a court order permitting them to open it. Ramey says Come and both of them walk up the stairs. Ramey and Fortesque mount thestairs and walk to the far end of the hall to wjhere the one closed door stands. Ramey reaches into a small drawer and draws out a key. He inserts into the lock and the door swings open reveilling a very austere but spotless room. Then Ramey quickly closes the door, locks it and puts the key ~~in his pocket~~ back into the drawer. You'll need the warrent to open that door he says with no malice in his voice so that there was no malice taken. Fortesque smiles, pats the boy on the shoulder and says never mind. He asks Ramey how he got out to the house and on hearing that he walked invites him to go back into ton with him. Ramey promptly accepts the offer and the two drive into town.

CHAPTER 2

Mr Fortesque's Office on Union Street was not half shoddy looking as his district attourney's office in the court house. The chairs were comfortable, the atmosphere more quiet and enjoyable. In short, Mr Fortesques private office was a pleasant retreat. It was beginning to look like afternnoon now as the sun's rays were beginning to slant through the shutters. Below the office, in the alley a few negroes were playing

a game . Their sounds echoed up into the tomblike quiet of the office. It was rather cool there though and the two found themselves talking quietly about little things as if in preparation for the story that Mr. Fortesque knew he would be asked to tell, the story that he knew that he had to tell even if he were not asked.

" I want to tell the story as I see it. I have to know as much about all of these people as it will help me to find the truth of it all. Not just because both of our family's are bound up into this, mine by blood, yours by mere happenstance. But you see we both are oppressively close to the whole thing. It is hard to focus on a thing so close, so ready to involve the emotions. There is something about these people that is not being said. I want to have a chance to say it in court before all the people, friends or foreigners. I want to show them that we do have an excuse, an explanation for it all, That the right to rule which my fathers took from your fathers as they took it from the land that they fought everyday until it brought forth for them as it denied to you. I ant to show them that we did not gain this right just by ~~xxxx~~ the mere arbitrariness of fate, that we still deserved to rule. "

Ramey breaks into the old man's words. I'm hungry he says. Why dont we eat something first then talk about it later.

The ~~lawyer~~ lawyer goes to the window and yells down at one of the negroes for him to come up to the office. Yes sir Mr Fortesque. The boy comes up to the office and Mr Fortesque orders some sandwiches and coffee.

CHAPTER 3

Mr Fortesque wipes his mouth rather daintly, folds the paper napkin and begins to talk. " In order to understand Jane Merrill you would have to use just more than understanding, you would have need to use a great deal of pity, though she would have been the last of anybody to accept it. "

CHAPTER 3 (cont.)

Fortesque's conversation becomes the body of the book. His words become the past of forty years before in the nineties where the story begins. Jane Merrill, known to her friends as Jennie was born to the rank of a Ratchez princess. Having been surrounded by infinite wealth and of all the cultural refinements associated with such prosperity, Jenny attained all of the grace which might be synonymous with the best educated of her day.

Fortesque's remembrances take him back to the day when he first recalls Jennie's association with Octavia Dockery. It was at a party held in honor of Jenny upon her return from Belgium where her father had been ambassador before being taken suddenly ill. Here in all the villainess of society politics Jenny allies herself to Octavia Dockery who is not in social favor, in fact who has what many in the town consider a rather seedy past. It seems that there is a rumor that Miss Dockery is born out of wedlock. But Jenny upon her first look at Octavia as she walks up the steps with her escort the socially prominent, accepted Dick Dana, knows that there is something out of the ordinary about this girl, that like Jenny there is a fire that no petty social politics can cool. There is a will to survive through it all, an aggressiveness shared mutually by both of them. When the guests purposely abandon a room occupied by Dana and Octavia, then Jenny goes into the room and sits with them. But Jenny may go too far with her friends. For certain indiscretion of her ancestors

The old car moved slowly up the last hill, moving slower and slower as it neared the top, coughing and sputtering but still straining forward until it was over the hill and then descending, accelerating by its own weight as the hill sloped down through a gulley filled with trees covered with Kudzu vines, opening up to the outskirts of Numedia. There was very little to show that they were coming to a town, only a sign, leaning over as though it had been struck by an automobile or had just been forgotten, a sign which read: Numedia

pop. 5358

elev. 240 ft.

Besides the sign, there were a few negro shacks, an occasional faded Victorian house set empty and alone among stands of Pecan trees. The car was on level ground now, farming land. The land stretched out in crooked rows of cotton, still green, waving green bolls in the wind. Ramey thought to himself: "The cotton looks good this year, in spite of no rain. Another month and maybe a good crop." The preacher kept his eyes fixed to the road and said nothing. Stands of pecan trees laced the edges of the cotton fields. Tom looked up into the trees like a greedy boy eyeing the pecans, still green too, which swelled in ^{green} clusters from the tips of the branches. He remembered when he was a boy, when his mother ~~and~~ he used to pick pecans for a dollar a day, the only money they had to live on. He remembered how he used to bury part of his load and then come back in the night to get them. Even on cold days when the pecans were ripe and falling when the wind blew through the trees, he used to take his shoes off and feel through the leaves with his feet. He never could explain the simple pleasure that he felt when his feet felt the prize beneath the leaves. It was almost a sin to step on a pecan and smash it just because you had your shoes on.

Across a large, crescent shaped cotton field bordered by woods Ramey could see the two church spires rising above the trees, glittering white in the afternoon sunshine. Not far away from the church spires rose the two black smoke stacks of the brick mill, gaunt and inanimate with out the clouds of black smoke that he was so accustomed to seeing as a boy. There was more signs of a town now as the car moved on to a paved road. They crossed the railroad tracks which had turned and were now running parallel with the road. The ~~road~~ followed the tracks past the two

The model T chugged slowly up the last hill, then started descending, accelerating by its own weight as the hill sloped down through a forest of Kudzu covered trees which opened up to the outskirts of Numedia. Though Numedia had less than five thousand people it was a spread out town. They drove past negro shacks, negro stores

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BOOK 1

Chapter 1

^{Symbol}
The House

Elmscourt was not a new house. Infact behind that newly painted facade remained one of the oldest, maintained houses in Natchez. Those who could still remember the parties held here before the war refered to the place ^{as the} house of a thousand candles. And somehow it was a lucky house, always escaping the ravages of time and economics which conquered its more unfortunate contemporaries. Perhaps it was that piece of ivory sunk into the banister by a voodoo slave blessed or cursed by the aboriginal sweat that went into each board and brick. Built as a shining symbol of ~~the~~ aristocratic builders, it had aquired an aristocratic demeanor of its own, a selfish and demanding one. But it was flesh that built the house and it was flehh that fought for it only in the end to loose it when it could not meet the demands of its share of the bargain. To own Elmscourt was to ~~enter~~ in to contract with it, almost like marriage, to gain the symbol and in return maintain it. There was no shame in loosing it. Too many had gained and lost ~~it~~ ^{The House} for there to be shame to

any but those who had tried and failed. Six names had owned and lost the prize, but the seventh had been the luckiest or the shrewdest of them all. The seventh had held the house for nearly forty years and to all who did not hold grudges the symbol became synonymous with the name, Merrill.

It was Spring, 1893 and after nearly six years of Merrill absence Elmscourt was once again the house of a thousand candles. The Merrills were back from Europe. The ambassador and his daughters were home at last from the courts of Belgium and Great Britain. Of course good feeling was not shared by all who had come to the party but they had hidden their hate as well as their curiosity behind smiling faces. Yes, all appeared well at Elmscourt. Elegantly dressed servants moved smoothly among the three hundred guests, offering trays of straight whiskey or to the more refined and less volatile tastes were offered frosted glasses of mint juleps. There were children here too, for Elmscourt had always been known for its children. They played about the old doll house, Jennie's old doll house, which unlike the big house had suffered from six years of no children. Roses bloomed in gay perfection about the doll house and now there were sound of laughing, running children. Most of the women were standing but still the wicker chairs lined along the front and rear galleries remained occupied by talking females for most of the afternoon.