

HUBRIS & NEMESIS: PRIDE & PREJUDICE

ACT I

EXT. PERCY HOUSE -- NIGHT

March, 1927. A TERRIFIC THUNDERSTORM batters the house.

Lightning flashes reveal that the exterior has been remodeled:
The columns are gone from the front.

INT. PERCY PARLOR -- NIGHT

Rain POUNDS the windows. LEROY, CAMILLE, and WILL chat with ROY and MATTIE SUE PERCY. A BLACK BUTLER, age 30, serves a drink to CAMILLE.

CAMILLE
(to BUTLER)

Thank you, David.

ROY
This is not what I call vacation weather.

LEROY
No big loss. Hunting's out of season, Roy.

MATTIE SUE
Anyway, all the game in these parts are probably extinct. You two are--relentless.

WILL
(smiles)
It serves some deep psychological need that they have.

MATTIE SUE
Obviously! All for the better, I'm sure.

LEROY
Will had a fine time shooting Germans but going after game doesn't appeal to him. But your husband compensates, Mattie Sue. You really should visit us here more often.

CAMILLE
And bring those boys of yours!

LEROY
Yes! Walker's already eleven, LeRoy's ten, Phinizy's five! They've never seen the ancestral lands...

A chime sounds. DAVID goes to the hall.

MATTIE SUE

They'll never see the way this house
used to be. A shame.

WILL

I for one like the renovation, the
stucco, the French style. Those col-
umns--an eyesore, really.

DAVID ushers in an ELEGANT MAN. LEROY approaches him.

LEROY

Dr. Livingston, I presume?

DOWNLEY

(laughs; English accent:)

Yes, I suppose that these parts do
resemble the wilds of Africa. Alastaire
Downley, at your service.

LEROY

(shakes DOWNLEY'S hand)

LeRoy Percy.

DOWNLEY

Shall I address you as Senator?

LEROY

That's not necessary. Although I can't
seem to stop most people doing it. Please
meet my wife, Camille. My son, Will, my
nephew, Roy, and Roy's Southern belle,
Mattie Sue.

A round of genteel hand shakes.

CAMILLE

May we offer you some bourbon?

DOWNLEY

Yes, thanks. I've been wanting to sample
your famous Southern firewater and feared
that here amongst the Baptists I might,
heaven forbid, have to forego all intoxi-
cants. But my cronies assured me that
y'all have been able to survive not only
Prohibition but also hell and high water.

(to DAVID)

No ice, please.

DAVID exits. A DEAFENING peal of thunder.

DOWNLEY

Frightful!

CAMILLE

We've been through worse, Mr. Downley.

DOWNLEY

It will affect the planting. That worries me and the others in London.

LEROY

We have a whole month, Mr. Downley.

DOWNLEY

Here we are in mid-March with record rainfall since the first of the year. "April showers," Mr. Percy. Why should it stop now?

LEROY

You came all this way to fret about weather?

DOWNLEY

I came here to fret about 13 cents a pound. Down from 29 cents just three years ago. We are talking about--millions of dollars.

LEROY

We did better than 13 a pound. And we'll do better this year.

The chime sounds again.

DOWNLEY

(to ROY)

You're an aviator, I understand. And your uncle's hunting partner?

ROY

We do enjoy a good shoot.

DAVID shows in a MAN in his 40s.

LEROY

Downley, meet my ablest manager and very good friend, Charlie Williams.

DOWNLEY

I'm honored. You are the man who will save us...

(waves at windows)

From all that.

WILLIAMS chuckles. They shake hands. WILLIAMS catches DAVID'S eye: He wants a drink.

LEROY

Charlie is a man of many talents. Second to no white man at hunting, fishing. The best flood fighter in the Delta. On the side, he runs my cotton compress--a big operation.

DOWNLEY

2,700 bales from Trail Lake last year, 10,000 from Panther Burn. Well over six million pounds. However...

LEROY

The price will be higher this year.

DOWNLEY

(glances at a newspaper on a table)

I see your governor mobilized the National Guard. Mr. Williams--why do you need protection?

CU:

The Greenville Democrat-Times

March 17, 1927

GUARD CALLED IN

WILLIAMS

Saboteurs from Arkansas, across the river. If our levee goes, theirs stands.

LEROY

It's an old problem. Ever since Arkansas started building levees, both sides have had guards on patrol when the water gets high. Guards with guns. And lanterns.

WILL

Lanterns on the levee--around here, Mr. Downley, that image is almost folkloric.

INT. PERCY DINING ROOM -- NIGHT

DAVID serves oysters on the half shell to PERCYS and GUESTS.

DOWNLEY

(to ROY)

Our chairman was telling me--your wing of the family gave up on planting and went

into the steel business?

ROY

Tennessee Coal & Iron, based in Birmingham,
Alabama. My father--

MATTIE SUE drops her oyster fork.

ROY

My father was general counsel.

MATTIE SUE

And your mother--

ROY

Mother's father, Mr. DeBardleben, owned a
big chunk of the company.

DOWNLEY

Steel--not quite as volatile as cotton. Not
subject to the vicissitudes of weather.

(blinks)

Perhaps you could put some of that steel in Mr.
Williams's levees. Stiffen their spines, eh?

MATTIE SUE

Oh, my. You are worried. And rightly so. In
these parts, fortunes easily come and go.

ROY

I'm not affiliated with TCI, Mr. Downley.
My father arranged for Andrew Carnegie to
buy it, many years ago.

DOWNLEY

Ah. I see. Where does that leave you?

LEROY

A graduate of Harvard Law School, and on
the Review there, Roy is one of the leading
lawyers in Alabama.

DOWNLEY

(to ROY)

And your father? Did he enter the Carnegie
fold?

ROY

My father is--deceased.

CAMILLE coughs. A tense moment.

WILL

A striking fact, Mr. Downley. When the river is low, you can hardly see it from the levee.

WILLIAMS

There's a mile of forested land, what we call the batture, stretching from the riverbank to the barrow moat. The barrow moat, it's where we dug up the earth to build the levee. It's a dry moat, 300 feet wide, 14 feet deep at the deepest, sloping up to the levee itself. And then the levee--rising from the moat 40 feet tall. Massive. Wide as what we call a football field at the base, eight feet wide on the crown.

WILL

It's almost as strong across the river. A mile of batture, the moat, then the levee. To get a big flood, the river has to overflow a mile on both sides. Then wash into the moats. And then climb the levees.

DOWNLEY

Astonishing to think--that such an enormous basin could simply--fill up.

(pause)

And now it has *indeed* filled up.

LEROY

(to WILL and WILLIAMS)

You're scaring the Englishman!

(to DOWNLEY)

It happens from time to time. This year we've had enormous storms. Combined with the snow melt up north, we're getting high water. But we're prepared.

(glances at WILLIAMS)

Tell him, Charlie.

WILLIAMS

We established a training camp in February--we saw it coming, after tributaries flooded in Arkansas. We've got crews deployed up and down the levee. Earth moving machines. Wire, lights, generators, so we can work at night. We have four boxcars of empty cotton bags. That's hundreds of thousands of sandbags. And we have the labor to fill 'em. 10,000 darkies.

DOWNLEY

That's the paramount issue: labor. It's ever been thus, has it not, Mr. Percy?

LEROY

Two paramount issues, Downley. Labor is one.

EXT. GREENVILLE LEVEE, NORTH OF TOWN -- NIGHT -- CONTINUING

RAIN FALLS TORRENTIALLY. GALE-FORCE WINDS SHIMMY MAKESHIFT ELECTRICITY POLES, LIGHTS. 200 BLACK MEN frantically fill sandbags with earth, pass them to other BLACK MEN.

WHITE GUARDS supervise. Strapped to their coats: BIG HANDGUNS.

DOWNLEY (VO)

And the other issue? What is it?

CAMERA FOLLOWS A LABORER carrying a sandbag to the levee's crown.

LEROY (VO)

The river, of course. Ole Man River.

CAMERA PULLS UP TO THE RIVER: 7 feet below the levee crown, it RAGES. A human corpse, drowned animals, whole trees, a chicken coop HURTLE DOWNSTREAM. Atop the coop, TERRIFIED CHICKENS SCREAM.

INT. PERCY DINING ROOM -- NIGHT -- CONTINUING

DAVID clears oyster plates.

LEROY

With the river, nothing is ever guaranteed.

(wipes mouth with napkin)

But those are federal levees up and down the Mississippi. Built to the highest standards.

DOWNLEY

I'm sure you saw to that. In Washington, when you served in the Senate.

LEROY

The Senate was only an episode, Downley.

I've been looking after levees all my life.

(smiles)

We've never lost a federal levee. Not once.

EXT. WOODS -- DAY

Gusty rain falls. LEROY and ROY tramp through the woods.

ROY

What did you mean, that Charlie Williams is the best hunter? Is he?

LEROY

Better than me. Not better than you.

ROY

That's nice of you to say. Don't know if I deserve it.

LEROY

Hell, Roy. Of course you deserve it.

ROY

Have you--have you given up on Will?

LEROY

In what way?

ROY

Marriage. Kids.

LEROY

I think it's pretty clear that Will--that he's not the marrying kind. For a long time Camille and I had hopes. It was hard on us. Especially because little LeRoy--what happened. We still miss that boy.

(rubs his mustache)

But Roy, we have you. And your fine boys. They're like grandchildren to me.

ROY

Thank God for you, Uncle LeRoy. My boys never got to know Father. It's been ten years since he--

LEROY pats ROY on the back.

LEROY

Let's let that be, Roy. Just let it be.

They walk on for a few moments in silence.

LEROY

And you? How about you?

ROY

Oh, just fine. Ever since that stay at the Phipps Clinic, two years ago. It did me a world of good.

LEROY nods.

INT. PERCY CAR -- DAY

March 29, 1972. Wipers WHACK RAIN from the windshield. A HANDSOME YOUNG BLACK MAN drives. WILL sits in the back seat.

HANDSOME YOUNG BLACK MAN

You reckon the rain will ever stop, Mr. Will?

WILL

Yes, Ernest. Of course.

ERNEST

Way more'n forty days, forty nights.

WILL

Yes.

ERNEST

This meetin'. Means it's gonna get worse?

WILL

I hope not. But we have to plan for it.
Just in case.

WILL reaches forward, pats Ernest affectionately on his shoulder.

WILL

Don't you worry, Ernest. Look at it this way: at least you're not on the levee.

ERNEST glances at WILL, gives him a frightened smile.

EXT. COURTHOUSE -- DAY

SIGN: "Natchez Courthouse." WILL enters the building. A SIGN beside the door: "Red Cross Emergency Planning Session."

INT. COURTROOM -- DAY

A crowd of OFFICIALS mills in the courtroom. The buzz is quietly urgent. A MAN at podium bangs his gavel.

CHAIRMAN

This meeting will come to order!

OFFICIALS take seats.

CHAIRMAN

We gather here today from national, state, and local offices of the Red Cross, to talk about refugees. We already have thousands. As you know, that might well

be just the beginning.

CROWD rustles.

CHAIRMAN

Laconia Circle was the oldest levee in Arkansas. And it wasn't a federal levee, just a back levee on a tributary. But we considered it solid--very solid. The fact that it collapsed this morning is bad news.

CROWD murmurs.

CHAIRMAN

Two months ago, levees broke along the White River and the Little Red. It's pretty grim in parts of Arkansas. Of course, that's nice for Mississippi, on the other side.

NERVOUS LAUGHTER.

CHAIRMAN

Except that the Yazoo and the Sunflower are also running wild.

(drinks water)

And then there's the big one.

(gazes at WILL)

Mr. William Alexander Percy!

WILL stands.

CHAIRMAN

Will Percy chairs the Cross in Washington County. Mr. Percy--suppose you got a crevasse in the Delta. What would you do?

WILL

Pray to de Lawd.

LAUGHTER.

WILL

We're doing all we possibly can to keep the levee in shape. If it goes...we're in trouble.

CHAIRMAN

Have you planned for refugees if it goes?

WILL is at a loss for words. CHAIRMAN frowns. CROWD murmurs.

INT. PERCY CAR -- DAY

Toward dusk. Wipers whack rain from windshield.

ERNEST

You got it all figgered out, Mr. Will?

WILL

Yes, Ernest. Everything's figured out.

ERNEST squints worriedly at WILL in the rear-view mirror.

INT. PERCY HOUSE LIBRARY -- NIGHT

LEROY pours a drink, raises the glass to WILL. WILL shakes his head: he doesn't want a drink.

LEROY

I heard a story today.

WILL nods.

LEROY

A steamer's coming down the Little Red. The captain sees a bunch of people standing on the levee. He knows it's flooded beyond it. He'd passed a break just a mile back.

(sips drink)

So he heads over. 200 sharecroppers shivering in the rain, all colored. And two white men, planters. Heavily armed. The captain gets close, steadies his boat, lowers the gangplank. He calls out, "I can take you!"

(clears his throat)

The planters point guns. One of them yells, "You ain't stealin' our niggers!"

WILL

Afraid they'll never come back.

LEROY

The steamer's a taxi to Chicago, is what they think. So, what do you know? A doctor's on the boat. A gentleman, and unarmed. He comes down the gangplank. He says to the planters, "We're taking these men." "No!" the planters yell, raising guns. "Go ahead," says the doctor. "Shoot me."

WILL smiles.

LEROY

Doctor says, "You don't dare." To the croppers he says, "Get on this boat!" And they got on.

WILL

What did the planters do?

LEROY

They climbed aboard. They weren't about to abandon their--property. Besides. They couldn't stay there either.

WILL

(despondent)

What are we going to do?

LEROY

You mean, what would we do. If?

WILL

It'd ruin you to lose your labor. Why would they come back? Come back to what--flattened shacks, heaps of mud?

LEROY

That would be a problem. But I'm not so much worried about us. We'd survive.

(sips drink)

It's the marginal planters that worry me. The ones mortgaged to their necks. They would *not* survive.

(smiles faintly)

The ones who think they're genteel because they have 600 acres and a hundred tenants? If they lose that, they'll revert to redneck real fast.

WILL

What are you saying?

LEROY

They will be angry, Will. Mad-dog mad.

WILL

Like those desperadoes on the levee. That the doctor faced down.

(thoughtful)

It doesn't answer the question.

LEROY

The Red Cross man in Natchez shook you up.

WILL

Yes. What would we do with refugees? Ship them out? Or keep them here?

LEROY yawns.

LEROY

Well, it's obvious. If we can't feed and shelter them, I'll have to ship them out.

WILL

I knew you'd say that. However costly, it's the only honorable thing to do.

LEROY nods wearily.

INT. PERCY & PERCY LAW OFFICES -- DAY

Early April. WILL works at his desk. Rain drums on windows. Door of his office is ajar. A RADIO in the next room plays.

RADIO

With the rainfall unrelenting we are seeing record gauge levels across a vast area. The Mississippi rose 6 feet in 24 hours at St. Louis. The Ohio is rising 2 feet every 24 hours from West Virginia to Kentucky. So far the federal levees have held. But state and private levees on the smaller rivers are crumbling. The refugee count is 35,000 and rising.

SOUNDS OF a door opening, slamming shut, footsteps. CHARLIE WILLIAMS sticks his head, streaming water, into WILL's office.

WILLIAMS

Your father sent for me.

WILL rises, follows dripping WILLIAMS into LEROY'S office. LEROY, at his desk, is speaking into the phone.

LEROY

Governor, with all due respect, you can send more labor. We appreciate the National Guard. The trucks. The help with rounding up men...

EXT. DOWNTOWN GREENVILLE -- DAY -- CONTINUING

A convoy of open-backed National Guard trucks rumbles through rain, packed with sullen, soaked BLACK MEN. WHITE SOLDIERS with rifles stand over them.

LEROY (VO)

But it's still not enough. I urge to you to send all able-bodied convicts from Parchman Penitentiary. Yes...thank you. Thanks.

INT. PERCY & PERCY LAW OFFICES -- DAY -- CONTINUING

LEROY hangs up phone, looks at WILLIAMS and WILL.

LEROY

Sit down, Charlie, I don't care if you mess up the chair.

WILLIAMS and WILL sit.

LEROY

Strip every last man and boy from the compress, the plantations, and get them to the levee.

WILLIAMS

We've already...

LEROY

All of them!

A timid knock on the door. ERNEST (chauffeur) stands in the hall holding paper bags. He shudders.

ERNEST

Lunch, Mr. Percy.

A MOMENT as WILL and LEROY understand ERNEST'S fright.

WILL

He doesn't mean you, Ernest.

WILLIAMS

Why not?

WILL

We have to have a driver.

WILLIAMS starts to say something but holds his tongue. LEROY coolly appraises his manager, his son.

LEROY

Ernest, what's for lunch?

ERNEST sags with relief. He unpacks cold fried chicken, ham, cole slaw, potato salad, beaten biscuits, iced tea in a pitcher.

INT. PERCY HOUSE, WILL'S ROOM -- NIGHT [April 16]

Seated at a table, WILL pores over page proofs. Title sheet:
Three April Nocturnes.

From a murky doorway on the other side of the room, a SOFT VOICE:

SOFT VOICE

Mistah Will?

WILL

Come in, Ernest.

ERNEST emerges from murk. WILL takes his hand, rubs it tenderly.

ERNEST

Your father wants you.

INT. PERCY LIBRARY -- NIGHT

WILL enters. LEROY, seated in an armchair, is smoking a cigar. Uncharacteristically, he looks very worried.

LEROY

Got a phone call.

(pause)

The levee broke at Doreena. South of Cairo.

WILL

That's a federal levee. They said it--
(dazedly takes a chair)
Couldn't happen.

EXT. LEVEE BOARD BUILDING, GREENVILLE -- DAY

Early the next morning: Trucks carrying BLACK LABORERS and MANACLED CONVICTS roar through drizzle.

Sign on building: "Levee Board Headquarters."

INT. LEVEE BOARD HEADQUARTERS -- DAY

A MADHOUSE OF ACTIVITY: Phones ring, MEN bark orders into phones, SECRETARIES rifle through files.

MAN #1 ON PHONE

We need those barges NOW!

MAN #2 ON PHONE

What do you mean, no more sandbags?

At the entrance a CROWD tries to burst in. A DEPUTY, hand clapped on his holster, holds them back.

PEOPLE IN CROWD

Will the levee hold? Will it hold?

DEPUTY

Yes! Yes! The levee will hold!

DOWN A HALL: A CLOSED DOOR: THROUGH IT INTO A ROOM:

LEROY, WILL, CHARLIE WILLIAMS, SEGUINE ALLEN (levee board chief engineer, elderly), GENERAL CURTIS GREEN (commander of the state's National Guard), MAJOR PAXTON (Greenville National Guard commander, haughty), Greenville's MAYOR JOHN CANNON (elderly), and LEVEE BOARD MEMBERS crowd around a conference table.

From the front office, SOUNDS OF: COMMOTION.

GENERAL GREEN

I'm authorized to speak for the governor.
We stand ready to do whatever it takes.

MAYOR CANNON

Thank you, General. We might have a problem with public order. People are panicking.

GENERAL GREEN

People are panicking from Illinois to Louisiana. You are not a special case.

MAYOR CANNON

We are a special case. If the levee goes anywhere in these parts, the entire Delta goes. Greenville in the middle of it!

SEGUINE ALLEN

Maybe not, Mayor. We have the rear protection levee. It could deflect an upstream break. I designed it to do just that.

WILLIAMS

You're a great engineer, Mr. Allen, but with all due respect--it's only 8 feet high. The river is higher than it's ever been. I wouldn't count on that rear levee.

LEROY

Let's be practical. Say we're flooded, not just a couple of feet, but really flooded. All of Washington County under God knows how much water. What do we need?

MAJOR PAXTON

Food. Drinking water. Camps, tents, blankets,
fuel, medicine...

WILLIAMS

Boats. Most of all, boats.

MAJOR PAXTON

River boats? Steamers?

WILLIAMS

Yeah. But above all, we'll need boats to get
into the interior. Small power boats. We'll
have people on roofs, in trees, clear across
the county. Shivering, wet, drinking filthy
floodwater. Fightin' off snakes.

A moment of silence.

WILL

Do we have--such boats?

WILLIAMS shakes his head, a silent "No."

GENERAL GREEN

First things first. I need a civilian in
charge. Senator?

LEROY

Will here chairs the Red Cross. He got the
job because he did so well in the Great War,
helping Hoover feed the Belgians. There's
his valor in battle, too. I nominate my son.

A stir of approval. The Senator has spoken.

MAYOR CANNON

Good! I am way too old.

(coughs)

I hereby appoint Will Percy Chairman of
the Flood Relief Committee. Will, it'll
give you even more authority.

WILL

Exactly what powers will I have?

GENERAL GREEN

With your father behind you...why, you'll
have all the power in the world.

An exchange of nods, glances. No one doubts that idea.

INT. TRUCK CAB -- DAY [April 19]

Wipers WHACK. ERNEST drives. WILL sits beside him, WILLIAMS by the window. They're moving at high speed alongside the levee, which REARS UP to their left. The angle makes it seem MONUMENTAL.

A REPAIR CREW comes in sight. 500 EXHAUSTED BLACK MEN, THREE ARMED WHITE OVERSEERS. A DESPERATE EFFORT to fill sandbags, carry them to the levee crown as fast as possible.

WILLIAMS

We've raised the levee a good foot and a half along this stretch.

WILL

That makes a difference?

WILLIAMS

Yeah. Look at it this way. When built, this levee reached three feet higher than the highest known flood. With the bags the levee's now four and a half feet higher than that record. However.

ERNEST sees a LABORER collapse. A CREW OVERSEER prods him with a gun. ERNEST, alarmed, looks at WILL. WILL ignores him.

WILL

However?

WILLIAMS

Just north of here, water's flowing over the sandbags. This flood's almost five feet higher than the old record. And it's still rising.

(to ERNEST)

Stop the truck.

(to WILL)

C'mon. You should see it.

EXT. LEVEE -- DAY

WILLIAMS scrambles up the levee, nears crown. The going is tough because the levee is soaked. WILL follows. He looks behind him: ERNEST, at the base, throws up his arms: "This is a bad idea!"

WILLIAMS reaches the crown, crouches behind seeping sandbags. His hair tousles in HEAVY WIND. Panting WILL slithers up beside him, peers over the sandbags. His face blanches.

WILL POV: A FOOT BELOW, WATER CAREENS DOWNSTREAM, TAKING WITH IT A GHOULISH DANCE OF DEBRIS: BLOATED MULES, CATTLE, HOGS. In the distance, what seems to be an enormous house FLIES BY.

WILL
(shouting over wind)

My God! My God!

WILLIAMS

DO YOU FEEL IT?

WILL slaps a hand on a sandbag. He realizes: it's VIBRATING. He puts his cheek to the levee proper. It's VIBRATING.

INT. TRUCK CAB -- DAY

WILLIAMS and WILL slime the bench. ERNEST, driving, squirms.

WILLIAMS
What's the matter. Too fancy for river-muck?

ERNEST
Nossuh! Nossuh!

WILL
It's like jelly. It's--saturated.

WILLIAMS nods.

WILL
How long can it possibly hold?

WILLIAMS peers through the windshield without answering.

WILLIAMS
There it is. Mounds Landing.

EXT. MOUNDS LANDING -- DAY

WILL takes in a small settlement. A shack bears a sign:
"CAMP REX--MISSISSIPPI NATIONAL GUARD"
WILL notes a ferryboat moored to the levee. A line of cars waits to board the ferry.

WILLIAMS
We have to close down that ferry.

WILL raises his eyebrows.

Traffic weakens the levee. The vibration.
At this point, every little thing counts.

EXT. PERCY HOUSE -- NIGHT

WILL exits a rear door, slips through rain to the carriage house. He enters it, climbs a flight of stairs, opens a door.

FRIGHTENED VOICE

Who's there?

WILL

It's me.

ERNEST, in bed, peers through dark.

ERNEST

You.

WILL strips off his clothes, gets into bed with ERNEST.

ERNEST

I been so scared.

WILL

It's all right. Everything is just--fine.

INT. NATIONAL GUARD HEADQUARTERS, GREENVILLE -- DAY

MAJOR PAXTON sits on a desk, feet on a chair, fielding questions from REPORTERS. His attitude: Imperious. SEGUINE ALLEN, his advanced age more apparent under stress, looks on.

REPORTER

Sam Tilden, New York Times. Major Paxton, we have reports that the levee may be on the verge of collapse. Will you comment?

PAXTON

Who told you that?

TILDEN

Sources in the National Guard.

PAXTON

(struggles for composure)

The damage is minimal. The levee will hold.

TILDEN

Mr. Allen! Do you share that opinion?

ALLEN

Of course. As chief engineer, I--I know that levee better than anyone. It'll hold.

INT. PERCY DINING ROOM -- NIGHT

RAIN, WIND assault windows. LEROY, WILL, and CAMILLE sip chicory coffee at the table. Remnants of pecan pie lie before them. A cognac bottle, snifters. In the fireplace coals are fading.

WILL

Paxton keeps saying it's all okay.
(dreamy)

It doesn't seem real.

LEROY

We have beat this kind of thing before.
Even with a breach, Greenville could stay
dry. We do have the rear levee.

In the hall, the phone RINGS. DAVID enters.

DAVID

Mr. Williams on the telephone.

EXT. GREENVILLE'S REAR PROTECTION LEVEE -- NIGHT

RAIN, WIND. The levee, 8 feet tall, is a modest affair compared to the river levee: it's simply an embanked wall, flat fields with a few shacks stretching beyond it. Armed GUARDS supervise hundreds of BLACK LABORERS laying sandbags on the crown.

CHARLIE WILLIAMS speaks into a phone mounted on a makeshift electricity pole.

WILLIAMS

We're doing all we can at the rear levee.
But I'm worried about Mounds Landing. I'll
be heading up there early in the morning.

LEROY (OC)

Keep me posted, Charlie.

EXT. MOUND'S LANDING LEVEE -- DAY [April 21, 7:15 a.m.]

Day seeps dimly through stormy skies. Makeshift lights glare. Trucks crammed with BLACK LABORERS roar through rain to levee. National Guard LIEUTENANT exits Camp Rex HQ shack. SOLDIERS prod LABORERS off trucks.

LIEUTENANT

MOVE IT!

A LABORER stares at water SEEPING, GEYSERING through the levee,
WASHING OVER THE ERODING CROWN.

LABORER

We're all gonna drown. Lawd help us!

GUARDS herd LABORERS to the work area at the levee's edge. The truck drivers do hasty u-turns, speed away. A car pulls up. CHARLIE WILLIAMS jumps out. Transfixed, he studies the levee. LIEUTENANT studies WILLIAMS' face.

LIEUTENANT

Williams--you ever seen anything like that?

WILLIAMS

Hell, no.

INT. CAMP REX HQ SHACK -- DAY

WILLIAMS dials a phone number.

INT. PERCY LIBRARY -- DAY -- CONTINUING

Phone RINGS. LEROY--rumped, unshaven, asleep in a chair--stirs, picks up the phone. WILL shudders awake in his chair.

LEROY

Yes?

WILLIAMS (OC)

Mounds Landing is about to go.

LEROY

Get yourself out of there, Charlie.

EXT. CAMP REX HQ SHACK -- DAY -- CONTINUING

WILLIAMS

The only safe place is on the levee, maybe half a mile down. I have to get the men out.

WILLIAMS hangs up, looks around HQ, sees a pair of binoculars, grabs it. He runs out of HQ shack and accosts LIEUTENANT.

WILLIAMS

Get your men downriver and up on the levee!

WILLIAMS jumps in his car, beckons SOLDIERS. Five cram in with him. They drive downriver. Terrified LABORERS, SOLDIERS follow.

EXT. LEVEE, SOUTH OF MOUNDS LANDING -- DAY

Some minutes later: WILLIAMS, LABORERS, SOLDIERS scramble up the levee. The river ROILS, carrying with it ALL MANNER OF GHASTLY DEBRIS. WILLIAMS scans countryside with binoculars.

BINOCULAR POV: near Mounds Landing, an allée of tall trees leads to a plantation manor. Some distance away: barns, stables, livestock pens. WILLIAMS scans Landing buildings. He shifts to the levee looming above it: WATER CASCADES OVER THE CROWN. THE LEVEE SHIMMIES. MUD PLUMES INTO THE AIR.

WILLIAMS

It's going!

As if shoved by a giant hand, a 100-foot stretch of levee HURTLES OVER MOUNDS LANDING. The HQ shack, other buildings DISINTEGRATE.

On the levee near WILLIAMS: LABORERS, SOLDIERS SHOUT WITH TERROR.

A WALL OF WATER 50 FEET HIGH RUSHES OVER FLAT FARMLAND. [The volume was later estimated to be more than twice that of Niagara Falls in full flood.] Through binoculars, WILLIAMS watches the water MOW DOWN THE ALLÉE OF TREES, OBLITERATE THE PLANTATION HOUSE, BUILDINGS.

WILLIAMS feels the levee VIBRATE under his boots.

WILLIAMS

RUN!

WILLIAMS, LABORERS, SOLDIERS DASH ALONG THE LEVEE CROWN. WILLIAMS casts a frightened look over his shoulder. The CREVASSE IS WIDENING, RAPIDLY APPROACHING.

WILLIAMS, OTHERS TRY TO OUTPACE IT. The more fit quickly leave the rest behind. A LABORER, flagging, is SWEPT TO HIS DEATH.

EXT. GREENVILLE MILLS, FIREHOUSES, CHURCHES -- DAY

SEQUENCE: Sirens, whistles, bells in various buildings SOUND THE ALARM. PEOPLE IN STREETS FREEZE. Then, a MAD SCRAMBLE as they realize they may be in mortal danger.

INT. GREENVILLE LEVEE BOARD OFFICE -- DAY

ALARMS, WHISTLES, BELLS ECHO IN. Office is staffed but strangely still. BOARD MEMBERS, VOLUNTEERS, SECRETARIES stare at:

Old SEGUINE ALLEN at his desk, face in hands, SOFTLY SOBBING.

MAJOR PAXTON breaks the silence, shouting:

PAXTON

Every last man to the rear levee!

STAFF SNAP TO IT: COMMOTION, SHOUTING, SNATCHED-UP PHONES.

EXT. PERCY HOUSE VERANDAH -- DAY

ALARMS ECHO FROM ACROSS THE CITY. LEROY and WILL sit on verandah, bundled up against the chill, sipping coffee, staring at drizzle.

WILL

I hope Charlie makes it.

LEROY

He will, I'm sure. He's nimble and swift like a leopard. Wise as an owl.

(pause)

This is it, Son. The county's in your hands.

WILL

Luckily, I've got you.

LEROY

I'll be dealing with insurance companies and federal bureaucrats.

(smiles)

It's your show. No matter what Paxton says.

WILL

He "commandeered" the Opera House.

DISTANT, LOUD VOICE

ALL ABLE-BODIED HANDS! REPORT IMMEDIATELY TO THE REAR LEVEE!

A pickup truck cruises up Percy Street. Standing on the bed, a MAN with a megaphone:

MEGAPHONE MAN

ALL ABLE-BODIED HANDS! REPORT IMMEDIATELY TO THE REAR LEVEE!

Truck passes. ERNEST approaches verandah.

LEROY

Give a hand with the furniture, Ernest, move what you can upstairs. Fill the bathtubs. Otherwise, stay put.

ERNEST nods vigorously. WILL stands.

WILL

I'm off.

WILL salutes LEROY. LEROY casually returns it.

WILL and ERNEST make fleeting eye contact, both men nodding almost imperceptibly. LEROY takes note from the corner of an eye. WILL walks to the sidewalk, heads downtown.

EXT. DOWNTOWN GREENVILLE -- DAY

PANDEMONIUM IN THE STREETS. Trucks loaded with LABORERS sit in slow-moving traffic: pickups, pushcarts, mule-drawn wagons. CROWDS in stores overflow onto sidewalks, jostling, scuffling. Umbrellas COLLIDE. POLICEMEN bellow commands, attempt to clear traffic, maintain order.

WILL makes his way down Washington St. PASSERS-BY shout questions at him. WILL deflects them with sharp waves of his hand.

WILL nears the Opera House. A block away the levee looms over the town like a giant medieval battlement, DWARFING the city's buildings, including the three-story Opera House. On the crown, SOLDIERS erect TENTS. Wind, rain LASH the tents.

SOLDIERS guard Opera House entrance. WILL nods at them, enters.

INT. OPERA HOUSE LOUNGE -- DAY

The gloomy room seems far removed from the tumult in the streets. Five men sit at a table: Congressman WILL WHITTINGTON, state National Guard commander GENERAL CURTIS GREEN, local National Guard commander MAJOR PAXTON, levee board chief engineer SEGUINE ALLEN, and BILLY WYNN, a young, ambitious attorney.

BILLY WYNN

Let's get one thing straight. Even if we stay dry, we'll have thousands of refugees.

WILL enters.

MAJOR PAXTON

We'll ship 'em out! I've scheduled trains to Jackson. I've got steamers, barges!

WILL

(sitting at table)

What, exactly, do you have, Major Paxton?

MAJOR PAXTON

More than you know! Listen here--I have it all planned out.

CHARLIE WILLIAMS, mud-caked, bursts into the room.

WILL

Charlie! How'd you get here so--

WILLIAMS

Hitched a ride in a speedboat. A bootlegger's.
Almost commandeered the boat--but the rascal
had too many guns.

CONGRESSMAN WHITTINGTON

How bad--is it?

WILLIAMS

How bad? We'll be *swamped* sometime tonight!

GENERAL GREEN

We've sent almost every man we have to the
rear levee, Williams. That should help.

WILLIAMS

Yes, I saw. But the water coming at us is more
than a flood. It's a tidal wave. Many tidal
waves, great big breakers. Seven, eight feet
tall. The rear levee won't stop that.

(glowers)

I said it before. I'll say it again. We need
boats.

WILL

That means, carpenters.

(to MAJOR PAXTON, GENERAL GREEN)

Send the word out. We need every man able to
drive a nail down at the mills.

WILLIAMS

We need *motorboats*.

(waves an arm)

The whole Delta's going under! How the hell
are you gonna get all those thousands out
there up onto the levee?

MAJOR PAXTON

Motorboats. How many do we have?

WILLIAMS

(incredulous)

You mean you don't know?

BILLY WYNN

Four, maybe five. Pleasure craft.

WILL

Let's get 'em. Get anything that floats.

(dons his coat)

Gentlemen, we have much to do. Let's do it.

BILLY WYNN

One last thing. Food and water. We need
kitchens. Giant field kitchens.

WILL

Can you see to that? On the levee?

WYNN, PAXTON, GREEN nod affirmatively.

EXT. DOWNTOWN GREENVILLE -- DAY

WILL walks through thronged streets almost in a trance, not
registering the chaos around him.

INT. PERCY HOUSE -- DAY

WILL climbs the stairs, goes to his room, shuts the door. He
looks at writing materials.

INT. WILL'S ROOM -- DAY

Late afternoon. Drizzle films windows. WILL is writing poetry. He
hears a COMMOTION outside, goes to a window, looks out: ERNEST is
struggling with a BURLY WHITE SOLDIER.

ERNEST

Help! Help!

EXT. PERCY HOUSE -- DAY

WILL runs out of the house. SOLDIER is dragging ERNEST to a truck
filled with LABORERS. Another SOLDIER guards them at gunpoint.

ERNEST

Let me go!

WILL

Unhand that man!

SOLDIER halts, keeps a grip on ERNEST.

SOLDIER

Orders, sir. We need men.

WILL

He's under *my* orders. He's my driver.

(stares at SOLDIER)

Where on earth are you from?

SOLDIER

Jackson.

WILL

I'm William Percy, chair of the Red Cross
and the Emergency Committee. Let him go.

SOLDIER releases ERNEST.

SOLDIER

I saw him moving tools. Figured that could
wait. Sorry, Mr. Percy.
(heads for truck; over shoulder:)
Where you drivin' to?

WILL

Never you mind. Come on, Ernest.

LABORERS snicker, stare at ERNEST with envy and contempt.

LABORER

Who drives who?

LABORERS guffaw. Truck moves on. WILL stares at it, FURIOUS.

INT. PERCY PARLOR -- NIGHT

CAMILLE, WILL, and CHARLIE WILLIAMS sip pre-dinner toddies.

WILLIAMS

I appreciate the hospitality.

CAMILLE

This house is your home, Charlie. We need you
here. Greenville needs you.
(apprehensive)
How did it go today?

WILLIAMS shrugs. SOUND OF: Front door opening, closing. LEROY
enters.

LEROY

(to Williams)

David showed you your room?

WILLIAMS nods.

LEROY

I need a drink. David!
(takes off his raincoat)
What a hell of a day.
(heaves out a sigh)
Now, I guess we--just wait.

EXT. GREENVILLE REAR LEVEE -- NIGHT [April 22, 3:00 a.m.]

CHARLIE WILLIAMS watches hundreds of BLACK LABORERS frantically stack sandbags under the glare of makeshift lights. White SOLDIERS prod them on. Beyond the levee, flat fields, shacks: An ordinary, tranquil night. WILLIAMS surveys the scene.

A car drives up. MAJOR PAXTON, SEGUINE ALLEN get out.

PAXTON

Bad news, Charlie.

ALLEN

Got a phone call from a farmer four miles north. He heard water roaring through woods, coming at his house. Then he saw it, said it looked like breakers, crashing waves. And then--

WILLIAMS

How deep?

PAXTON

He didn't say. The line went dead.

WILLIAMS

Poor devil! I hope to God he got to the roof.
(frowns)
You two--you better get on over to the levee board office.

SOUND OF: A DISTANT ROAR.

ALLEN

Oh my God. There it is. Here it comes!

The three MEN peer into the murk. They see a blurry DISTURBANCE on the horizon. A LABORER shouts.

WILLIAMS

Go on, now. Get!

ALLEN

What about you?

WILLIAMS

I'll be fine. Already survived one break.

PAXTON

Where's Will Percy?

WILLIAMS

Last I knew, he was at his father's.

More LABORERS shout. SOLDIERS shout. Several dozen LABORERS run. SOLDIERS fire shots into the air.

PAXTON

Maybe he's poetizing. Not the man for this!

PAXTON, ALLEN scurry to their car, screech away.

SOUNDS OF: WHISTLES, SIRENS, CHURCHBELLS.

WILLIAMS studies the dark horizon. ROARING SOUND gets louder. Then WILLIAMS SEES IT: a DARK ROILING WALL SEVEN FEET HIGH, spume IRIDESCENT in starlight.

More SHOUTS, DEFECTIONS, GUNFIRE.

WAVES HIT the levee like surf smashing into a cliff. WAVES REAR UP, CRASH DOWN over the levee. Sandbags slough off.

In a die-hard effort, AT GUNPOINT, a handful of LABORERS attempt to sandbag the levee's eroding crown.

The incoming WALL OF WATER is RISING, EVER-BIGGER WAVES POUND.

WILLIAMS

Retreat! Run! Get outta here!

WILLIAMS runs to a car, floors it. LABORERS, SOLDIERS FLEE.

The levee CRUMBLES. WALLS OF WATER SURGE INTO THE STREET.

EXT. DOWNTOWN GREENVILLE, NIGHT

CONTINUING SOUNDS OF: SIRENS, WHISTLES, CHURCHBELLS.

MASSES OF PEOPLE rush through the streets in RAPIDLY RISING KNEE-DEEP WATER toward the main levee. They fight their way into two- and three-story buildings.

INT. WILL'S BEDROOM -- NIGHT

SOUNDS OF SIRENS, WHISTLES, CHURCHBELLS.

WILL sits at his table, smoking a cigarette in a cigarette holder, drafting plans and orders.

A YOUNG HOUSEBOY bursts in, followed by agitated ERNEST.

YOUNG HOUSEBOY

Massah Will! Massah Will!

WILL

Calm down, boy. We're on high ground.
No flood has ever threatened this house.

(scribbles)

The basement might flood, though. Ernest,
how many barrels of whisky are down there?

ERNEST

I dunno!

WILL

Go down and check. Get it up. For the sake
of Father, his friends, get it all up.

ERNEST

Ain't you sposed to be--savin' people?

WILL

(exploding with anger)

What the hell can I do now?

(a grand queen: his eyes glitter)

Tomorrow, Ernest. Tomorrow I save people.

When I can see.

(flicks cigarette ash at dark windows)

Now go.

WILL picks up his pen, SCRIBBLES.

EXT. PERCY HOUSE -- DAY [April 22]

Just past dawn. Chilly drizzle falls. LEROY and CAMILLE sit on
the verandah, looking down Percy Street, slick with rain but not
flooded. MINERVA, the cook, a large black woman, serves them
coffee. WILL comes out, sits, takes coffee from MINERVA.

WILL

Nice weather.

LEROY smiles. CAMILLE shivers within her shawl.

WILL

Where's Charlie?

LEROY

At the levee board. He called.

WILL

At least the telephones work. How deep is
it, downtown?

LEROY

Almost ten feet. Which means...

CAMILLE

Any moment now.

LEROY

The phones work because the wires are up on poles. Will, you know what else those poles are good for?

WILL

Of course. Finding people out in the country. You can't see roads, and if it's deep enough, you can't even see fences. So you just follow the poles. In boats.

(pause)

We should have listened to Charlie. And brought a boat up here. Look!

(points)

Here it comes.

The PERCYS stare: a SHALLOW BAND OF DARK WATER advances up the slope of Percy Street, filling gutters, spreading over pavement, spilling up onto the sidewalks, SPREADING FURTHER INTO THE YARDS OF HOUSES. It lacks the violence of the downtown flood but the approach is relentless.

CAMILLE

With just ten feet in town, we should be fine.

LEROY

"Just" ten feet!

(shrugs fatalistically)

The Englishman can't be happy. Parts of Panther Burn must be 15 feet under.

(to WILL)

You better get along.

WILL stands, drains his coffee cup.

WILL

I'll see you later?

LEROY

After I make phone calls. They'll likely be lengthy.

Water SEEPS INTO THE PERCY GARDEN.

WILL

There goes your larkspur, Mother.

WILL descends verandah steps.

CAMILLE

Can't you send for--for a boat?

WILL

They're being put to better use, Mother.

CAMILLE and LEROY watch WILL walk down the street. He is soon knee-deep.

CAMILLE

He'll get sick.

LEROY

Camille. Will's a war hero, hardened. He's been through a whole lot worse than this.

(suddenly grave)

It's time he made his mark in these parts. High time. When we're gone--he will need respect.

CAMILLE

But you just said--the war. And he's--a Percy!

LEROY

He's surrounded by good ole boys, Baptists, Methodists. Moralists, Camille. You know what I'm talking about.

CAMILLE frowns.

ACT II

EXT. DOWNTOWN GREENVILLE -- DAY

Dawn brightens above drizzle. Water flows through the streets below the second-story windows of buildings. At intersections crosscurrents COLLIDE, SLAMMING TOGETHER items of debris.

Half-afloat on a large piece of plywood, legs kicking water for propulsion, WILL makes his way toward a building. Sign on it: "KNIGHTS OF COLUMBUS." Debris jostles WILL. He passes the open entry of another building, looks at the entry hall: a DEAD HORSE floats within.

WILL reaches the steps to the K of C entry, sloshes up them.

INT. KNIGHTS OF COLUMBUS HALL -- DAY

WILL climbs from water to the second floor, goes into a large, dim room that holds 10 card tables: a poker room. Along walls masses of BODIES huddle. They stir. WILL loudly claps his hands.

WILL

Folks, wake up! Wake up, now!

(pause)

I know you came in here to escape the flood, and that's all right. But I'm going to have to move you because I need this space. So get on up now and get ready.

GROANS, OATHS from REFUGEES, all black.

REFUGEE # 1

Who are you?

REFUGEE # 2

What da man want?

WILL

I am William A. Percy, your commander-- and you WILL obey!

WILL finds a phone, dials.

WILL

(into phone)

Major Paxton? Will Percy.

(pause)

Where the hell am I? At the Knights of Columbus. My new headquarters. Yes, Paxton, my new headquarters. The levee board's too small, the opera house is--the opera house, not suitable. So this is it. Get on over here, with boats. I've got people I need to move.

INT. K OF C POKER ROOM -- DAY

Two hours later: REFUGEES are gone, the room is brightly lit and ASWARM WITH ACTIVITY. TECHNICIANS install more telephones. A SOLDIER fiddles with a short-wave radio. SOLDIERS carry in all manner of supplies: typewriters, filing cases, barrels, bulk containers of food. WILL, dressed in dry military khakis, directs the show. His manner: that of a SEASONED MARTINET.

WILL

Foodstuffs in the next room! And put a lock on that door!

MAJOR PAXTON, his hands on his hips, unable to suppress a sneer, watches WILL. RADIO SOLDIER brings WILL a note. He reads it.

WILL

Paxton!

PAXTON
(stiffening with mock respect)

Yes?

WILL
What's the situation with that train wreck?

PAXTON
Train wreck?

WILL
The train that didn't make it to Jackson this morning. Packed full of refugees.

PAXTON shakes his head: He knows nothing.

WILL
That's fine, I just got word myself. It's two miles east of town, derailed from track no longer there. Get a rescue party to it.

PAXTON exits, bumping aside a raffish YOUNG WHITE MAN coming in the door. MAN is unfazed. He saunters up to WILL.

MAN
I reckon you're the boss.

WILL sizes up the fellow.

WILL
Do I know you?

MAN
No. You don't wanter know me.

WILL raises his eyebrows.

MAN
Unless yer feelin'--thirsty.

WILL
Ahh. Moonshine.

MAN (BOOTLEGGER)
River folk. Folks with boats.

BOOTLEGGER leads WILL to a window, points outside. A SLEEK BOAT with a LARGE OUTBOARD MOTOR bobs next to the small ramshackle flotilla of Committee boats tied up to the front stair rail.

WILL
Perfect. How much do you want?

BOOTLEGGER

Nothin'. 'Cept--mash fer my chickens.

WILL

And in return?

BOOTLEGGER

That train wreck? We got a bunch a boats leavin' there right now. Full a wet ladies and tots--ain't the usual cargo. They're headin' fer the levee.

WILL

It's a deal! You'll get your mash!

BOOTLEGGER

We don't want no trouble.

WILL hugs BOOTLEGGER, whispers to him:

WILL

Without the likes of you, half this county'd go stark raving mad. You'll have no trouble, whatsoever, rest assured.

WILL and BOOTLEGGER grin at each other, shake hands.

EXT. GREENVILLE LEVEE -- DAY

Late morning, cold drizzle. Many boats unload bedraggled REFUGEES onto the levee. Rafts bear braying LIVESTOCK. Unshaven, moon-eyed stringy-haired blond MEN helm boats with big motors: BOOTLEGGERS.

CAMERA PULLS UP: a dense line of BLACK REFUGEES snakes down the levee AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE.

Armed SOLDIERS patrol the levee crown. A desperate situation: REFUGEES are soaked, filthy, cold. Some are injured, others feverish. BABIES cry, OLD FOLKS whimper.

An elderly BLACK MAN comforts a BLACK WOMAN with a BAWLING BABY.

WOMAN WITH BABY

Watah! Watah, please!

A SOLDIER with a megaphone ignores WOMAN. Into the megaphone:

SOLDIER

All hands! Proceed to the pier to unload cargo!

ELDERLY BLACK MAN
(to SOLDIER)

You ain't got no white folk doin' shit work!

SOLDIER repeats MEGAPHONE COMMAND. Then, to ELDERLY BLACK MAN:

SOLDIER
Git your black ass to that pier, son!

ELDERLY BLACK MAN
Can't barely walk!

SOLDIER sticks his gun in ELDERLY BLACK MAN's face.

A large steamer is moored at the concrete pier. SOLDIERS under the command of a LIEUTENANT guard the gangplank, holding back a CROWD of ANGRY WHITE MEN.

FURIOUS WHITE MAN
Let us get on that boat!

LIEUTENANT
Calm down, sir. Decisions must be made!

INT. K OF C HEADQUARTERS -- DAY

WILL sits at the head of a conference table composed of card tables shoved together. MAJOR PAXTON, GENERAL GREEN, CHARLIE WILLIAMS, others attend. BACKGROUND: PANDEMONIUM OF ACTIVITY.

WILL
We have two choices as I see it. Either we feed and shelter people, or we send them downriver to camps at Vicksburg.

GENERAL GREEN
We ship 'em out. We can't handle it here.

PAXTON
You mean *white* people. Yes, they must go!

WILL gives PAXTON a troubled glance.

WILL
Women, children, the elderly first. Paxton-- those cowardly men at the pier, trying to board that boat--it's under control?

PAXTON nods.

WILL
Let's round 'em up. Get 'em to the pier any

way we can. We have more steamers coming.
We'll be done in just a few days.

PAXTON

The nigras?

WILL

What about them? Where are the tents? How
are those kitchens coming along?

PAXTON

They're coming. Don't you worry.

WILL

(to WILLIAMS)

Charlie, call in the Red Cross Committee.

PAXTON

What do you want them for?

WILL

This is a humanitarian crisis, Major. The
kind of thing the Red Cross deals with.
Money. Food. Water. Refugee camps. Any
other questions?

An AIDE approaches WILL.

AIDE

Mr. Percy, telephone call from the Senator.

WILL nods curtly at PAXTON, crosses the room, picks up a phone.

WILL

Father?

LEROY (OC)

Can you spare a boat to come pick me up?

WILL

Of course. Father--Paxton is getting difficult
about evacuation. The colored people.

LEROY (OC)

No surprise there, Will. He's a cotton
factor--has to keep the planters happy.
How's it going?

WILL

All right. OK, I guess. Father, I'm sending a
boat right away. I really need you here.

INT. K OF C BUILDING, BACK ROOM -- DAY

WILL meets with his Red Cross Committee: CHARLIE WILLIAMS, JUDGE EMET HARTY, WILL HARDIE, NEWSPAPER OWNER.

WILL

I feel honored to have such fine men on this committee. One way or another, you've all worked closely with Father. He respects you highly and so do I.

JUDGE HARTY

Cut to the chase, Will. You're about to say something awful. We can't wait to find out what it is.

WILL

I've decided to ship out the colored folk.

WILLIAMS groans. A STIR.

WILL

And I'm asking for your support.

WILL HARDIE

I've been managing Trail Lake for many years, Will. I can tell you one thing about our hands. If they go...

WILLIAMS

They'll end up in Chicago. Count on it. They'll never come back.

WILL

Don't be so sure. Our own workers--we treat them so very well.

NEWSPAPER OWNER

What made you decide on such a reckless--wild--dangerous idea, Will Percy?

WILL

I like the way you put that.

Nervous laughter.

WILL

It's the only Christian thing to do.

JUDGE HARTY

The planters will disagree. They'll accuse you--accuse us--of betraying our way of life.

WILL
(fervently)
Betraying their wallets! Their money!

WILLIAMS
Strange thing, Mr. Percy. The Senator never mentioned...

WILL
He and I have discussed it, Charlie. If you doubt that, he's on his way here right now.

A ripple of agitation. WILL holds up a hand.

WILL
Let's vote.

Reluctantly, all hands go up.

WILL
Thank you.
(looks at NEWSPAPER OWNER)
You're putting out the Democrat-Times tomorrow?

NEWSPAPER OWNER
We think we can manage a four-page spread.

WILL
You'll run the story?

NEWSPAPER OWNER hesitates, then nods.

INT. K OF C CARD ROOM -- DAY

Minutes later. CHARLIE WILLIAMS and WILL HARTIE walk through a welter of activity to a corner where they cannot be overheard.

HARTIE
Will better start carrying a gun.

WILLIAMS
I doubt he'd shoot.

HARTIE
He fought in the war!

WILLIAMS
Right. The war hero. The only reason he didn't get run out of town long ago.

HARTIE

That, and his father.

(chuckles mordantly)

Reckon he'll ship out that boy of his?

WILLIAMS

Boy?

HARTIE

That driver. Ernest.

WILLIAMS

Oh, no. Will would never part with him. How'd you--how'd you know about that?

HARTIE

A couple of tenants at Trail Lake. People who talk to relatives of his. The nigras--they know more than you might think. They *do* talk...

(sees something across the room)

Here comes the Senator. You want to speak with him? Or should I?

HARTIE

Let it go for the moment, Charlie. That's my advice. See how things play out.

EXT. COUNTRYSIDE -- DAY

Trees, a few damaged farm buildings poke up from a VAST EXPANSE OF BROWN WATER. The water SWIRLS with currents, crosscurrents. SOUNDS OF gurgling, hissing, GNAWING: the flood is still taking things apart. Drizzle patters into the water.

SOUND OF: a motorboat. A sleek boat comes into view, following a LINE OF UTILITY POLES.

TWO BOOTLEGGERS man the boat. They pass a thick tree, branches of which droop into the water. CU: a branch is ALIVE WITH SNAKES.

Boat follows utility poles to the roof of a farmhouse, submerged up to the eaves. On the roof, a WHITE FAMILY forlornly waves.

EXT. GREENVILLE LEVEE -- DAY

Late afternoon, drizzle. Levee is ASWARM WITH SHIVERING BLACK REFUGEES. A flotilla of boats unloads NEW ARRIVALS.

A DOZEN SOLDIERS guard the concrete pier. From it a large crowd of WHITE WOMEN, WHITE CHILDREN, and WHITE ELDERLY board a steamer. SOLDIERS carry SICK WHITE PEOPLE on stretchers up the gangplank. A knot of well-dressed WHITE MEN watch the boarding.

BLACK WOMAN with BABY, ELDERLY BLACK MAN (from earlier scene) stand near the pier. BABY is GASPING FOR BREATH. WOMAN attempts to go by a SOLDIER to the pier. SOLDIER bars her.

BLACK WOMAN WITH BABY

Mah baby's sick!

SOLDIER

I'm sorry. No exceptions.

SOLDIER looks at SICK BABY: his face softens.

SOLDIER

Lieutenant!

A LIEUTENANT approaches, looks at BABY. A WELL-DRESSED WHITE MAN shoves through, looks at BABY.

BLACK WOMAN WITH BABY

He's real sick! Liable to die!

WELL-DRESSED WHITE MAN

Right! So am I!

SOLDIER

(to LIEUTENANT)

I think we should let her on.

WELL-DRESSED WHITE MAN

You let that nigger on ahead of me--

(pulls a pistol)

I'll shoot her! And the baby!

FUROR. ONLOOKERS RECOIL. LIEUTENANT grabs WELL-DRESSED WHITE MAN, wrestles him to levee crown. Pistol GOES OFF: a wild shot, no one hit. SCREAMS, PANIC. LIEUTENANT lands a fist in WHITE MAN's face. Pistol falls from his hand. LIEUTENANT grabs it, gets up, draws his own pistol, glares at the other WHITE MEN seeking to board.

LIEUTENANT

Gentlemen, get off this pier. Now!

LIEUTENANT LEVELS his guns. WHITE MEN back away.

LIEUTENANT

(to BLACK WOMAN WITH BABY)

Get on that boat.

BLACK WOMAN WITH BABY

Youse a God-fearin' Christian!

ELDERLY BLACK MAN tries to follow her to the gangplank.
LIEUTENANT bars him.

BLACK WOMAN WITH BABY goes up gangplank.

WHITE MEN ERUPT WITH FURY. WHITE PEOPLE boarding the steamer
recoil from BLACK WOMAN. BLACK REFUGEES CHEER WOMAN, JEER AT
WHITE MEN, at WHITES boarding the steamer. A NEAR RIOT.

LIEUTENANT FIRES BOTH GUNS INTO THE AIR.

INT. PERCY DINING ROOM -- NIGHT

LEROY, WILL, CHARLIE WILLIAMS consume a late supper: biscuits,
cold fried chicken, country ham, cheese. CAMILLE sits with them.

CAMILLE

Some excitement at the pier today.

WILL

Cowards. That lieutenant--a fine young
man. Wish I'd been there to see it.

LEROY

You'll see it. All hell will break
loose when colored folks start boarding
boats.

WILLIAMS gives LEROY a quizzical look.

LEROY

(to WILLIAMS)

You think we're crazy, don't you?

WILLIAMS shrugs.

LEROY

Maybe we are.

WILL

It runs in the family.

CAMILLE

Will!

LEROY winces. TENSE SILENCE.

WILL

Just joking, Mother.

LEROY gives WILL a moody stare.

INT. WILLIAMS'S ROOM, PERCY HOUSE -- NIGHT

WILLIAMS lies in bed, eyes open, hands behind his head. He hears something in the hall outside his closed door: a SOFT TREAD.

He gets up, goes to the door, listens: someone is descending the staircase. WILLIAMS glances at one of his windows. He goes to it, looks out. Moments later he sees:

WILL walking to the carriage house. Entering it.

WILLIAMS
(mutters)

They really are crazy.

EXT. K OF C HALL -- DAY [April 23]

Morning. Drizzle. A motorboat delivers LEROY, WILL, and WILLIAMS to the K of C hall.

INT. BACK ROOM OF K OF C HALL -- DAY

LEROY, WILL, and BILLY WYNN confer at the table.

LEROY
Billy, we've done some thinking. What's your legal opinion of martial law?

WYNN
Here? Washington County?

LEROY nods. WYNN laughs.

WILL
There's looting. The logistics of labor. Fights at the pier. General lawlessness.

WYNN
Legally, you'd have to get approval from higher authorities, the governor maybe, or the mayor, the city council. But Senator-- if we need martial law? Just declare it.

MAJOR PAXTON bursts in carrying a newspaper.

LEROY
Morning, Major. It's good you're here. We have just declared martial law.

PAXTON
What the hell is this?

He holds up the *Greenville Democrat-Times*: Headline:

EVACUATION FOR ALL

LEROY

Sit down, Major.

PAXTON sits.

PAXTON

(reading from newspaper)

"The city will be almost completely evacuated within a few days." And the governor says, "We will remove all the refugees and all other persons who desire to leave the city."

(glares at LEROY)

Did you talk to the governor about this?

LEROY

Governor Murphree and I have conversed.

PAXTON

So this is your idea?

LEROY

I take some responsibility. Major. I repeat. We've declared martial law.

PAXTON

Brilliant, Senator. You'll need it!

WILL

With this weather, with the conditions-- no clean water, little food, human and animal excrement--Major, we're looking at epidemics. A matter of public health.

PAXTON

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

WILL

The Red Cross is setting up first-rate refugee camps in Vicksburg. And you want to keep those poor people here?

PAXTON

(to LEROY)

You've got railroad income, the law office, the banks, so much else. You can go without cotton. But many of us--brokers like me--we'll all be ruined.

LEROY

I feel terrible about the situation,
Major.

PAXTON

You'll get trouble. Trouble that even
You might not survive.

LEROY

I'm a gambling man. I'll take my chances.

PAXTON stews.

PAXTON

Martial law. We already have it. Under me.

LEROY

Well, now.

WILL

I control the Red Cross. I control the
food, the water, the dollars. Especially
the dollars, the hundreds of thousands
coming from Washington. You control the
guns. But without money, guns won't do
much good. Major--this is a joint
operation.

PAXTON

Is that a threat?

WILL stands, POUNDS TABLE WITH FIST.

WILL

If you want to take it that way!

PAXTON stands, makes for the door, muttering under his breath:

PAXTON

This is what you get--from an *artiste*...

LEROY

Paxton!

PAXTON turns on his heel, his face pale.

PAXTON

Senator?

LEROY

Get the hell out of my sight.

EXT. HOTEL -- DAY

A large hotel on Main Street. Sign: "Cowan Hotel--'The Delta's Finest.'" A number of boats are tied to the grand entry.

INT. COWAN HOTEL, MEZZANINE -- DAY

Mezzanine overlooks flooded lobby, but on the mezzanine itself life continues. GUESTS mingle. A café serves breakfast. A table in the café:

Three copies of that day's *Greenville Democrat-Times* lie on it. Around the table, prosperous WHITE MEN heatedly talk.

WHITE MAN # 1

You can't stop the Senator!

WHITE MAN # 2

No? Watch me.

WHITE MAN # 1

The governor's in his pocket. And so are the bigwigs in Washington.

WHITE MAN # 3

(rips newspaper in half)

This cannot stand.

WHITE MAN # 2

Maybe it's not the Senator we deal with.

WHITE MAN # 1

If not him--who?

WHITE MAN # 2

His son. The so-called hero.

(leans forward)

What do we have on him?

EXT. LEVEE BOARD BUILDING -- DAY

A MAN rows a boat to the building. His passenger: WHITE MAN # 2.

INT. LEVEE BOARD OFFICE -- DAY

WHITE MAN # 2 enters the busy office, approaches a WOMAN.

WHITE MAN # 2

Hello, Sondra.

SONDRA

Hi there, Mr. Peeler.

PEELER

I'm looking for Charlie Williams.

SONDRA

He's in the back with Seguire Allen.

PEELER nods, walks to the back room, knocks. WILLIAMS opens the door. ALLEN looks up from the table.

WILLIAMS

Mr. Peeler.

PEELER

Charlie! How you doin'! May I have a word with you?

INT. OUTER HALLWAY, LEVEE BOARD OFFICE -- DAY

PEELER and WILLIAMS stand in hallway. They're alone.

WILLIAMS

What can I do for you?

PEELER

You got all your hands to safety?

WILLIAMS

(nods)

They were working on the rear levee. And their families, we already had 'em on the main levee. Your hands?

PEELER

Still comin' in.

(unpleasant laugh)

Reckon I should have done what the Senator did. Put 'em to work on the levee.

WILLIAMS

We could have used the help.

PEELER

(another laugh)

I heard you're staying at the Percys'.

WILLIAMS'S eyes narrow.

PEELER

What can you tell me about Will and--and that boy of his? What's his name?

WILLIAMS

I don't believe I know what you mean.

PEELER

Yes you do. I'm sure you do.

WILLIAMS

No, Mr. Peeler. I don't.

PEELER leers at WILLIAMS. WILLIAMS flinches.

PEELER

A little hanky-panky...right, Charlie?

WILLIAMS

If you'll excuse me, I have work to do.

WILLIAMS turns away.

PEELER

You let the Senator know we have Will's number, Charlie. You tell him that. For the sake of *both* of them.

WILLIAMS freezes. Then he walks back into the office.

INT. PERCY FRONT HALL -- NIGHT

WILLIAMS enters, looking tired. CAMILLE calls from the parlor:

CAMILLE

Just in time for some wonderful crawfish bisque!

WILLIAMS

No thanks, Mrs. Percy. I had supper in town.

WILLIAMS goes up the stairs.

EXT. K OF C BUILDING -- DAY [April 24]

The next morning, still drizzly. A motorboat approaches bearing LEROY, WILL, WILLIAMS. LEROY and WILL step off. WILLIAMS stays in the boat.

WILLIAMS

Call me at the levee board if you need me.

LEROY waves a "yes." Motorboat moves off.

LEROY

What's gotten into him?

WILL

Tired, probably. Exhausted! Everybody is.

INT. RELIEF HEADQUARTERS, K OF C BUILDING -- DAY

Mid-day. WILL chairs a meeting of the Relief Committee. MAJOR PAXTON, SEGUINE ALLEN, BILLY WYNN attend.

WILL

I have some news. A government steamer, the Control, is set to dock tomorrow. It can take 500 passengers, white women and children. The Minnesota, a bigger ship, also will dock tomorrow. 1000 people will board it--colored people.

PAXTON

Women? Children?

WILL

And men. The Wabash and the Kappa will be standing by tomorrow, coming in as soon as the Minnesota leaves. The Sprague, Tollinger, and Cincinnati are on the way, each towing barges. Big barges--able to hold thousands. Livestock as well as people.

(pauses)

This town will be empty in just a couple of days.

PAXTON

What if the nigras don't want to go?

WILL

They have no choice. They can't take care of themselves. That's obvious.

INT. PERCY DINING ROOM -- NIGHT

LEROY and WILL have a late snack. CAMILLE sits with them.

CAMILLE

When this is over, I want you both to get some rest.

WILL and LEROY look at each other, smile.

LEROY

It won't be over for months, Camille. The clean-up. Fixing the rear levee. The banks, the financing, the debt. We've just begun.

CAMILLE

I mean the evacuation. When that's done,
you'll have a load off your minds. You will
deserve a respite. And need it!

SOUND OF: Front door opening, shutting.

LEROY rises, goes to hall. WILLIAMS is heading for the stairs.

LEROY

Charlie.

WILLIAMS

A long day. I'm turning in, Mr. Percy.

LEROY

Of course. Charlie. If there's something on
your mind--that you'd like to discuss--

WILLIAMS

Thanks, Mr. Percy. Guess I'm a little down.
Still can't believe we lost Mound's Landing.

LEROY

Don't blame yourself, Charlie. You did all you
could, and more.

WILLIAMS

Yeah.

(forced smile)

Good night.

LEROY

Good night, Charlie.

WILLIAMS goes upstairs. LEROY returns to dining room.

CAMILLE

He needs a rest. All of you do.
(clutches her chest)
Oh! That--pain. Again.

LEROY

Darling! You get to bed right now!

INT. PERCY LIBRARY -- NIGHT

LEROY sips a nightcap. He's alone. A knock on the door.

LEROY

Come in.

WILLIAMS enters.

LEROY

Charlie. Have a seat.

WILLIAMS closes the door, sits.

LEROY

Shoot, Charlie. What is it?

WILLIAMS

It's about Will, Mr. Percy. Or--it's that--
it relates to Will. Not just about him.

LEROY nods gravely.

WILLIAMS

There's some people out to get him.

LEROY

Out to get him--how?

WILLIAMS

You know how much I respect him. Known him
since we were little.

LEROY

Who's out to get him and why?

WILLIAMS

Jack Peeler. And his crowd. They think--

LEROY

What do they *think*, Charlie?

WILLIAMS

Well. Don't know how to put it. They think
they've got the goods on Will and Ernest.
They think they can destroy you, too.

EXT. PERCY HOUSE -- DAY [April 25]

Drizzle. LEROY, WILL, and WILLIAMS board a motorboat. DRIVER
takes the boat down Percy Street.

WILL

Now it's both of you. What is this--silence?

LEROY

It's nothing special, Son. Things may be
getting beyond our grasp... Out of control.

EXT. K OF C BUILDING -- DAY

Motorboat delivers WILL to building, then moves on with LEROY and WILLIAMS.

EXT. LEVEE PIER -- DAY

TWO DOZEN SOLDIERS guard the pier, MAJOR PAXTON in command. WHITE WOMEN and CHILDREN are boarding a steamer, the *Control*. SOLDIERS keep at bay a crowd of ANGRY WHITE MEN.

A larger steamer, the *Minnesota*, eases in along the pier's other side. A restive THRONG OF BLACK PEOPLE awaits embarkment.

Further on down the levee: CHAOS, MISERY in the dank cold. A motorboat takes WILL alongside the levee. He scans the wretched hordes sharing space with unruly livestock, quarreling dogs.

Boat draws up to the pier. WILL gets off, eyes ANGRY WHITE MEN, turns from them, approaches PAXTON. Behind WILL:

VOICE

Nigger lover!

WILL slowly turns toward ANGRY WHITE MEN, his face rigid with disdain. WHITE MEN scowl, sneer. One steps forward, drawing open his suit jacket: tucked into his waistband: TWO REVOLVERS.

WILL

I'm not afraid of trash like you.

MAJOR PAXTON stands by. He shakes his head: exasperated.

INT. LEVEE BOARD REAR OFFICE -- DAY

LEROY is on the phone. SONDRÄ (office worker) comes in.

SONDRÄ

Senator? Some gentlemen are here. They want to see you.

LEROY

(cups phone)

Send them in.

JACK PEELER, WHITE MEN # 1 and # 3, and three other WHITE MEN enter. Their faces are grim. LEROY ignores them. Into phone:

LEROY

Thank you, Mr. Hoover. I appreciate it.

LEROY hangs up, looks impassively at the MEN.

PEELER

You know why we're here?

LEROY shrugs. Not a care in the world. PEELER frowns.

PEELER

Those hands will not board those boats.

LEROY

Why is that, Peeler?

PEELER

We won't let them.

LEROY

(smiles)

Gentlemen, this town is under martial law.
And you are not the ones giving orders.

WHITE MAN # 1

Who's giving the orders?

LEROY

His name is William A. Percy. If you wish to
change policy, you must speak with him.

PEELER

We'll do more than that.

LEROY

(mildly)

Is that a threat?

LEROY's mildness packs an OMINOUS FORCE. The MEN stir.

WHITE MAN # 3

Senator, we don't want no violence. You're
in charge. Don't let this happen.

PEELER puts his hands on LeRoy's table, leans into LeRoy's face.

PEELER

In charge? We'll see who's in charge. That
sissy son of yours--what he's doing...

LEROY stands. PEELER straightens. Hatred SIZZLES between them.

LEROY

Get out.

PEELER smiles.

PEELER

Come on, boys.

PEELER turns to the door, waves the other MEN out. He goes through the door, turns back to LEROY: softly:

PEELER

We've lynched white people for less.

LeRoy sits, lights a cigar. PEELER's comment does not appear to bother him. Again, not a care in the world.

EXT. LEVEE PIER -- DAY

The *Minnesota's* gangplank THUDS onto the pier. ANGRY WHITE MEN shake their fists. WILL waves BLACK EVACUEES to the gangplank. EVACUEES shuffle aboard the steamer. MAJOR PAXTON stands by. His SOLDIERS separate EVACUEES from WHITE MEN.

ANGRY WHITE MAN

Paxton! Stop it! Stop it NOW!

Stone-faced, PAXTON does not reply. WHITE MEN CURSE, SHOUT.

A BLACK MAN with his FAMILY MEMBERS approach WILL.

BLACK MAN

Mistah Percy. We don't want to go.

WILL

What?

ANGRY WHITE MAN

They don't want to go!

WILL

(furious, to BLACK MAN)

Get on that ship!

WHITE MEN surge into SOLDIERS, who push back. BLACK EVACUEES press forward toward gangplank. SHOUTS, CRIES OF PANIC.

The steamer's horns BLAST. The CAPTAIN shouts from the bridge:

CAPTAIN

What the hell is going on down there!

WILL

Order! Order!

SCUFFLES break out among EVACUEES trying to board the steamer.

WILL grabs a SOLDIER'S pistol, FIRES REPEATEDLY into the air.

WILL

(to BALKY BLACK MAN)

If you don't want to go, GET OUT OF THE WAY.

(to Paxton, gesturing at ANGRY WHITE MEN)

Get them off the pier!

A HAND drops on WILL's shoulder. He turns, sees LEROY.

LEROY

Come with me, Son. We must talk a moment together.

(to PAXTON)

Follow orders, Major!

(to ANGRY WHITE MEN)

Violence will not be tolerated. If you draw your guns--you will be shot.

(to WILL)

Come on.

LEROY leads WILL down the levee toward a large National Guard tent south of the pier.

LEROY

We're in big trouble, Will. We're no longer in charge.

WILL

What's happened?

LEROY

More than you realize, I fear. We cannot control this situation any longer.

A SOLDIER guards the tent's entry. He nods as LEROY and WILL enter. Various supplies fill the tent's dim interior. LEROY and WILL find chairs in a corner, sit.

WILL

What's happened?

LEROY

Threats. Death threats.

WILL

You can't be serious.

LEROY

A few weeks ago, I predicted the rednecks

would get angry. Mad-dog mad. It's happened.
Jack Peeler's talking about lynching.

WILL

Lynching who?

LEROY

You.

WILL jumps to his feet.

WILL

I'll have him arrested!

LEROY

Sit down, Will. We have to think long term.

WILL angrily paces.

LEROY

There's another lynch target.

WILL

(sitting)

Who?

LEROY

Ernest.

WILL

What's--what's he got to do with this?

LEROY

I'd prefer not to get into details. Anyway,
I don't know them. And do not want to know.

(meets WILL's horrified stare)

Have you ever thought about your position
in this county when--

WILL

When? When what?

LEROY

I'm gone.

WILL sags.

LEROY

I've already lived longer than any
male Percy. And then my younger brothers--
both dead...

WILL

(bitterly interrupts)

All right. My position here. What about it?

LEROY

You'll have enemies. You'll need resources to fight them.

WILL

Common decency is all I'll need.

LEROY

No. You'll need respect and strong allies among the whites that matter.

WILL shudders.

WILL

Respect. Lovely. I'll need respect. Are you saying--I don't already have it?

LEROY

Of course you do. But not from vicious, ignorant men like Peeler.

WILL

I do not want or need their respect.

LEROY

No you don't but you do need allies against them. If you push those men over the edge they will ruin both of us. And all that our family has worked for. And then they will take it out on the colored folks, who will suffer the most if we make the wrong move now.

WILL shakes his head.

LEROY

We have a situation here. We are inches away from a war. If that war comes, many will die. Colored and white alike. We don't control things, unlike previous crises. Reconstruction, Redemption, the second Klan hereabouts. Then, we ruled. We no longer rule--even in Greenville.

WILL

Seems to me, we have a pretty tight grip.

LEROY

Not with lynch talk we don't!

WILL recoils.

LEROY

We must be realistic. We at least have influence. And we must use it.

WILL

All right, Father. How?

LEROY

You will call a meeting of the Committee and take another vote on evacuation. The Committee will vote to cancel it.

WILL

I feel--sick.

LEROY

You will pretend that you do not know the outcome of the vote. You'll argue against it. Nobly. With passion. But in the end you will accede despite your revulsion--which will be real enough. Don't get sick on me, now.

WILL

Everybody'll know that you--put in the fix.

LEROY

Yes. Which will give me influence over the planters, big and small, genteel and redneck. But, your integrity will be preserved. That is important. Decent folks will take note and honor you long after I'm gone.

Bleakly, WILL laughs.

LEROY

Hear me out. The hands on the levee will be angry. You will be firm. Very firm. Paxton will be only too happy to help you.

WILL

How can we be more firm than we already...

LEROY

You will rule with an IRON FIST!
(voice softens)
And thereby save many colored folks' lives.

WILL stares at his father.

LEROY

Meantime I'll handle the planters. Together,
we will prevent war. Race war.

WILL

And I will get--respect.

Wearily, LEROY nods.

WILL

That's one hell of a tradeoff.

LEROY

It's called survival. Your survival. The
blacks' survival. And Greenville's.

WILL stands. LEROY stands.

WILL

The Minnesota sails as planned.

LEROY

That's fine. They're already boarding her.
Oh, another thing. The weather.

LEROY follows WILL to the tent's entrance.

WILL

The weather?

LEROY

It will be better tomorrow. And we'll get
the tents we need.

WILL

How do you know that?

LEROY

I'm a betting man.

WILL

(to SOLDIER standing guard)

Telephone?

SOLDIER points. WILL picks up a phone, dials.

WILL

(into phone)

Charlie. Call in the Committee. We're
having an emergency meeting.

EXT. LEVEE -- DAY

Morning: BRIGHT SUNSHINE. BLACK LABORERS unload cargo from a large steamer moored to the pier. MAJOR PAXTON, WILL look on. SOLDIERS stand by.

PAXTON

Tents, Mr. Percy. Many tents.

WILL

In the nick of time.

(grins)

It's so warm today. Father predicted it.

PAXTON

The Senator is a wise man.

(grunts)

The nigras don't seem unhappy.

WILL

A lot of them really didn't want to go.

This is after all home to them, the only one they've ever known.

A well-dressed, light-skinned BLACK MAN approaches.

WILL

(to BLACK MAN)

Good morning, Mr. McMiller.

MCMILLER

Mr. Percy. Major Paxton.

(stares at the swollen river)

It is a nice day. Thank God!

(stares at WILL)

But we got a problem, Mr. Percy.

WILL

We have many problems, John.

MCMILLER

I reckon with the evacuation called off, you'll need a lot of hands.

WILL

Yes. We have to plug the rear levee.

MCMILLER

How do you plan to get those hands?

PAXTON

The way we've been doin' in it. We'll

round 'em up.

MCMILLER

Conscription. And pay? Do you plan to pay the hands?

WILL

We're running out of money, Mr. Mc-Miller.

MCMILLER points at ARMED WHITE SOLDIERS.

MCMILLER

The problem, sirs, is not labor and it isn't really even the pay. It's the guns. You've got black folks working at gun-point. Just like slaves.

(smiles grimly)

For the sake of this town, get rid of the guns.

MCMILLER walks away.

PAXTON

What do you think about that, Mr. Percy?

WILL

I don't know, Major. Maybe he has a point.

(frowns at deluged town)

But just look at that mess. We've got so much work to do.

EXT. PERCY GARDEN -- DAY

July 7, 1927, two-and-a-half months later. WILL sits at the table, eating lunch. ERNEST shovels muck from a flower bed.

ERNEST

Months aftah de flood. Weese *still* cleanin' up!

WILL

Not fast enough. Ernest, tell me something. Why do colored men hate working?

ERNEST

They be workin! Ise workin!

CAMILLE walks into the garden.

CAMILLE

Will, a phone call came in from Major Paxton. I think it's serious.

WILL

Somebody didn't get enough food because he didn't show up for levee duty?

CAMILLE

That new police officer, the young one, shot James Gooden.

ERNEST starts, loses his grip on the shovel.

WILL

Oh, no. I know him. He's a solid man. Why on earth did--you must mean Mosely. Why did Mosely shoot Gooden?

CAMILLE

Apparently because he refused to be conscripted. At any rate, he died.

ERNEST emits a soft wail.

CAMILLE

Did you know him, Ernest?

ERNEST

Aww, Miz Percy, Mistah Will! I just knew him to say hello. But this'll be trouble. A whole lotta trouble!

WILL

Why?

ERNEST

Folks'll go crazy!

WILL and CAMILLE stare at ERNEST.

ERNEST

It's da guns! Doze gawd-awful guns!

INT. RELIEF HEADQUARTERS -- DAY

WILL enters. A group of grim-faced BLACK MEN, including JOHN MCMILLER, await. RELIEF WORKERS sit tensely at tables.

MCMILLER

Mr. Percy!

WILL

Mr. McMiller, I have heard the terrible news. There is no need to shout.

MCMILLER

Did you hear that Mr. Gooden had worked all night when Officer Mosely invaded his home? That Mosely *shot him* when the tired man refused to get in the truck?

WILL

No. I hadn't heard that.

MCMILLER

This is it! We have *had it!*

MCMILLER storms out. BLACK MEN follow.

RELIEF WORKERS stare apprehensively at WILL.

INT. BACK OFFICE OF RELIEF HEADQUARTERS -- DAY

Two hours later. WILL chairs a staff meeting. MAJOR PAXTON, the MAYOR, the POLICE CHIEF, other OFFICIALS attend.

PAXTON

Every last operation has halted. Cargo unloading, shipments inland, clean-up efforts--it's all stopped! The nigras are *on strike*.

WILL

What are they doing?

POLICE CHIEF

Buying guns.

MAYOR

White folks, too. Everybody's arming. I don't need to remind you that at present, the town's white population is about 4000. There are eleven thousand blacks.

WILL

Yes. It doesn't help to be outnumbered in any war. But especially in a race war.

MAYOR

What on earth will we do?

WILL

Well. We'll stop the war, obviously.

PAXTON

How?

WILL

I will speak to the Negro community to-night. In a church of John McMiller's choice.

NERVOUS LAUGHTER.

MAYOR

You're joking, of course.

WILL

I'm quite serious. And I will go alone.

MAYOR

They'll tear you from limb to limb! They blame you, Will!

WILL

Where is Officer Mosely?

POLICE CHIEF

Down at the station.

WILL

Jail him.

(stands)

Put that imbecile in jail immediately! Announce that he faces a murder charge!

POLICE CHIEF

That won't save you if you set foot in a black church, Will.

WILL

We'll see about that.

WILL exits.

PAXTON

They do say that in Europe, the man fought with valor. And I believe I read that it was almost--"suicidal" valor.

OFFICIALS eye each other uneasily.

EXT. PERCY VERANDAH -- NIGHT

That night. CAMILLE and ERNEST, both tearful, confront WILL.

ERNEST

Mistah Will! Pleeeeze! Don't do it!

CAMILLE

Won't you at least call your father?
Maybe he can talk sense into you!

WILL

Father and I have already discussed the matter, Mother. It is my job to contain the Negroes, for their own well-being. It is Father's job to get bank loans for the whites, especially the ones who'd otherwise go under. We saw this coming. Don't you see? We must prevent a war.

EXT. HANDSOME, SOLID CHURCH -- NIGHT

WILL, alone, enters the church.

INT. CHURCH -- NIGHT

WILL walks down the aisle. The church is almost empty.

A LARGE BLACK MAN in clerical garb sits on the platform.

WILL

Pastor Weddington! Good evening.

WEDDINGTON

(stonily)

Good evening, Mr. Percy.

WILL

Quite a crowd, isn't it?

WEDDINGTON

They will come. Trust me, they will come.

INT. CHURCH -- NIGHT

Half an hour later. The church is packed with silent but INTENSELY SURLY BLACK MEN. Hostility RADIATES.

WEDDINGTON rises, moves to the pulpit.

WEDDINGTON

I will read from Scripture.

(pause)

When the Lord saw how great was the wickedness of human beings on earth...

INT. CHURCH -- NIGHT

Ten minutes later. WEDDINGTON concludes:

WEDDINGTON

...and only Noah and those who were with him in the ark survived.

(pause)

Join me in a hymn. You *know* which one I mean.

Hymn characterization from *Lanterns on the Levee*, pp. 266-267:

"It was a hymn I had never heard, a droning, monotonous thing that swelled, as they repeated verse after verse, from an almost inaudible mutter to a pounding barbaric chant of menace. I could feel their excitement and hate mount to frenzy. In the quivering silence that followed the last defiant roar from those dusky throats and deep chests, the preacher turned to me....His words were gaunt:"

WEDDINGTON

I present Mr. Percy, chairman of the Red Cross.

WILL walks to the pulpit. His eyes GLEAM.

INT. PERCY PARLOR -- NIGHT

Later the same night. WILL sits with CAMILLE.

CAMILLE

You told them that *they* killed Gooden?

WILL

Trying to reason with them was out of the question, retreat would have been fatal, and so I had no choice but to attack. And yes, in a sense they did kill Gooden. If they had done their duty unloading the supplies that are keeping them alive-- there would have been no conscription! We wouldn't have had police desperately looking for labor.

CAMILLE

You told them they have blood on their hands.

WILL

Yes. Because they do.

CAMILLE

And you made them pray for forgiveness.

WILL

Yes. On their knees.

CAMILLE sighs.

CAMILLE

Will it prevent the race war?

WILL

I don't know. When I asked for volunteers to unload the next boat, only four men stood up. Three of them cripples.

(smiles)

I think I put the fear of God in them. They roared at me with their hymn, but I roared back. By the end we'd let out a lot of roaring. It must have done some good.

CAMILLE

I don't know how you survived.

WILL

Father will understand it.

(gazes at thin air)

He'll understand it very well.

ACT III

EXT. COUNTRY AIRFIELD NEAR GREENVILLE -- DAY

October, 1927: Bare woods surround a primitive facility. One runway, two flimsy hangars, a one-floor control building.

CAMILLE and MATTIE SUE sit on a bench outside the control building, bundled up: it's chilly. CAMILLE looks frail.

They watch a single-prop airplane perform DARING AERIAL STUNTS.

CAMILLE

Now, tell me. How is he, really?

MATTIE SUE

Not well. He goes into these--black moods.

CAMILLE

And you trust him--

(looks at pirouetting airplane)

To do that?

MATTIE SUE

It's scary, of course. But it seems to help.
It's like hunting. Roy needs the thrill.

(pause)

And LeRoy? You must miss him.

CAMILLE

He's so busy in Washington, helping Congress
with the recovery program. Since the flood
last summer, he has worked so hard.

(pause)

Far too hard. Yes, I miss him terribly.

MATTIE SUE

That flood took a great toll on both of you.

CAMILLE

And on Will. In some ways he suffered the most.

MATTIE SUE

He is very high-strung.

CAMILLE

It's more than that. You know--the brutality
charges. Oh, it was simply dreadful. The worst
of it was, Will couldn't stop the abuse.

MATTIE SUE

Those colored newspapers up north cast him
as the villain.

CAMILLE

Yes. No wonder he sailed for Japan. He
had to get away...

(puts a hand to her chest)

But I must say, it improved his standing
in the community--

(gazes skyward)

What on earth is Roy doing?

The airplane HURTLES EARTHWARD IN A NEAR-VERTICAL DIVE.

MATTIE SUE

(leaps to her feet)

Oh! Oh, no!

Airplane PULLS OUT OF THE DIVE, makes a graceful landing.

INT. HOSPITAL CORRIDOR -- DAY

MATTIE SUE confronts ROY, who wears aviation regalia: a leather jacket, goggles hoisted to his forehead, etc.

MATTIE SUE

You almost killed her!

ROY

Mattie Sue--please...

A DOCTOR approaches.

DOCTOR

Mrs. Percy is fine. Just a bit unnerved.

(frowns)

I recommend that she see a heart specialist.

INT. GREENVILLE TRAIN STATION -- DAY

Three days later. ERNEST watches a train pull in.

WILL exits the train. A PORTER follows with trunks.

ERNEST

Mistah Will! Welcome home!

INT. PERCY CAR -- DAY

ERNEST drives. WILL sits in the back.

ERNEST

Japan! What was it like, Mr. Will?

WILL

Oh, it was all right. I liked the gardens.

(pause)

It was good to get away.

ERNEST

Like always, huh, Mr. Will?

WILL

Yes. Like always.

(yawns)

Tell me. Do people still hate me?

ERNEST

That depends. Do you mean white folks.
Or black folks?

WILL

You know what I mean!

ERNEST

Mr. Will. I have to say somethin'. Miz Percy--she's not doing so good.

INT. CAMILLE'S BEDROOM -- DAY

CAMILLE, in bed, is deathly pale. WILL sits in a chair beside the bed, holding her hand. A DOCTOR stands behind WILL.

CAMILLE

I'm all right, Will. Don't fret. I'm feeling better.

WILL

Father's on his way home. He'll be here tomorrow, Mother.

WILL stands, motions DOCTOR to the hall. They walk down it.

DOCTOR

Your mother is not in mortal danger. But she must not be subjected to any shocks. Bed rest and calm are what she needs.

WILL and DOCTOR descend the staircase.

DOCTOR

Tranquillity, Will.

WILL

Yes, yes. Of course...

At the foot of the stairs, a LARGE BLACK WOMAN bustles through the hall. A BEAUTIFUL BLACK BOY, about 13, follows her.

WILL

Who are you?

LARGE BLACK WOMAN

Louisa. [the "i" pronounced "eye," the "a" pronounced "er"]

WILL

What brings you here, Louisa?

LOUISA

(indignant)

Me? I am Miz Percy's cook!

WILL

What happened to Minerva?

LOUISA shrugs.

WILL
I see. And the boy?

LOUISA
Dats my Fode.

WILL
I'm Will Percy.

LOUISA and FODE bob their heads.

WILL
(smiles)
Nice to meet you, Louisa. Hello, Fode.

FODE gives WILL a brilliant smile.

DAVID (butler) walks in, notes the smile, glances at WILL.

DAVID
(to LOUISA)
Come along now.

INT. PERCY DINING ROOM -- NIGHT

DAVID serves LEROY, WILL, ROY, and MATTIE SUE roast quail with wild rice, okra, grits, hot breads. LEROY is haggard.

WILL
The quail is delicious.

LEROY
(to ROY)
You bagged these birds, I'm sure.

ROY
Just the other day. Before my little air show.

MATTIE SUE
Disgraceful.

ROY
Mattie Sue...

LEROY
Camille's been having spells for a while now. We can't blame it on Roy's antics in the sky.
(pause)
So much to catch up on. Me in Washington, Will in Japan, a marvelous new cook. What

became of Minerva?

MATTIE SUE

I gathered from Camille that, with you and Will out of the house, she--something about last summer, the flood. Her angry relatives. Noise in the kitchen.

LEROY and WILL exchange glances.

WILL

Those people have no idea how much we've done for them over the years.

DAVID stiffens ever so slightly, leaves the room.

INT. PERCY KITCHEN -- NIGHT

DAVID enters. ERNEST, LOUISA, FODE are eating dinner.

LOUISA

How does Mr. Percy like my quail?

DAVID

The Senatah likes it fine.

(glances at ERNEST, then at FODE)

And Mr. Will--he seems mighty pleased.

(to FODE)

You gonna make yoself useful around here?

FODE nods. ERNEST stops eating, shoves aside his plate.

INT. PERCY VERANDAH -- DAY

CAPTION: 20 Months Later

Late June, 1929: Shrubs flower. Shirtless, FODE clips hedges.

Gaunt CAMILLE sits in a chair, reading. SOUND OF: Telephone ring. DAVID enters verandah.

DAVID

Mrs. Roy Percy on the phone, Mrs. Percy.

CAMILLE rises, walks stiffly to the hall, picks up phone.

INT. LARGE LIVING ROOM -- DAY -- CONTINUING

Beyond picture windows lies a spiffy garden trimmed with boxwoods. The room's décor is fashionable '20s Art Deco.

MATTIE SUE sits on a sofa, a phone to her ear.

MATTIE SUE

Camille--how are you?

CAMILLE (OC)

Mending tolerably well. And you? Roy?

MATTIE SUE

I'm all right, but Roy--I'm very worried,
Camille. The crouching beast...

(suppresses a sob)

Roy needs his uncle. I know LeRoy is taking
care of you, this is so hard to ask. But--

CAMILLE (OC)

LeRoy's at his office. I'll call him right
away. And Mattie--don't you let Roy go flying.

EXT. SPRAWLING, RECENTLY BUILT SINGLE-STORY BRICK HOUSE -- DAY

The house is set on the fringe of the Birmingham Country Club's
golf course. Two large wings project from a central section. The
tiled roof is pitched, allowing for an attic.

A Packard pulls into the drive. ERNEST gets out, opens the rear
door. LEROY gets out, limps with a cane to the door, raps the
knocker.

A short, wiry BLACK MANSERVANT opens the door. LEROY nods at him.

LEROY

Hello, Lige.

LIGE

A'hm so glad you came, Senatah.

INT. ART DECO-STYLE LIBRARY -- DAY

MATTIE SUE and LEROY sit in armchairs, facing each other.

MATTIE SUE

It's nonstop drinking. But he can't sleep.
When he does, the nightmares come. He yells.
As if something is stalking him--

LEROY nods.

MATTIE SUE

And so, I can't sleep either. I'm a wreck.

LEROY

He's in bed?

MATTIE SUE nods. A SMALL BOY, age 7, runs into the room.

BOY

Uncle LeRoy!

LEROY

Hey there, Phin! I hear that your Daddy gave you some beautiful toy soldiers!

PHIN

Daddy needs you bad, Uncle LeRoy. He's real, real sad.

LEROY

I know, Phin. That's why I'm here. Where are Walker and LeRoy?

PHIN

They're at summer camp!

(pouts)

I'm too young to go.

LEROY scoops up PHIN, hugs him, sets him on his knee.

LEROY

Next year, you'll be big enough. OK?

MATTIE SUE

Phinizy. Your uncle and I need to talk.

PHIN bursts into tears, clutches LEROY around his neck. LEROY pats the boy's back.

LEROY

There, there. All will be well, little man. I'm here to fix everything up.

(to MATTIE SUE)

Let's go see him.

MATTIE SUE leads LEROY from the library and down a hallway.

INT. BEDROOM -- DAY

Daylight glows behind closed drapes. ROY lies on a large bed. LEROY sits on the edge of the bed.

ROY

(slurring)

I guess I'm a mess.

LEROY squeezes ROY's arm.

ROY

Thanks for coming, Uncle LeRoy.

LEROY

Roy. I'd do anything for you, Son.

INT. SPACIOUS ART DECO-STYLE FOYER -- DAY

MATTIE-SUE and LEROY walk into the foyer from the library/bedroom wing.

LEROY

Where does he keep his guns?

MATTIE SUE

Why?

LEROY

Remember where his father killed himself.
In the gun room of the old house.

MATTIE SUE leads LEROY to the opposite wing. They pass through a dining room, a pantry, and enter a "moderne" kitchen. MATTIE SUE opens a door in a corner. A staircase ascends to the attic.

INT. ATTIC ROOM -- DAY

LEROY and MATTIE SUE look at an array of football gear, tennis racquets, golf sets. LEROY focuses on a GUN RACK.

MATTIE SUE

Should we lock the door?

LEROY

No. No, I don't think that's a good idea.

(pause)

It would send him the wrong idea.

INT. BIRMINGHAM COUNTRY CLUB POKER ROOM -- NIGHT

ROY and LEROY sit at a table with four other MEN, all holding hands of cards. In the middle of the table, a PILE of chips. A WAITRESS sets down mint juleps, serves ROY a different drink.

ROY

(to WAITRESS)

Iced tea?

WAITRESS

Yes, sir. Just like the last one.

ROY
(to LEROY)

I don't know how the hell you hauled me
out here. But you did.

ROY puts his hand on the table. He trumps the other players.

ROY
Ha-haa!

ROY scoops over the pot, exultant. LEROY beams.

INT. ROY & MATTIE SUE'S DINING ROOM -- NIGHT

ROY, LEROY, MATTIE SUE, and PHIN sit at the table. Each place
setting has a large china soup bowl on a plate.

LIGE comes in bearing a covered soup tureen, sets it before
MATTIE SUE. LIGE removes tureen cover: steam rises.

MATTIE SUE
Your favorite, Roy. New Orleans gumbo!

LEROY raises his wine glass, smiles at ROY.

LEROY
To the master poker player!

MATTIE SUE, PHIN
(glasses raised to ROY)
To the master player!

ROY
To my wonderful family. Thank you.
(sips wine)
I wish Walker and Little LeRoy were here.
And all the rest of us!

PHIN
Me, too.
(wrinkles his nose at the tureen)
They could eat my okra!

ROY laughs UPROARIOUSLY--a bit oddly. LEROY, MATTIE SUE exchange
tentative smiles.

EXT. ROY AND MATTIE SUE'S HOUSE -- DAY

MATTIE SUE walks with LEROY to his Packard. ERNEST stands by.

MATTIE SUE
I think he's much improved.

LEROY

Vigilance, Mattie Sue. And prayer.

MATTIE SUE

Thank you so much.

They embrace. LEROY smiles, gets in the Packard, waves.

INT. PERCY PARLOR, GREENVILLE -- DAY

LEROY and CAMILLE take seats.

CAMILLE

Mattie Sue called. She's so relieved. And she seems almost happy!

(smiles)

She said that she finally feels it's safe for her to leave the house and do some serious shopping.

LEROY

Roy did seem to get better. I'll take him hunting this fall.

INT. DARK ROOM -- DAY [July 9, 1929]

A door creaks open, creating a rectangle of light. Framed in the rectangle: ROY.

He flips a light switch. Tennis racquets, football gear, golf bags appear.

And the GUN RACK.

Methodically, Roy undresses, stripping to his underwear.

ROY takes a shotgun from the rack. He loads it.

GRIMACING, he puts the muzzle under his jaw.

He fingers the trigger: BLAM.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. ATTIC STAIRWELL -- DAY

PHIN SCRAMBLES up the stairwell, his face TWISTED with panic. MAID's voice echoes up from behind him:

MAID (OC)

Mastah Phinizy! Don't you go up there!

PHIN runs to the door of the athletic equipment room, stops dead in his tracks. PHIN POV:

Near-naked ROY lies on the floor, his jaw, face, forehead BLOWN OFF. Blood DRIPS from GOLF CLUBS. A gob of brains SPLATS.

INT. ROY AND MATTIE SUE'S HOUSE -- VARIOUS ROOMS -- DAY

PHIN runs through the house, SCREAMING:

PHIN

Nooo! Nooo! Nooo!

MAID chases PHIN, cannot catch him.

EXT. DOWNTOWN BIRMINGHAM -- DAY

MATTIE SUE and a FEMALE FRIEND emerge from a chic clothing store carrying shopping bags.

A NEWSBOY down the street hawks a late edition:

NEWSBOY

Leading Lawyer Commits Suicide! Leading
Lawyer Commits Suicide!

MATTIE SUE pales. She turns to her FRIEND.

MATTIE SUE

It's Roy.

INT. HOTEL DINING ROOM, FLORENCE, ITALY -- NIGHT

WILL and NORMAN DOUGLAS dine with two ATTRACTIVE YOUNG MEN. They are progressing languidly through the antipasto course.

DOUGLAS

When do you leave for Taormina, Will?

WILL looks at ATTRACTIVE YOUNG MAN #1.

WILL

It depends on Giancarlo. Gianni, would
you like to go to Sicily?

GIANCARLO thoughtfully chews *prosciutto con melone*. A HOTEL CLERK approaches bearing a silver tray. On the tray, an envelope.

HOTEL CLERK

Telegrafico, Signore Percy.

WILL opens the telegraph, scans it. He grimaces.

WILL

My God!

WILL REMEMBERS an event of many years before:

EXT. PERCY GRAVEYARD PLOT -- DAY

FAMILY and FRIENDS are gathered around an open grave. A PRIEST says words.

LEROY and CAMILLE can barely stand. JOHN PARKER approaches to sympathize. LEROY waves him off.

PARKER turns, sees 16-YEAR-OLD WILL standing a few feet away, a hand on MUR's gravestone. WILL is wretched, nauseous.

WILL LOOKS UP, SEES PARKER STARING AT HIM, HEARS:

PARKER

My God. It's come to this.

INT. HOTEL DINING ROOM, FLORENCE, ITALY -- NIGHT

DOUGLAS

Will, what on earth?

WILL

(snaps out of the flashback)

My cousin Roy. He shot himself. A tragedy.
He was so much more than a cousin.

DOUGLAS

How much more?

WILL

Almost a son to my father. He replaced
our own lost LeRoy Jr.

(shudders)

I thought it would come to this.

GIANCARLO

Will--what?

WILL

I will become the head of the family.

A moment of silence. GIANCARLO hides a smile.

DOUGLAS

Is that so bad?

WILL

You don't know the Delta.

DOUGLAS

Ah! Yes. That's true. I imagine that it's--
dreadful. But then, so is England. Will, my
dear. Like so many of us, you must become an
expatriate. You've got the money.

WILL

You don't understand.

(stares at something invisible)

I am talking about my family.

INT. MATTIE SUE'S HOUSE -- DAY

Funereal music plays. The reception rooms are packed with the
BUSINESS ELITE of Birmingham. In the living room, a PASTOR faces
the family, seated on sofas: a FORMIDABLE ELDERLY WOMAN, MATTIE
SUE, PHIN and his TWO BROTHERS (WALKER, 13, and YOUNG LEROY, 12),
LEROY, and CAMILLE. LEROY and Camille look frail.

MATTIE SUE wears elaborate JET-BLACK WIDOW'S WEEDS.

INT. MATTIE SUE'S DINING ROOM -- DAY

An hour later. FORMIDABLE ELDERLY WOMAN oversees the arrangement
of various dishes that family friends have brought to the post-
funeral reception: tomato aspic, pickled shrimp, fried chicken,
stuffed eggs, beaten biscuits, cakes, cookies. On a sideboard, an
array of liquor. CAMILLE approaches.

CAMILLE

(to FORMIDABLE ELDERLY WOMAN)

Nellie, where is Mattie Sue?

NELLIE

My grieving daughter? I don't know and I
am fit to be tied.

At the other end of the dining room, a MILD FUROR:

MATTIE SUE enters, widow's weeds SHUCKED: She wears a BRIGHT-RED
DRESS.

NELLIE and CAMILLE stare, AGHAST.

CAMILLE

(whisper to NELLIE)

What is she thinking?

NELLIE

(whisper to CAMILLE)

She's out of her mind.

(chokes up)

And she has been for a long, long time.

CAMILLE

What can you mean?

Fiercely, NELLIE shakes her head.

INT. PERCY BEDROOM SUITE, GREENVILLE -- NIGHT

LEROY and CAMILLE prepare for bed. Their movements are feeble: both have AGED CONSIDERABLY, almost overnight.

LEROY

Roy gone, like his father. Mattie Sue in a red dress. What are we coming to, Cam?

CAMILLE

What will Mattie Sue do?

LEROY

I advised her to stay in Birmingham, so the boys don't have to change schools. But she wants to flee to her mother's in Athens.

(sits on bed)

Honey. I feel so old.

CAMILLE sits beside LEROY.

CAMILLE

Nellie said something--about Mattie Sue. That she's crazy. Has been for a while.

LEROY

The red dress. What about it?

CAMILLE

I don't know. Nellie wouldn't say.

(puts a hand to her chest)

This is killing us, LeRoy.

They embrace, shuddering. They weep.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM -- DAY [October, 1929]

WILL enters the room. CAMILLE lies in the bed, eyes closed, her face ashen. LEROY sits bedside, drooping, his face ashen.

WILL

Father.

LEROY nods. CAMILLE'S eyelashes flutter. She smiles faintly. WILL kisses her on her forehead.

EXT. PERCY PLOT, GREENVILLE CEMETERY -- DAY

Percy family and friends bury CAMILLE. LEROY totters. WILL steadies him.

INT. PERCY LIBRARY -- DAY

WILL looks at the front page of the *Greenville Democrat-Times*: headline: CU:

October 24, 1929
CRASH!
Wall Street Reels

WILL looks across the room. LEROY dozes in his desk chair.

WILL

Father?

LEROY continues to doze. WILL quietly exits, with newspaper.

EXT. GOLF COURSE -- DAY

November, 1929. WILL makes a putt on a green. He turns to LEROY. LEROY stares blankly into the distance.

WILL

Father?

LEROY continues to stare blankly.

EXT. HOSPITAL -- NIGHT

Sign: "Memphis Baptist Hospital." A Christmas tree glows.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM -- NIGHT

LEROY, cheeks sunken, eyes closed, lies in the bed. WILL sits in a chair. A miniature Christmas tree pathetically blinks.

EXT. MEMPHIS PARK -- NIGHT

SOUND OF: A group of PEOPLE singing "Silent Night."

WILL sits on a bench, BITTERLY WEEPING.

CAROLERS walk by, see WILL. Song dies in their throats.

CAROLER

Sir-- Sir, can we help you?

WILL heaves, wipes his face.

WILL

No. I am beyond all help.

CAROLER

God bless you, sir.

WILL nods, bleakly grateful.

INT. APARTMENT LIVING ROOM -- NIGHT

Early January, 1930. A tastefully furnished room. Beyond windows, the Manhattan skyline GLITTERS. WILL sits with HUGER JERVEY (former Sewanee professor), LINDLEY HUBBEL (NYC friend), and another MAN (GERSTLE MACK). They sip martinis.

WILL

After the funeral, I didn't know what to do. That big house. Empty. Ghostly.

HUGER

Is staying in Greenville still the plan?

WILL

Yes. Oddly enough, I haven't changed my mind.

HUGER

You have two elderly aunts in Greenville, and some younger cousins. I guess that makes you--the patriarch?

WILL

Some patriarch. A patriarch presides. I preside over a bunch of tombstones! Yes, I have cousins. Three of them are little boys with an unstable mother, living in Athens. The other three grew up in Memphis, and they also have a questionable mother-- Uncle Willie took up with her when she was 15!

HUGER

Willie gave her an elegant education before they married. In TarrytownZ

WILL

Yes. Elegant enough. And she sent her sons to Stanford.

(waves dismissively)

But I preside over nothing. The family is a shambles. Starting with limp-wristed me.

HUGER

I've met Roy's widow, Mattie Sue. She's pretty. And she's charming. You say she has three boys.

WILL nods.

HUGER

Maybe they should move in with you. It'll be lonely in that house. You'll be at the mercy of those servants--who of course know *all* of your foibles.

WILL smiles.

HUGER

And *also*...

(a calculating glance at WILL)

It wouldn't hurt to have a household. Image-wise. A lovely lady presiding. It might dampen "bachelor" talk.

WILL shrugs.

GERSTLE

Why don't you move here to New York?

WILL

And do what? Practice law? The economy's in a nose dive. Not exactly the best time to look for work.

LINDLEY

You could do your famous strip act at the Apollo.

They all giggle.

WILL

I'd faint in coils.

GERSTLE

Who's ready for another martini?

LINDLEY

(hands on hips)

Wait a second, girls. Are we going out tonight?

HUGER

Gerstle, count me in for another martini. Especially if we're going out.

INT. LOBBY, APOLLO THEATER -- NIGHT

A STYLISH CROWD, mostly black, fills the lobby. WILL, LINDLEY, HUGER, and GERSTLE wait for drinks at the bar. They stick out a bit but are relaxed. A passing MAN appraises them.

LINDLEY

Are there places like this in Memphis?

WILL

In New Orleans, but not quite like this. Of course, if Huey Long takes Louisiana, all kinds of interesting establishments might spring up.

LINDLEY

Oh, look--

(indicates a SUAVELY HANDSOME YOUNG BLACK MAN)

That's Langston Hughes.

WILL

No kidding. I'd love to meet him!

HUGER and GERSTLE turn from bar with drinks. They see HUGHES.

GERSTLE

He's one of us, you know. But he's even more discreet than we are. You'd never see him at the Mount Morris baths.

LINDLEY

Introduce yourself, Will.

LINDLEY, HUGER, GERSTLE POV: They watch WILL cross the room and engage HUGHES in conversation. HUGHES smiles; they shake hands.

LINDLEY

Will moves fast.

HUGER

They're poets. Hughes of course knows who Will is. Maybe Will can help him, include him in that series at Yale.

LINDLEY, HUGER, GERSTLE move to a table, take seats. At an adjoining table FIVE MEN, two black and three white, laugh gaily.

LINDLEY

It's ladies' night.

GERSTLE

It almost makes me nervous.

LINDLEY

Why?

GERSTLE

It invites a crackdown.

WILL joins them at the table.

WILL

Hughes is charming. We're having lunch tomorrow.

HUGER

Invite him to speak in Greenville. See what the neighbors think.

LINDLEY

That would invite a crackdown.

WILL

What are you talking about?

GERSTLE

I was just going to mention some friends in Berlin enjoying the huge homo party there, all the clubs, baths, bordellos. But with the Crash, politics is moving toward extremism. Either the Communists or the Nazis will take over. I doubt that either would be tolerant of the likes of us.

LINDLEY

Don't forget that years ago Herr Hitler, ne Schickelgruber, had that butch queen Rohm as his best friend. And that Hitler had been a painter in Bohemia and Vienna.

WILL

I wouldn't count on any of that for protection. Like Jews we make excellent scapegoats. In Germany, I fear for both

the queers and the Jews.

(gestures at the flamboyant crowd)

So all of this--it's Weimar, on the eve
of destruction? Are we surrounded by
secret police, taking down names?

HUGER

You should know, Will.

WILL smiles.

WILL

What do you mean?

HUGER

You're awfully good at spotting secret
police.

WILL

I am?

HUGER

Yes. In Greenville.

WILL

Oh, you mean the Klan. Well, we got rid
of them. I suppose that the populations
of all small towns collectively form a
kind of secret police. A vice squad.
Everybody spies on everyone else.

LINDLEY

I'd be arrested on arrival.

They laugh.

WILL

Huger, I've been thinking about Mattie
Sue and her boys. But not in terms of
camouflage. The vice squad already has
has my number. And I simply don't care.

LINDLEY

My God, it must be feudal down there.

WILL

I think I've figured it out. You do
exactly what you want to do, in my case
poetry and flowers and arias blasting on
the Capehart, and behave as if it's the
most ordinary thing the world. Because,

of course, it is.

LINDLEY

And nobody says anything?

WILL

Of course they do! They gossip like mad!
But not in public.

(smiles at HUGER)

And I think I'm going to give them
another reason to gossip. Huger, you've
read my mind. I'm going to take in
Mattie Sue and her kids.

HUGER

But not for camouflage.

WILL

Because it's the right thing to do.
The ordinary thing to do.

LINDLEY

Like poetry, flowers, arias.

WILL

Yes!

GERSTLE

How will the boys react to that?

WILL

I don't know. But I intend to give them
a better education than anything availa-
ble in Athens, Georgia.

HUGER

It's a new calling.

WILL

It's my duty to the family. To the Delta!

THE END

HUBRIS & NEMESIS: PRIDE & PREJUDICE

ACT I

EXT. PERCY HOUSE -- NIGHT

March, 1927. A TERRIFIC THUNDERSTORM batters the house.

Lightning flashes reveal that the exterior has been remodeled:
The columns are gone from the front.

INT. PERCY PARLOR -- NIGHT

Rain POUNDS the windows. LEROY, CAMILLE, and WILL chat with ROY and MATTIE SUE PERCY. A BLACK BUTLER, age 30, serves a drink to CAMILLE.

CAMILLE
(to BUTLER)

Thank you, David.

ROY
This is not what I call vacation weather.

LEROY
No big loss. Hunting's out of season, Roy.

MATTIE SUE
Anyway, all the game in these parts are probably extinct. You two are--relentless.

WILL
(smiles)
It serves some deep psychological need that they have.

MATTIE SUE
Obviously! All for the better, I'm sure.

LEROY
Will had a fine time shooting Germans but going after game doesn't appeal to him. But your husband compensates, Mattie Sue. You really should visit us here more often.

CAMILLE
And bring those boys of yours!

LEROY
Yes! Walker's already eleven, LeRoy's ten, Phinizy's five! They've never seen the ancestral lands...

A chime sounds. DAVID goes to the hall.

MATTIE SUE

They'll never see the way this house
used to be. A shame.

WILL

I for one like the renovation, the
stucco, the French style. Those col-
umns--an eyesore, really.

DAVID ushers in an ELEGANT MAN. LEROY approaches him.

LEROY

Dr. Livingston, I presume?

DOWNLEY

(laughs; English accent:)

Yes, I suppose that these parts do
resemble the wilds of Africa. Alastaire
Downley, at your service.

LEROY

(shakes DOWNLEY'S hand)

LeRoy Percy.

DOWNLEY

Shall I address you as Senator?

LEROY

That's not necessary. Although I can't
seem to stop most people doing it. Please
meet my wife, Camille. My son, Will, my
nephew, Roy, and Roy's Southern belle,
Mattie Sue.

A round of genteel hand shakes.

CAMILLE

May we offer you some bourbon?

DOWNLEY

Yes, thanks. I've been wanting to sample
your famous Southern firewater and feared
that here amongst the Baptists I might,
heaven forbid, have to forego all intoxi-
cants. But my cronies assured me that
y'all have been able to survive not only
Prohibition but also hell and high water.

(to DAVID)

No ice, please.

DAVID exits. A DEAFENING peal of thunder.

DOWNLEY

Frightful!

CAMILLE

We've been through worse, Mr. Downley.

DOWNLEY

It will affect the planting. That worries me and the others in London.

LEROY

We have a whole month, Mr. Downley.

DOWNLEY

Here we are in mid-March with record rainfall since the first of the year. "April showers," Mr. Percy. Why should it stop now?

LEROY

You came all this way to fret about weather?

DOWNLEY

I came here to fret about 13 cents a pound. Down from 29 cents just three years ago. We are talking about--millions of dollars.

LEROY

We did better than 13 a pound. And we'll do better this year.

The chime sounds again.

DOWNLEY

(to ROY)

You're an aviator, I understand. And your uncle's hunting partner?

ROY

We do enjoy a good shoot.

DAVID shows in a MAN in his 40s.

LEROY

Downley, meet my ablest manager and very good friend, Charlie Williams.

DOWNLEY

I'm honored. You are the man who will save us...

(waves at windows)

From all that.

WILLIAMS chuckles. They shake hands. WILLIAMS catches DAVID'S eye: He wants a drink.

LEROY

Charlie is a man of many talents. Second to no white man at hunting, fishing. The best flood fighter in the Delta. On the side, he runs my cotton compress--a big operation.

DOWNLEY

2,700 bales from Trail Lake last year, 10,000 from Panther Burn. Well over six million pounds. However...

LEROY

The price will be higher this year.

DOWNLEY

(glances at a newspaper on a table)

I see your governor mobilized the National Guard. Mr. Williams--why do you need protection?

CU:

The Greenville Democrat-Times

March 17, 1927

GUARD CALLED IN

WILLIAMS

Saboteurs from Arkansas, across the river. If our levee goes, theirs stands.

LEROY

It's an old problem. Ever since Arkansas started building levees, both sides have had guards on patrol when the water gets high. Guards with guns. And lanterns.

WILL

Lanterns on the levee--around here, Mr. Downley, that image is almost folkloric.

INT. PERCY DINING ROOM -- NIGHT

DAVID serves oysters on the half shell to PERCYS and GUESTS.

DOWNLEY

(to ROY)

Our chairman was telling me--your wing of the family gave up on planting and went

into the steel business?

ROY

Tennessee Coal & Iron, based in Birmingham,
Alabama. My father--

MATTIE SUE drops her oyster fork.

ROY

My father was general counsel.

MATTIE SUE

And your mother--

ROY

Mother's father, Mr. DeBardleben, owned a
big chunk of the company.

DOWNLEY

Steel--not quite as volatile as cotton. Not
subject to the vicissitudes of weather.

(blinks)

Perhaps you could put some of that steel in Mr.
Williams's levees. Stiffen their spines, eh?

MATTIE SUE

Oh, my. You are worried. And rightly so. In
these parts, fortunes easily come and go.

ROY

I'm not affiliated with TCI, Mr. Downley.
My father arranged for Andrew Carnegie to
buy it, many years ago.

DOWNLEY

Ah. I see. Where does that leave you?

LEROY

A graduate of Harvard Law School, and on
the Review there, Roy is one of the leading
lawyers in Alabama.

DOWNLEY

(to ROY)

And your father? Did he enter the Carnegie
fold?

ROY

My father is--deceased.

CAMILLE coughs. A tense moment.

WILL

A striking fact, Mr. Downley. When the river is low, you can hardly see it from the levee.

WILLIAMS

There's a mile of forested land, what we call the batture, stretching from the riverbank to the barrow moat. The barrow moat, it's where we dug up the earth to build the levee. It's a dry moat, 300 feet wide, 14 feet deep at the deepest, sloping up to the levee itself. And then the levee--rising from the moat 40 feet tall. Massive. Wide as what we call a football field at the base, eight feet wide on the crown.

WILL

It's almost as strong across the river. A mile of batture, the moat, then the levee. To get a big flood, the river has to overflow a mile on both sides. Then wash into the moats. And then climb the levees.

DOWNLEY

Astonishing to think--that such an enormous basin could simply--fill up.

(pause)

And now it has *indeed* filled up.

LEROY

(to WILL and WILLIAMS)

You're scaring the Englishman!

(to DOWNLEY)

It happens from time to time. This year we've had enormous storms. Combined with the snow melt up north, we're getting high water. But we're prepared.

(glances at WILLIAMS)

Tell him, Charlie.

WILLIAMS

We established a training camp in February--we saw it coming, after tributaries flooded in Arkansas. We've got crews deployed up and down the levee. Earth moving machines. Wire, lights, generators, so we can work at night. We have four boxcars of empty cotton bags. That's hundreds of thousands of sandbags. And we have the labor to fill 'em. 10,000 darkies.

DOWNLEY

That's the paramount issue: labor. It's ever been thus, has it not, Mr. Percy?

LEROY

Two paramount issues, Downley. Labor is one.

EXT. GREENVILLE LEVEE, NORTH OF TOWN -- NIGHT -- CONTINUING

RAIN FALLS TORRENTIALLY. GALE-FORCE WINDS SHIMMY MAKESHIFT ELECTRICITY POLES, LIGHTS. 200 BLACK MEN frantically fill sandbags with earth, pass them to other BLACK MEN.

WHITE GUARDS supervise. Strapped to their coats: BIG HANDGUNS.

DOWNLEY (VO)

And the other issue? What is it?

CAMERA FOLLOWS A LABORER carrying a sandbag to the levee's crown.

LEROY (VO)

The river, of course. Ole Man River.

CAMERA PULLS UP TO THE RIVER: 7 feet below the levee crown, it RAGES. A human corpse, drowned animals, whole trees, a chicken coop HURTLE DOWNSTREAM. Atop the coop, TERRIFIED CHICKENS SCREAM.

INT. PERCY DINING ROOM -- NIGHT -- CONTINUING

DAVID clears oyster plates.

LEROY

With the river, nothing is ever guaranteed.

(wipes mouth with napkin)

But those are federal levees up and down the Mississippi. Built to the highest standards.

DOWNLEY

I'm sure you saw to that. In Washington, when you served in the Senate.

LEROY

The Senate was only an episode, Downley.

I've been looking after levees all my life.

(smiles)

We've never lost a federal levee. Not once.

EXT. WOODS -- DAY

Gusty rain falls. LEROY and ROY tramp through the woods.

ROY

What did you mean, that Charlie Williams is the best hunter? Is he?

LEROY

Better than me. Not better than you.

ROY

That's nice of you to say. Don't know if I deserve it.

LEROY

Hell, Roy. Of course you deserve it.

ROY

Have you--have you given up on Will?

LEROY

In what way?

ROY

Marriage. Kids.

LEROY

I think it's pretty clear that Will--that he's not the marrying kind. For a long time Camille and I had hopes. It was hard on us. Especially because little LeRoy--what happened. We still miss that boy.

(rubs his mustache)

But Roy, we have you. And your fine boys. They're like grandchildren to me.

ROY

Thank God for you, Uncle LeRoy. My boys never got to know Father. It's been ten years since he--

LEROY pats ROY on the back.

LEROY

Let's let that be, Roy. Just let it be.

They walk on for a few moments in silence.

LEROY

And you? How about you?

ROY

Oh, just fine. Ever since that stay at the Phipps Clinic, two years ago. It did me a world of good.

LEROY nods.

INT. PERCY CAR -- DAY

March 29, 1972. Wipers WHACK RAIN from the windshield. A HANDSOME YOUNG BLACK MAN drives. WILL sits in the back seat.

HANDSOME YOUNG BLACK MAN

You reckon the rain will ever stop, Mr. Will?

WILL

Yes, Ernest. Of course.

ERNEST

Way more'n forty days, forty nights.

WILL

Yes.

ERNEST

This meetin'. Means it's gonna get worse?

WILL

I hope not. But we have to plan for it.
Just in case.

WILL reaches forward, pats Ernest affectionately on his shoulder.

WILL

Don't you worry, Ernest. Look at it this way: at least you're not on the levee.

ERNEST glances at WILL, gives him a frightened smile.

EXT. COURTHOUSE -- DAY

SIGN: "Natchez Courthouse." WILL enters the building. A SIGN beside the door: "Red Cross Emergency Planning Session."

INT. COURTROOM -- DAY

A crowd of OFFICIALS mills in the courtroom. The buzz is quietly urgent. A MAN at podium bangs his gavel.

CHAIRMAN

This meeting will come to order!

OFFICIALS take seats.

CHAIRMAN

We gather here today from national, state, and local offices of the Red Cross, to talk about refugees. We already have thousands. As you know, that might well

be just the beginning.

CROWD rustles.

CHAIRMAN

Laconia Circle was the oldest levee in Arkansas. And it wasn't a federal levee, just a back levee on a tributary. But we considered it solid--very solid. The fact that it collapsed this morning is bad news.

CROWD murmurs.

CHAIRMAN

Two months ago, levees broke along the White River and the Little Red. It's pretty grim in parts of Arkansas. Of course, that's nice for Mississippi, on the other side.

NERVOUS LAUGHTER.

CHAIRMAN

Except that the Yazoo and the Sunflower are also running wild.

(drinks water)

And then there's the big one.

(gazes at WILL)

Mr. William Alexander Percy!

WILL stands.

CHAIRMAN

Will Percy chairs the Cross in Washington County. Mr. Percy--suppose you got a crevasse in the Delta. What would you do?

WILL

Pray to de Lawd.

LAUGHTER.

WILL

We're doing all we possibly can to keep the levee in shape. If it goes...we're in trouble.

CHAIRMAN

Have you planned for refugees if it goes?

WILL is at a loss for words. CHAIRMAN frowns. CROWD murmurs.

INT. PERCY CAR -- DAY

Toward dusk. Wipers whack rain from windshield.

ERNEST

You got it all figgered out, Mr. Will?

WILL

Yes, Ernest. Everything's figured out.

ERNEST squints worriedly at WILL in the rear-view mirror.

INT. PERCY HOUSE LIBRARY -- NIGHT

LEROY pours a drink, raises the glass to WILL. WILL shakes his head: he doesn't want a drink.

LEROY

I heard a story today.

WILL nods.

LEROY

A steamer's coming down the Little Red. The captain sees a bunch of people standing on the levee. He knows it's flooded beyond it. He'd passed a break just a mile back.

(sips drink)

So he heads over. 200 sharecroppers shivering in the rain, all colored. And two white men, planters. Heavily armed. The captain gets close, steadies his boat, lowers the gangplank. He calls out, "I can take you!"

(clears his throat)

The planters point guns. One of them yells, "You ain't stealin' our niggers!"

WILL

Afraid they'll never come back.

LEROY

The steamer's a taxi to Chicago, is what they think. So, what do you know? A doctor's on the boat. A gentleman, and unarmed. He comes down the gangplank. He says to the planters, "We're taking these men." "No!" the planters yell, raising guns. "Go ahead," says the doctor. "Shoot me."

WILL smiles.

LEROY

Doctor says, "You don't dare." To the croppers he says, "Get on this boat!" And they got on.

WILL

What did the planters do?

LEROY

They climbed aboard. They weren't about to abandon their--property. Besides. They couldn't stay there either.

WILL

(despondent)

What are we going to do?

LEROY

You mean, what would we do. If?

WILL

It'd ruin you to lose your labor. Why would they come back? Come back to what--flattened shacks, heaps of mud?

LEROY

That would be a problem. But I'm not so much worried about us. We'd survive.

(sips drink)

It's the marginal planters that worry me. The ones mortgaged to their necks. They would *not* survive.

(smiles faintly)

The ones who think they're genteel because they have 600 acres and a hundred tenants? If they lose that, they'll revert to redneck real fast.

WILL

What are you saying?

LEROY

They will be angry, Will. Mad-dog mad.

WILL

Like those desperadoes on the levee. That the doctor faced down.

(thoughtful)

It doesn't answer the question.

LEROY

The Red Cross man in Natchez shook you up.

WILL

Yes. What would we do with refugees? Ship them out? Or keep them here?

LEROY yawns.

LEROY

Well, it's obvious. If we can't feed and shelter them, I'll have to ship them out.

WILL

I knew you'd say that. However costly, it's the only honorable thing to do.

LEROY nods wearily.

INT. PERCY & PERCY LAW OFFICES -- DAY

Early April. WILL works at his desk. Rain drums on windows. Door of his office is ajar. A RADIO in the next room plays.

RADIO

With the rainfall unrelenting we are seeing record gauge levels across a vast area. The Mississippi rose 6 feet in 24 hours at St. Louis. The Ohio is rising 2 feet every 24 hours from West Virginia to Kentucky. So far the federal levees have held. But state and private levees on the smaller rivers are crumbling. The refugee count is 35,000 and rising.

SOUNDS OF a door opening, slamming shut, footsteps. CHARLIE WILLIAMS sticks his head, streaming water, into WILL's office.

WILLIAMS

Your father sent for me.

WILL rises, follows dripping WILLIAMS into LEROY'S office. LEROY, at his desk, is speaking into the phone.

LEROY

Governor, with all due respect, you *can* send more labor. We appreciate the National Guard. The trucks. The help with rounding up men...

EXT. DOWNTOWN GREENVILLE -- DAY -- CONTINUING

A convoy of open-backed National Guard trucks rumbles through rain, packed with sullen, soaked BLACK MEN. WHITE SOLDIERS with rifles stand over them.

LEROY (VO)

But it's still not enough. I urge to you to send all able-bodied convicts from Parchman Penitentiary. Yes...thank you. Thanks.

INT. PERCY & PERCY LAW OFFICES -- DAY -- CONTINUING

LEROY hangs up phone, looks at WILLIAMS and WILL.

LEROY

Sit down, Charlie, I don't care if you mess up the chair.

WILLIAMS and WILL sit.

LEROY

Strip every last man and boy from the compress, the plantations, and get them to the levee.

WILLIAMS

We've already...

LEROY

All of them!

A timid knock on the door. ERNEST (chauffeur) stands in the hall holding paper bags. He shudders.

ERNEST

Lunch, Mr. Percy.

A MOMENT as WILL and LEROY understand ERNEST'S fright.

WILL

He doesn't mean you, Ernest.

WILLIAMS

Why not?

WILL

We have to have a driver.

WILLIAMS starts to say something but holds his tongue. LEROY coolly appraises his manager, his son.

LEROY

Ernest, what's for lunch?

ERNEST sags with relief. He unpacks cold fried chicken, ham, cole slaw, potato salad, beaten biscuits, iced tea in a pitcher.

INT. PERCY HOUSE, WILL'S ROOM -- NIGHT [April 16]

Seated at a table, WILL pores over page proofs. Title sheet:
Three April Nocturnes.

From a murky doorway on the other side of the room, a SOFT VOICE:

SOFT VOICE

Mistah Will?

WILL

Come in, Ernest.

ERNEST emerges from murk. WILL takes his hand, rubs it tenderly.

ERNEST

Your father wants you.

INT. PERCY LIBRARY -- NIGHT

WILL enters. LEROY, seated in an armchair, is smoking a cigar. Uncharacteristically, he looks very worried.

LEROY

Got a phone call.

(pause)

The levee broke at Doreena. South of Cairo.

WILL

That's a federal levee. They said it--
(dazedly takes a chair)
Couldn't happen.

EXT. LEVEE BOARD BUILDING, GREENVILLE -- DAY

Early the next morning: Trucks carrying BLACK LABORERS and MANACLED CONVICTS roar through drizzle.

Sign on building: "Levee Board Headquarters."

INT. LEVEE BOARD HEADQUARTERS -- DAY

A MADHOUSE OF ACTIVITY: Phones ring, MEN bark orders into phones, SECRETARIES rifle through files.

MAN #1 ON PHONE

We need those barges NOW!

MAN #2 ON PHONE

What do you mean, no more sandbags?

At the entrance a CROWD tries to burst in. A DEPUTY, hand clapped on his holster, holds them back.

PEOPLE IN CROWD

Will the levee hold? Will it hold?

DEPUTY

Yes! Yes! The levee will hold!

DOWN A HALL: A CLOSED DOOR: THROUGH IT INTO A ROOM:

LEROY, WILL, CHARLIE WILLIAMS, SEGUINE ALLEN (levee board chief engineer, elderly), GENERAL CURTIS GREEN (commander of the state's National Guard), MAJOR PAXTON (Greenville National Guard commander, haughty), Greenville's MAYOR JOHN CANNON (elderly), and LEVEE BOARD MEMBERS crowd around a conference table.

From the front office, SOUNDS OF: COMMOTION.

GENERAL GREEN

I'm authorized to speak for the governor.
We stand ready to do whatever it takes.

MAYOR CANNON

Thank you, General. We might have a problem with public order. People are panicking.

GENERAL GREEN

People are panicking from Illinois to Louisiana. You are not a special case.

MAYOR CANNON

We are a special case. If the levee goes anywhere in these parts, the entire Delta goes. Greenville in the middle of it!

SEGUINE ALLEN

Maybe not, Mayor. We have the rear protection levee. It could deflect an upstream break. I designed it to do just that.

WILLIAMS

You're a great engineer, Mr. Allen, but with all due respect--it's only 8 feet high. The river is higher than it's ever been. I wouldn't count on that rear levee.

LEROY

Let's be practical. Say we're flooded, not just a couple of feet, but really flooded. All of Washington County under God knows how much water. What do we need?

MAJOR PAXTON

Food. Drinking water. Camps, tents, blankets,
fuel, medicine...

WILLIAMS

Boats. Most of all, boats.

MAJOR PAXTON

River boats? Steamers?

WILLIAMS

Yeah. But above all, we'll need boats to get
into the interior. Small power boats. We'll
have people on roofs, in trees, clear across
the county. Shivering, wet, drinking filthy
floodwater. Fightin' off snakes.

A moment of silence.

WILL

Do we have--such boats?

WILLIAMS shakes his head, a silent "No."

GENERAL GREEN

First things first. I need a civilian in
charge. Senator?

LEROY

Will here chairs the Red Cross. He got the
job because he did so well in the Great War,
helping Hoover feed the Belgians. There's
his valor in battle, too. I nominate my son.

A stir of approval. The Senator has spoken.

MAYOR CANNON

Good! I am way too old.

(coughs)

I hereby appoint Will Percy Chairman of
the Flood Relief Committee. Will, it'll
give you even more authority.

WILL

Exactly what powers will I have?

GENERAL GREEN

With your father behind you...why, you'll
have all the power in the world.

An exchange of nods, glances. No one doubts that idea.

INT. TRUCK CAB -- DAY [April 19]

Wipers WHACK. ERNEST drives. WILL sits beside him, WILLIAMS by the window. They're moving at high speed alongside the levee, which REARS UP to their left. The angle makes it seem MONUMENTAL.

A REPAIR CREW comes in sight. 500 EXHAUSTED BLACK MEN, THREE ARMED WHITE OVERSEERS. A DESPERATE EFFORT to fill sandbags, carry them to the levee crown as fast as possible.

WILLIAMS

We've raised the levee a good foot and a half along this stretch.

WILL

That makes a difference?

WILLIAMS

Yeah. Look at it this way. When built, this levee reached three feet higher than the highest known flood. With the bags the levee's now four and a half feet higher than that record. However.

ERNEST sees a LABORER collapse. A CREW OVERSEER prods him with a gun. ERNEST, alarmed, looks at WILL. WILL ignores him.

WILL

However?

WILLIAMS

Just north of here, water's flowing over the sandbags. This flood's almost five feet higher than the old record. And it's still rising.

(to ERNEST)

Stop the truck.

(to WILL)

C'mon. You should see it.

EXT. LEVEE -- DAY

WILLIAMS scrambles up the levee, nears crown. The going is tough because the levee is soaked. WILL follows. He looks behind him: ERNEST, at the base, throws up his arms: "This is a bad idea!"

WILLIAMS reaches the crown, crouches behind seeping sandbags. His hair tousles in HEAVY WIND. Panting WILL slithers up beside him, peers over the sandbags. His face blanches.

WILL POV: A FOOT BELOW, WATER CAREENS DOWNSTREAM, TAKING WITH IT A GHOULISH DANCE OF DEBRIS: BLOATED MULES, CATTLE, HOGS. In the distance, what seems to be an enormous house FLIES BY.

WILL
(shouting over wind)

My God! My God!

WILLIAMS

DO YOU FEEL IT?

WILL slaps a hand on a sandbag. He realizes: it's VIBRATING. He puts his cheek to the levee proper. It's VIBRATING.

INT. TRUCK CAB -- DAY

WILLIAMS and WILL slime the bench. ERNEST, driving, squirms.

WILLIAMS
What's the matter. Too fancy for river-muck?

ERNEST
Nossuh! Nossuh!

WILL
It's like jelly. It's--saturated.

WILLIAMS nods.

WILL
How long can it possibly hold?

WILLIAMS peers through the windshield without answering.

WILLIAMS
There it is. Mounds Landing.

EXT. MOUNDS LANDING -- DAY

WILL takes in a small settlement. A shack bears a sign:
"CAMP REX--MISSISSIPPI NATIONAL GUARD"

WILL notes a ferryboat moored to the levee. A line of cars waits to board the ferry.

WILLIAMS
We have to close down that ferry.

WILL raises his eyebrows.

Traffic weakens the levee. The vibration.
At this point, every little thing counts.

EXT. PERCY HOUSE -- NIGHT

WILL exits a rear door, slips through rain to the carriage house. He enters it, climbs a flight of stairs, opens a door.

FRIGHTENED VOICE

Who's there?

WILL

It's me.

ERNEST, in bed, peers through dark.

ERNEST

You.

WILL strips off his clothes, gets into bed with ERNEST.

ERNEST

I been so scared.

WILL

It's all right. Everything is just--fine.

INT. NATIONAL GUARD HEADQUARTERS, GREENVILLE -- DAY

MAJOR PAXTON sits on a desk, feet on a chair, fielding questions from REPORTERS. His attitude: Imperious. SEGUINE ALLEN, his advanced age more apparent under stress, looks on.

REPORTER

Sam Tilden, New York Times. Major Paxton, we have reports that the levee may be on the verge of collapse. Will you comment?

PAXTON

Who told you that?

TILDEN

Sources in the National Guard.

PAXTON

(struggles for composure)

The damage is minimal. The levee will hold.

TILDEN

Mr. Allen! Do you share that opinion?

ALLEN

Of course. As chief engineer, I--I know that levee better than anyone. It'll hold.

INT. PERCY DINING ROOM -- NIGHT

RAIN, WIND assault windows. LEROY, WILL, and CAMILLE sip chicory coffee at the table. Remnants of pecan pie lie before them. A cognac bottle, snifters. In the fireplace coals are fading.

WILL

Paxton keeps saying it's all okay.
(dreamy)

It doesn't seem real.

LEROY

We have beat this kind of thing before.
Even with a breach, Greenville could stay
dry. We do have the rear levee.

In the hall, the phone RINGS. DAVID enters.

DAVID

Mr. Williams on the telephone.

EXT. GREENVILLE'S REAR PROTECTION LEVEE -- NIGHT

RAIN, WIND. The levee, 8 feet tall, is a modest affair compared to the river levee: it's simply an embanked wall, flat fields with a few shacks stretching beyond it. Armed GUARDS supervise hundreds of BLACK LABORERS laying sandbags on the crown.

CHARLIE WILLIAMS speaks into a phone mounted on a makeshift electricity pole.

WILLIAMS

We're doing all we can at the rear levee.
But I'm worried about Mounds Landing. I'll
be heading up there early in the morning.

LEROY (OC)

Keep me posted, Charlie.

EXT. MOUND'S LANDING LEVEE -- DAY [April 21, 7:15 a.m.]

Day seeps dimly through stormy skies. Makeshift lights glare. Trucks crammed with BLACK LABORERS roar through rain to levee. National Guard LIEUTENANT exits Camp Rex HQ shack. SOLDIERS prod LABORERS off trucks.

LIEUTENANT

MOVE IT!

A LABORER stares at water SEEPING, GEYSERING through the levee,
WASHING OVER THE ERODING CROWN.

LABORER

We're all gonna drown. Lawd help us!

GUARDS herd LABORERS to the work area at the levee's edge. The truck drivers do hasty u-turns, speed away.

A car pulls up. CHARLIE WILLIAMS jumps out. Transfixed, he studies the levee. LIEUTENANT studies WILLIAMS' face.

LIEUTENANT

Williams--you ever seen anything like that?

WILLIAMS

Hell, no.

INT. CAMP REX HQ SHACK -- DAY

WILLIAMS dials a phone number.

INT. PERCY LIBRARY -- DAY -- CONTINUING

Phone RINGS. LEROY--rumped, unshaven, asleep in a chair--stirs, picks up the phone. WILL shudders awake in his chair.

LEROY

Yes?

WILLIAMS (OC)

Mounds Landing is about to go.

LEROY

Get yourself out of there, Charlie.

EXT. CAMP REX HQ SHACK -- DAY -- CONTINUING

WILLIAMS

The only safe place is on the levee, maybe half a mile down. I have to get the men out.

WILLIAMS hangs up, looks around HQ, sees a pair of binoculars, grabs it. He runs out of HQ shack and accosts LIEUTENANT.

WILLIAMS

Get your men downriver and up on the levee!

WILLIAMS jumps in his car, beckons SOLDIERS. Five cram in with him. They drive downriver. Terrified LABORERS, SOLDIERS follow.

EXT. LEVEE, SOUTH OF MOUNDS LANDING -- DAY

Some minutes later: WILLIAMS, LABORERS, SOLDIERS scramble up the levee. The river ROILS, carrying with it ALL MANNER OF GHASTLY DEBRIS. WILLIAMS scans countryside with binoculars.

BINOCULAR POV: near Mounds Landing, an allée of tall trees leads to a plantation manor. Some distance away: barns, stables, livestock pens. WILLIAMS scans Landing buildings. He shifts to the levee looming above it: WATER CASCADES OVER THE CROWN. THE LEVEE SHIMMIES. MUD PLUMES INTO THE AIR.

WILLIAMS

It's going!

As if shoved by a giant hand, a 100-foot stretch of levee HURTLES OVER MOUNDS LANDING. The HQ shack, other buildings DISINTEGRATE.

On the levee near WILLIAMS: LABORERS, SOLDIERS SHOUT WITH TERROR.

A WALL OF WATER 50 FEET HIGH RUSHES OVER FLAT FARMLAND. [The volume was later estimated to be more than twice that of Niagara Falls in full flood.] Through binoculars, WILLIAMS watches the water MOW DOWN THE ALLÉE OF TREES, OBLITERATE THE PLANTATION HOUSE, BUILDINGS.

WILLIAMS feels the levee VIBRATE under his boots.

WILLIAMS

RUN!

WILLIAMS, LABORERS, SOLDIERS DASH ALONG THE LEVEE CROWN. WILLIAMS casts a frightened look over his shoulder. The CREVASSE IS WIDENING, RAPIDLY APPROACHING.

WILLIAMS, OTHERS TRY TO OUTFACE IT. The more fit quickly leave the rest behind. A LABORER, flagging, is SWEPT TO HIS DEATH.

EXT. GREENVILLE MILLS, FIREHOUSES, CHURCHES -- DAY

SEQUENCE: Sirens, whistles, bells in various buildings SOUND THE ALARM. PEOPLE IN STREETS FREEZE. Then, a MAD SCRAMBLE as they realize they may be in mortal danger.

INT. GREENVILLE LEVEE BOARD OFFICE -- DAY

ALARMS, WHISTLES, BELLS ECHO IN. Office is staffed but strangely still. BOARD MEMBERS, VOLUNTEERS, SECRETARIES stare at:

Old SEGUINE ALLEN at his desk, face in hands, SOFTLY SOBBING.

MAJOR PAXTON breaks the silence, shouting:

PAXTON

Every last man to the rear levee!

STAFF SNAP TO IT: COMMOTION, SHOUTING, SNATCHED-UP PHONES.

EXT. PERCY HOUSE VERANDAH -- DAY

ALARMS ECHO FROM ACROSS THE CITY. LEROY and WILL sit on verandah, bundled up against the chill, sipping coffee, staring at drizzle.

WILL

I hope Charlie makes it.

LEROY

He will, I'm sure. He's nimble and swift like a leopard. Wise as an owl.

(pause)

This is it, Son. The county's in your hands.

WILL

Luckily, I've got you.

LEROY

I'll be dealing with insurance companies and federal bureaucrats.

(smiles)

It's your show. No matter what Paxton says.

WILL

He "commandeered" the Opera House.

DISTANT, LOUD VOICE

ALL ABLE-BODIED HANDS! REPORT IMMEDIATELY TO THE REAR LEVEE!

A pickup truck cruises up Percy Street. Standing on the bed, a MAN with a megaphone:

MEGAPHONE MAN

ALL ABLE-BODIED HANDS! REPORT IMMEDIATELY TO THE REAR LEVEE!

Truck passes. ERNEST approaches verandah.

LEROY

Give a hand with the furniture, Ernest, move what you can upstairs. Fill the bathtubs. Otherwise, stay put.

ERNEST nods vigorously. WILL stands.

WILL

I'm off.

WILL salutes LEROY. LEROY casually returns it.

WILL and ERNEST make fleeting eye contact, both men nodding almost imperceptibly. LEROY takes note from the corner of an eye. WILL walks to the sidewalk, heads downtown.

EXT. DOWNTOWN GREENVILLE -- DAY

PANDEMONIUM IN THE STREETS. Trucks loaded with LABORERS sit in slow-moving traffic: pickups, pushcarts, mule-drawn wagons. CROWDS in stores overflow onto sidewalks, jostling, scuffling. Umbrellas COLLIDE. POLICEMEN bellow commands, attempt to clear traffic, maintain order.

WILL makes his way down Washington St. PASSERS-BY shout questions at him. WILL deflects them with sharp waves of his hand.

WILL nears the Opera House. A block away the levee looms over the town like a giant medieval battlement, DWARFING the city's buildings, including the three-story Opera House. On the crown, SOLDIERS erect TENTS. Wind, rain LASH the tents.

SOLDIERS guard Opera House entrance. WILL nods at them, enters.

INT. OPERA HOUSE LOUNGE -- DAY

The gloomy room seems far removed from the tumult in the streets. Five men sit at a table: Congressman WILL WHITTINGTON, state National Guard commander GENERAL CURTIS GREEN, local National Guard commander MAJOR PAXTON, levee board chief engineer SEGUINE ALLEN, and BILLY WYNN, a young, ambitious attorney.

BILLY WYNN

Let's get one thing straight. Even if we stay dry, we'll have thousands of refugees.

WILL enters.

MAJOR PAXTON

We'll ship 'em out! I've scheduled trains to Jackson. I've got steamers, barges!

WILL

(sitting at table)

What, exactly, do you have, Major Paxton?

MAJOR PAXTON

More than you know! Listen here--I have it all planned out.

CHARLIE WILLIAMS, mud-caked, bursts into the room.

WILL

Charlie! How'd you get here so--

WILLIAMS

Hitched a ride in a speedboat. A bootlegger's.
Almost commandeered the boat--but the rascal
had too many guns.

CONGRESSMAN WHITTINGTON

How bad--is it?

WILLIAMS

How bad? We'll be *swamped* sometime tonight!

GENERAL GREEN

We've sent almost every man we have to the
rear levee, Williams. That should help.

WILLIAMS

Yes, I saw. But the water coming at us is more
than a flood. It's a tidal wave. Many tidal
waves, great big breakers. Seven, eight feet
tall. The rear levee won't stop that.

(glowers)

I said it before. I'll say it again. We need
boats.

WILL

That means, carpenters.

(to MAJOR PAXTON, GENERAL GREEN)

Send the word out. We need every man able to
drive a nail down at the mills.

WILLIAMS

We need *motorboats*.

(waves an arm)

The whole Delta's going under! How the hell
are you gonna get all those thousands out
there up onto the levee?

MAJOR PAXTON

Motorboats. How many do we have?

WILLIAMS

(incredulous)

You mean you don't know?

BILLY WYNN

Four, maybe five. Pleasure craft.

WILL

Let's get 'em. Get anything that floats.

(dons his coat)

Gentlemen, we have much to do. Let's do it.

BILLY WYNN

One last thing. Food and water. We need
kitchens. Giant field kitchens.

WILL

Can you see to that? On the levee?

WYNN, PAXTON, GREEN nod affirmatively.

EXT. DOWNTOWN GREENVILLE -- DAY

WILL walks through thronged streets almost in a trance, not
registering the chaos around him.

INT. PERCY HOUSE -- DAY

WILL climbs the stairs, goes to his room, shuts the door. He
looks at writing materials.

INT. WILL'S ROOM -- DAY

Late afternoon. Drizzle films windows. WILL is writing poetry. He
hears a COMMOTION outside, goes to a window, looks out: ERNEST is
struggling with a BURLY WHITE SOLDIER.

ERNEST

Help! Help!

EXT. PERCY HOUSE -- DAY

WILL runs out of the house. SOLDIER is dragging ERNEST to a truck
filled with LABORERS. Another SOLDIER guards them at gunpoint.

ERNEST

Let me go!

WILL

Unhand that man!

SOLDIER halts, keeps a grip on ERNEST.

SOLDIER

Orders, sir. We need men.

WILL

He's under *my* orders. He's my driver.

(stares at SOLDIER)

Where on earth are you from?

SOLDIER

Jackson.

WILL

I'm William Percy, chair of the Red Cross
and the Emergency Committee. Let him go.

SOLDIER releases ERNEST.

SOLDIER

I saw him moving tools. Figured that could
wait. Sorry, Mr. Percy.
(heads for truck; over shoulder:)
Where you drivin' to?

WILL

Never you mind. Come on, Ernest.

LABORERS snicker, stare at ERNEST with envy and contempt.

LABORER

Who drives who?

LABORERS guffaw. Truck moves on. WILL stares at it, FURIOUS.

INT. PERCY PARLOR -- NIGHT

CAMILLE, WILL, and CHARLIE WILLIAMS sip pre-dinner toddies.

WILLIAMS

I appreciate the hospitality.

CAMILLE

This house is your home, Charlie. We need you
here. Greenville needs you.
(apprehensive)
How did it go today?

WILLIAMS shrugs. SOUND OF: Front door opening, closing. LEROY
enters.

LEROY

(to Williams)

David showed you your room?

WILLIAMS nods.

LEROY

I need a drink. David!
(takes off his raincoat)
What a hell of a day.
(heaves out a sigh)
Now, I guess we--just wait.

EXT. GREENVILLE REAR LEVEE -- NIGHT [April 22, 3:00 a.m.]

CHARLIE WILLIAMS watches hundreds of BLACK LABORERS frantically stack sandbags under the glare of makeshift lights. White SOLDIERS prod them on. Beyond the levee, flat fields, shacks: An ordinary, tranquil night. WILLIAMS surveys the scene.

A car drives up. MAJOR PAXTON, SEGUINE ALLEN get out.

PAXTON

Bad news, Charlie.

ALLEN

Got a phone call from a farmer four miles north. He heard water roaring through woods, coming at his house. Then he saw it, said it looked like breakers, crashing waves. And then--

WILLIAMS

How deep?

PAXTON

He didn't say. The line went dead.

WILLIAMS

Poor devil! I hope to God he got to the roof.
(frowns)
You two--you better get on over to the levee board office.

SOUND OF: A DISTANT ROAR.

ALLEN

Oh my God. There it is. Here it comes!

The three MEN peer into the murk. They see a blurry DISTURBANCE on the horizon. A LABORER shouts.

WILLIAMS

Go on, now. Get!

ALLEN

What about you?

WILLIAMS

I'll be fine. Already survived one break.

PAXTON

Where's Will Percy?

WILLIAMS

Last I knew, he was at his father's.

More LABORERS shout. SOLDIERS shout. Several dozen LABORERS run. SOLDIERS fire shots into the air.

PAXTON

Maybe he's poetizing. Not the man for this!

PAXTON, ALLEN scurry to their car, screech away.

SOUNDS OF: WHISTLES, SIRENS, CHURCHBELLS.

WILLIAMS studies the dark horizon. ROARING SOUND gets louder. Then WILLIAMS SEES IT: a DARK ROILING WALL SEVEN FEET HIGH, spume IRIDESCENT in starlight.

More SHOUTS, DEFECTIONS, GUNFIRE.

WAVES HIT the levee like surf smashing into a cliff. WAVES REAR UP, CRASH DOWN over the levee. Sandbags slough off.

In a die-hard effort, AT GUNPOINT, a handful of LABORERS attempt to sandbag the levee's eroding crown.

The incoming WALL OF WATER is RISING, EVER-BIGGER WAVES POUND.

WILLIAMS

Retreat! Run! Get outta here!

WILLIAMS runs to a car, floors it. LABORERS, SOLDIERS FLEE.

The levee CRUMBLES. WALLS OF WATER SURGE INTO THE STREET.

EXT. DOWNTOWN GREENVILLE, NIGHT

CONTINUING SOUNDS OF: SIRENS, WHISTLES, CHURCHBELLS.

MASSES OF PEOPLE rush through the streets in RAPIDLY RISING KNEE-DEEP WATER toward the main levee. They fight their way into two- and three-story buildings.

INT. WILL'S BEDROOM -- NIGHT

SOUNDS OF SIRENS, WHISTLES, CHURCHBELLS.

WILL sits at his table, smoking a cigarette in a cigarette holder, drafting plans and orders.

A YOUNG HOUSEBOY bursts in, followed by agitated ERNEST.

YOUNG HOUSEBOY

Massah Will! Massah Will!

WILL

Calm down, boy. We're on high ground.
No flood has ever threatened this house.

(scribbles)

The basement might flood, though. Ernest,
how many barrels of whisky are down there?

ERNEST

I dunno!

WILL

Go down and check. Get it up. For the sake
of Father, his friends, get it all up.

ERNEST

Ain't you sposed to be--savin' people?

WILL

(exploding with anger)

What the hell can I do now?

(a grand queen: his eyes glitter)

Tomorrow, Ernest. Tomorrow I save people.

When I can see.

(flicks cigarette ash at dark windows)

Now go.

WILL picks up his pen, SCRIBBLES.

EXT. PERCY HOUSE -- DAY [April 22]

Just past dawn. Chilly drizzle falls. LEROY and CAMILLE sit on
the verandah, looking down Percy Street, slick with rain but not
flooded. MINERVA, the cook, a large black woman, serves them
coffee. WILL comes out, sits, takes coffee from MINERVA.

WILL

Nice weather.

LEROY smiles. CAMILLE shivers within her shawl.

WILL

Where's Charlie?

LEROY

At the levee board. He called.

WILL

At least the telephones work. How deep is
it, downtown?

LEROY

Almost ten feet. Which means...

CAMILLE

Any moment now.

LEROY

The phones work because the wires are up on poles. Will, you know what else those poles are good for?

WILL

Of course. Finding people out in the country. You can't see roads, and if it's deep enough, you can't even see fences. So you just follow the poles. In boats.

(pause)

We should have listened to Charlie. And brought a boat up here. Look!

(points)

Here it comes.

The PERCYS stare: a SHALLOW BAND OF DARK WATER advances up the slope of Percy Street, filling gutters, spreading over pavement, spilling up onto the sidewalks, SPREADING FURTHER INTO THE YARDS OF HOUSES. It lacks the violence of the downtown flood but the approach is relentless.

CAMILLE

With just ten feet in town, we should be fine.

LEROY

"Just" ten feet!

(shrugs fatalistically)

The Englishman can't be happy. Parts of Panther Burn must be 15 feet under.

(to WILL)

You better get along.

WILL stands, drains his coffee cup.

WILL

I'll see you later?

LEROY

After I make phone calls. They'll likely be lengthy.

Water SEEPS INTO THE PERCY GARDEN.

WILL

There goes your larkspur, Mother.

WILL descends verandah steps.

CAMILLE

Can't you send for--for a boat?

WILL

They're being put to better use, Mother.

CAMILLE and LEROY watch WILL walk down the street. He is soon knee-deep.

CAMILLE

He'll get sick.

LEROY

Camille. Will's a war hero, hardened. He's been through a whole lot worse than this.

(suddenly grave)

It's time he made his mark in these parts. High time. When we're gone--he will need respect.

CAMILLE

But you just said--the war. And he's--a Percy!

LEROY

He's surrounded by good ole boys, Baptists, Methodists. Moralists, Camille. You know what I'm talking about.

CAMILLE frowns.

ACT II

EXT. DOWNTOWN GREENVILLE -- DAY

Dawn brightens above drizzle. Water flows through the streets below the second-story windows of buildings. At intersections crosscurrents COLLIDE, SLAMMING TOGETHER items of debris.

Half-afloat on a large piece of plywood, legs kicking water for propulsion, WILL makes his way toward a building. Sign on it: "KNIGHTS OF COLUMBUS." Debris jostles WILL. He passes the open entry of another building, looks at the entry hall: a DEAD HORSE floats within.

WILL reaches the steps to the K of C entry, sloshes up them.

INT. KNIGHTS OF COLUMBUS HALL -- DAY

WILL climbs from water to the second floor, goes into a large, dim room that holds 10 card tables: a poker room. Along walls masses of BODIES huddle. They stir. WILL loudly claps his hands.

WILL

Folks, wake up! Wake up, now!

(pause)

I know you came in here to escape the flood,
and that's all right. But I'm going to have
to move you because I need this space. So get
on up now and get ready.

GROANS, OATHS from REFUGEES, all black.

REFUGEE # 1

Who are you?

REFUGEE # 2

What da man want?

WILL

I am William A. Percy, your commander--
and you WILL obey!

WILL finds a phone, dials.

WILL

(into phone)

Major Paxton? Will Percy.

(pause)

Where the hell am I? At the Knights of
Columbus. My new headquarters. Yes, Paxton,
my new headquarters. The levee board's too
small, the opera house is--the opera house,
not suitable. So this is it. Get on over here,
with boats. I've got people I need to move.

INT. K OF C POKER ROOM -- DAY

Two hours later: REFUGEES are gone, the room is brightly lit and
ASWARM WITH ACTIVITY. TECHNICIANS install more telephones. A
SOLDIER fiddles with a short-wave radio. SOLDIERS carry in all
manner of supplies: typewriters, filing cases, barrels, bulk
containers of food. WILL, dressed in dry military khakis, directs
the show. His manner: that of a SEASONED MARTINET.

WILL

Foodstuffs in the next room! And put a lock
on that door!

MAJOR PAXTON, his hands on his hips, unable to suppress a sneer,
watches WILL. RADIO SOLDIER brings WILL a note. He reads it.

WILL

Paxton!

PAXTON
(stiffening with mock respect)

Yes?

WILL
What's the situation with that train wreck?

PAXTON
Train wreck?

WILL
The train that didn't make it to Jackson this morning. Packed full of refugees.

PAXTON shakes his head: He knows nothing.

WILL
That's fine, I just got word myself. It's two miles east of town, derailed from track no longer there. Get a rescue party to it.

PAXTON exits, bumping aside a raffish YOUNG WHITE MAN coming in the door. MAN is unfazed. He saunters up to WILL.

MAN
I reckon you're the boss.

WILL sizes up the fellow.

WILL
Do I know you?

MAN
No. You don't wanter know me.

WILL raises his eyebrows.

MAN
Unless yer feelin'--thirsty.

WILL
Ahh. Moonshine.

MAN (BOOTLEGGER)
River folk. Folks with boats.

BOOTLEGGER leads WILL to a window, points outside. A SLEEK BOAT with a LARGE OUTBOARD MOTOR bobs next to the small ramshackle flotilla of Committee boats tied up to the front stair rail.

WILL
Perfect. How much do you want?

BOOTLEGGER

Nothin'. 'Cept--mash fer my chickens.

WILL

And in return?

BOOTLEGGER

That train wreck? We got a bunch a boats leavin' there right now. Full a wet ladies and tots--ain't the usual cargo. They're headin' fer the levee.

WILL

It's a deal! You'll get your mash!

BOOTLEGGER

We don't want no trouble.

WILL hugs BOOTLEGGER, whispers to him:

WILL

Without the likes of you, half this county'd go stark raving mad. You'll have no trouble, whatsoever, rest assured.

WILL and BOOTLEGGER grin at each other, shake hands.

EXT. GREENVILLE LEVEE -- DAY

Late morning, cold drizzle. Many boats unload bedraggled REFUGEES onto the levee. Rafts bear braying LIVESTOCK. Unshaven, moon-eyed stringy-haired blond MEN helm boats with big motors: BOOTLEGGERS.

CAMERA PULLS UP: a dense line of BLACK REFUGEES snakes down the levee AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE.

Armed SOLDIERS patrol the levee crown. A desperate situation: REFUGEES are soaked, filthy, cold. Some are injured, others feverish. BABIES cry, OLD FOLKS whimper.

An elderly BLACK MAN comforts a BLACK WOMAN with a BAWLING BABY.

WOMAN WITH BABY

Watah! Watah, please!

A SOLDIER with a megaphone ignores WOMAN. Into the megaphone:

SOLDIER

All hands! Proceed to the pier to unload cargo!

ELDERLY BLACK MAN
(to SOLDIER)

You ain't got no white folk doin' shit work!

SOLDIER repeats MEGAPHONE COMMAND. Then, to ELDERLY BLACK MAN:

SOLDIER
Git your black ass to that pier, son!

ELDERLY BLACK MAN
Can't barely walk!

SOLDIER sticks his gun in ELDERLY BLACK MAN's face.

A large steamer is moored at the concrete pier. SOLDIERS under the command of a LIEUTENANT guard the gangplank, holding back a CROWD of ANGRY WHITE MEN.

FURIOUS WHITE MAN
Let us get on that boat!

LIEUTENANT
Calm down, sir. Decisions must be made!

INT. K OF C HEADQUARTERS -- DAY

WILL sits at the head of a conference table composed of card tables shoved together. MAJOR PAXTON, GENERAL GREEN, CHARLIE WILLIAMS, others attend. BACKGROUND: PANDEMONIUM OF ACTIVITY.

WILL
We have two choices as I see it. Either we feed and shelter people, or we send them downriver to camps at Vicksburg.

GENERAL GREEN
We ship 'em out. We can't handle it here.

PAXTON
You mean *white* people. Yes, they must go!

WILL gives PAXTON a troubled glance.

WILL
Women, children, the elderly first. Paxton-- those cowardly men at the pier, trying to board that boat--it's under control?

PAXTON nods.

WILL
Let's round 'em up. Get 'em to the pier any

way we can. We have more steamers coming.
We'll be done in just a few days.

PAXTON

The nigras?

WILL

What about them? Where are the tents? How
are those kitchens coming along?

PAXTON

They're coming. Don't you worry.

WILL

(to WILLIAMS)

Charlie, call in the Red Cross Committee.

PAXTON

What do you want them for?

WILL

This is a humanitarian crisis, Major. The
kind of thing the Red Cross deals with.
Money. Food. Water. Refugee camps. Any
other questions?

An AIDE approaches WILL.

AIDE

Mr. Percy, telephone call from the Senator.

WILL nods curtly at PAXTON, crosses the room, picks up a phone.

WILL

Father?

LEROY (OC)

Can you spare a boat to come pick me up?

WILL

Of course. Father--Paxton is getting difficult
about evacuation. The colored people.

LEROY (OC)

No surprise there, Will. He's a cotton
factor--has to keep the planters happy.
How's it going?

WILL

All right. OK, I guess. Father, I'm sending a
boat right away. I really need you here.

INT. K OF C BUILDING, BACK ROOM -- DAY

WILL meets with his Red Cross Committee: CHARLIE WILLIAMS, JUDGE EMET HARTY, WILL HARDIE, NEWSPAPER OWNER.

WILL

I feel honored to have such fine men on this committee. One way or another, you've all worked closely with Father. He respects you highly and so do I.

JUDGE HARTY

Cut to the chase, Will. You're about to say something awful. We can't wait to find out what it is.

WILL

I've decided to ship out the colored folk.

WILLIAMS groans. A STIR.

WILL

And I'm asking for your support.

WILL HARDIE

I've been managing Trail Lake for many years, Will. I can tell you one thing about our hands. If they go...

WILLIAMS

They'll end up in Chicago. Count on it. They'll never come back.

WILL

Don't be so sure. Our own workers--we treat them so very well.

NEWSPAPER OWNER

What made you decide on such a reckless--wild--dangerous idea, Will Percy?

WILL

I like the way you put that.

Nervous laughter.

WILL

It's the only Christian thing to do.

JUDGE HARTY

The planters will disagree. They'll accuse you--accuse us--of betraying our way of life.

WILL
(fervently)
Betraying their wallets! Their money!

WILLIAMS
Strange thing, Mr. Percy. The Senator never mentioned...

WILL
He and I have discussed it, Charlie. If you doubt that, he's on his way here right now.

A ripple of agitation. WILL holds up a hand.

WILL
Let's vote.

Reluctantly, all hands go up.

WILL
Thank you.
(looks at NEWSPAPER OWNER)
You're putting out the Democrat-Times tomorrow?

NEWSPAPER OWNER
We think we can manage a four-page spread.

WILL
You'll run the story?

NEWSPAPER OWNER hesitates, then nods.

INT. K OF C CARD ROOM -- DAY

Minutes later. CHARLIE WILLIAMS and WILL HARTIE walk through a welter of activity to a corner where they cannot be overheard.

HARTIE
Will better start carrying a gun.

WILLIAMS
I doubt he'd shoot.

HARTIE
He fought in the war!

WILLIAMS
Right. The war hero. The only reason he didn't get run out of town long ago.

HARTIE

That, and his father.

(chuckles mordantly)

Reckon he'll ship out that boy of his?

WILLIAMS

Boy?

HARTIE

That driver. Ernest.

WILLIAMS

Oh, no. Will would never part with him. How'd you--how'd you know about that?

HARTIE

A couple of tenants at Trail Lake. People who talk to relatives of his. The nigras--they know more than you might think. They *do* talk...

(sees something across the room)

Here comes the Senator. You want to speak with him? Or should I?

HARTIE

Let it go for the moment, Charlie. That's my advice. See how things play out.

EXT. COUNTRYSIDE -- DAY

Trees, a few damaged farm buildings poke up from a VAST EXPANSE OF BROWN WATER. The water SWIRLS with currents, crosscurrents. SOUNDS OF gurgling, hissing, GNAWING: the flood is still taking things apart. Drizzle patters into the water.

SOUND OF: a motorboat. A sleek boat comes into view, following a LINE OF UTILITY POLES.

TWO BOOTLEGGERS man the boat. They pass a thick tree, branches of which droop into the water. CU: a branch is ALIVE WITH SNAKES.

Boat follows utility poles to the roof of a farmhouse, submerged up to the eaves. On the roof, a WHITE FAMILY forlornly waves.

EXT. GREENVILLE LEVEE -- DAY

Late afternoon, drizzle. Levee is ASWARM WITH SHIVERING BLACK REFUGEES. A flotilla of boats unloads NEW ARRIVALS.

A DOZEN SOLDIERS guard the concrete pier. From it a large crowd of WHITE WOMEN, WHITE CHILDREN, and WHITE ELDERLY board a steamer. SOLDIERS carry SICK WHITE PEOPLE on stretchers up the gangplank. A knot of well-dressed WHITE MEN watch the boarding.

BLACK WOMAN with BABY, ELDERLY BLACK MAN (from earlier scene) stand near the pier. BABY is GASPING FOR BREATH. WOMAN attempts to go by a SOLDIER to the pier. SOLDIER bars her.

BLACK WOMAN WITH BABY

Mah baby's sick!

SOLDIER

I'm sorry. No exceptions.

SOLDIER looks at SICK BABY: his face softens.

SOLDIER

Lieutenant!

A LIEUTENANT approaches, looks at BABY. A WELL-DRESSED WHITE MAN shoves through, looks at BABY.

BLACK WOMAN WITH BABY

He's real sick! Liable to die!

WELL-DRESSED WHITE MAN

Right! So am I!

SOLDIER

(to LIEUTENANT)

I think we should let her on.

WELL-DRESSED WHITE MAN

You let that nigger on ahead of me--

(pulls a pistol)

I'll shoot her! And the baby!

FUROR. ONLOOKERS RECOIL. LIEUTENANT grabs WELL-DRESSED WHITE MAN, wrestles him to levee crown. Pistol GOES OFF: a wild shot, no one hit. SCREAMS, PANIC. LIEUTENANT lands a fist in WHITE MAN's face. Pistol falls from his hand. LIEUTENANT grabs it, gets up, draws his own pistol, glares at the other WHITE MEN seeking to board.

LIEUTENANT

Gentlemen, get off this pier. Now!

LIEUTENANT LEVELS his guns. WHITE MEN back away.

LIEUTENANT

(to BLACK WOMAN WITH BABY)

Get on that boat.

BLACK WOMAN WITH BABY

Youse a God-fearin' Christian!

ELDERLY BLACK MAN tries to follow her to the gangplank.
LIEUTENANT bars him.

BLACK WOMAN WITH BABY goes up gangplank.

WHITE MEN ERUPT WITH FURY. WHITE PEOPLE boarding the steamer
recoil from BLACK WOMAN. BLACK REFUGEES CHEER WOMAN, JEER AT
WHITE MEN, at WHITES boarding the steamer. A NEAR RIOT.

LIEUTENANT FIRES BOTH GUNS INTO THE AIR.

INT. PERCY DINING ROOM -- NIGHT

LEROY, WILL, CHARLIE WILLIAMS consume a late supper: biscuits,
cold fried chicken, country ham, cheese. CAMILLE sits with them.

CAMILLE

Some excitement at the pier today.

WILL

Cowards. That lieutenant--a fine young
man. Wish I'd been there to see it.

LEROY

You'll see it. All hell will break
loose when colored folks start boarding
boats.

WILLIAMS gives LEROY a quizzical look.

LEROY

(to WILLIAMS)

You think we're crazy, don't you?

WILLIAMS shrugs.

LEROY

Maybe we are.

WILL

It runs in the family.

CAMILLE

Will!

LEROY winces. TENSE SILENCE.

WILL

Just joking, Mother.

LEROY gives WILL a moody stare.

INT. WILLIAMS'S ROOM, PERCY HOUSE -- NIGHT

WILLIAMS lies in bed, eyes open, hands behind his head. He hears something in the hall outside his closed door: a SOFT TREAD.

He gets up, goes to the door, listens: someone is descending the staircase. WILLIAMS glances at one of his windows. He goes to it, looks out. Moments later he sees:

WILL walking to the carriage house. Entering it.

WILLIAMS
(mutters)

They really are crazy.

EXT. K OF C HALL -- DAY [April 23]

Morning. Drizzle. A motorboat delivers LEROY, WILL, and WILLIAMS to the K of C hall.

INT. BACK ROOM OF K OF C HALL -- DAY

LEROY, WILL, and BILLY WYNN confer at the table.

LEROY
Billy, we've done some thinking. What's your legal opinion of martial law?

WYNN
Here? Washington County?

LEROY nods. WYNN laughs.

WILL
There's looting. The logistics of labor. Fights at the pier. General lawlessness.

WYNN
Legally, you'd have to get approval from higher authorities, the governor maybe, or the mayor, the city council. But Senator-- if we need martial law? Just declare it.

MAJOR PAXTON bursts in carrying a newspaper.

LEROY
Morning, Major. It's good you're here. We have just declared martial law.

PAXTON
What the hell is this?

He holds up the *Greenville Democrat-Times*: Headline:

EVACUATION FOR ALL

LEROY

Sit down, Major.

PAXTON sits.

PAXTON

(reading from newspaper)

"The city will be almost completely evacuated within a few days." And the governor says, "We will remove all the refugees and all other persons who desire to leave the city."

(glares at LEROY)

Did you talk to the governor about this?

LEROY

Governor Murphree and I have conversed.

PAXTON

So this is your idea?

LEROY

I take some responsibility. Major. I repeat. We've declared martial law.

PAXTON

Brilliant, Senator. You'll need it!

WILL

With this weather, with the conditions-- no clean water, little food, human and animal excrement--Major, we're looking at epidemics. A matter of public health.

PAXTON

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

WILL

The Red Cross is setting up first-rate refugee camps in Vicksburg. And you want to keep those poor people *here*?

PAXTON

(to LEROY)

You've got railroad income, the law office, the banks, so much else. You can go without cotton. But many of us--brokers like me--we'll all be ruined.

LEROY

I feel terrible about the situation,
Major.

PAXTON

You'll get trouble. Trouble that even
You might not survive.

LEROY

I'm a gambling man. I'll take my chances.

PAXTON stews.

PAXTON

Martial law. We already have it. Under me.

LEROY

Well, now.

WILL

I control the Red Cross. I control the
food, the water, the dollars. Especially
the dollars, the hundreds of thousands
coming from Washington. You control the
guns. But without money, guns won't do
much good. Major--this is a joint
operation.

PAXTON

Is that a threat?

WILL stands, POUNDS TABLE WITH FIST.

WILL

If you want to take it that way!

PAXTON stands, makes for the door, muttering under his breath:

PAXTON

This is what you get--from an *artiste*...

LEROY

Paxton!

PAXTON turns on his heel, his face pale.

PAXTON

Senator?

LEROY

Get the hell out of my sight.

EXT. HOTEL -- DAY

A large hotel on Main Street. Sign: "Cowan Hotel--'The Delta's Finest.'" A number of boats are tied to the grand entry.

INT. COWAN HOTEL, MEZZANINE -- DAY

Mezzanine overlooks flooded lobby, but on the mezzanine itself life continues. GUESTS mingle. A café serves breakfast. A table in the café:

Three copies of that day's *Greenville Democrat-Times* lie on it. Around the table, prosperous WHITE MEN heatedly talk.

WHITE MAN # 1

You can't stop the Senator!

WHITE MAN # 2

No? Watch me.

WHITE MAN # 1

The governor's in his pocket. And so are the bigwigs in Washington.

WHITE MAN # 3

(rips newspaper in half)

This cannot stand.

WHITE MAN # 2

Maybe it's not the Senator we deal with.

WHITE MAN # 1

If not him--who?

WHITE MAN # 2

His son. The so-called hero.

(leans forward)

What do we have on him?

EXT. LEVEE BOARD BUILDING -- DAY

A MAN rows a boat to the building. His passenger: WHITE MAN # 2.

INT. LEVEE BOARD OFFICE -- DAY

WHITE MAN # 2 enters the busy office, approaches a WOMAN.

WHITE MAN # 2

Hello, Sondra.

SONDRA

Hi there, Mr. Peeler.

PEELER

I'm looking for Charlie Williams.

SONDRA

He's in the back with Seguire Allen.

PEELER nods, walks to the back room, knocks. WILLIAMS opens the door. ALLEN looks up from the table.

WILLIAMS

Mr. Peeler.

PEELER

Charlie! How you doin'! May I have a word with you?

INT. OUTER HALLWAY, LEVEE BOARD OFFICE -- DAY

PEELER and WILLIAMS stand in hallway. They're alone.

WILLIAMS

What can I do for you?

PEELER

You got all your hands to safety?

WILLIAMS

(nods)

They were working on the rear levee. And their families, we already had 'em on the main levee. Your hands?

PEELER

Still comin' in.

(unpleasant laugh)

Reckon I should have done what the Senator did. Put 'em to work on the levee.

WILLIAMS

We could have used the help.

PEELER

(another laugh)

I heard you're staying at the Percys'.

WILLIAMS'S eyes narrow.

PEELER

What can you tell me about Will and--and that boy of his? What's his name?

WILLIAMS

I don't believe I know what you mean.

PEELER

Yes you do. I'm sure you do.

WILLIAMS

No, Mr. Peeler. I don't.

PEELER leers at WILLIAMS. WILLIAMS flinches.

PEELER

A little hanky-panky...right, Charlie?

WILLIAMS

If you'll excuse me, I have work to do.

WILLIAMS turns away.

PEELER

You let the Senator know we have Will's number, Charlie. You tell him that. For the sake of *both* of them.

WILLIAMS freezes. Then he walks back into the office.

INT. PERCY FRONT HALL -- NIGHT

WILLIAMS enters, looking tired. CAMILLE calls from the parlor:

CAMILLE

Just in time for some wonderful crawfish bisque!

WILLIAMS

No thanks, Mrs. Percy. I had supper in town.

WILLIAMS goes up the stairs.

EXT. K OF C BUILDING -- DAY [April 24]

The next morning, still drizzly. A motorboat approaches bearing LEROY, WILL, WILLIAMS. LEROY and WILL step off. WILLIAMS stays in the boat.

WILLIAMS

Call me at the levee board if you need me.

LEROY waves a "yes." Motorboat moves off.

LEROY

What's gotten into him?

WILL

Tired, probably. Exhausted! Everybody is.

INT. RELIEF HEADQUARTERS, K OF C BUILDING -- DAY

Mid-day. WILL chairs a meeting of the Relief Committee. MAJOR PAXTON, SEGUINE ALLEN, BILLY WYNN attend.

WILL

I have some news. A government steamer, the Control, is set to dock tomorrow. It can take 500 passengers, white women and children. The Minnesota, a bigger ship, also will dock tomorrow. 1000 people will board it--colored people.

PAXTON

Women? Children?

WILL

And men. The Wabash and the Kappa will be standing by tomorrow, coming in as soon as the Minnesota leaves. The Sprague, Tollinger, and Cincinnati are on the way, each towing barges. Big barges--able to hold thousands. Livestock as well as people.

(pauses)

This town will be empty in just a couple of days.

PAXTON

What if the nigras don't want to go?

WILL

They have no choice. They can't take care of themselves. That's obvious.

INT. PERCY DINING ROOM -- NIGHT

LEROY and WILL have a late snack. CAMILLE sits with them.

CAMILLE

When this is over, I want you both to get some rest.

WILL and LEROY look at each other, smile.

LEROY

It won't be over for months, Camille. The clean-up. Fixing the rear levee. The banks, the financing, the debt. We've just begun.

CAMILLE

I mean the evacuation. When that's done,
you'll have a load off your minds. You will
deserve a respite. And need it!

SOUND OF: Front door opening, shutting.

LEROY rises, goes to hall. WILLIAMS is heading for the stairs.

LEROY

Charlie.

WILLIAMS

A long day. I'm turning in, Mr. Percy.

LEROY

Of course. Charlie. If there's something on
your mind--that you'd like to discuss--

WILLIAMS

Thanks, Mr. Percy. Guess I'm a little down.
Still can't believe we lost Mound's Landing.

LEROY

Don't blame yourself, Charlie. You did all you
could, and more.

WILLIAMS

Yeah.

(forced smile)

Good night.

LEROY

Good night, Charlie.

WILLIAMS goes upstairs. LEROY returns to dining room.

CAMILLE

He needs a rest. All of you do.
(clutches her chest)
Oh! That--pain. Again.

LEROY

Darling! You get to bed right now!

INT. PERCY LIBRARY -- NIGHT

LEROY sips a nightcap. He's alone. A knock on the door.

LEROY

Come in.

WILLIAMS enters.

LEROY

Charlie. Have a seat.

WILLIAMS closes the door, sits.

LEROY

Shoot, Charlie. What is it?

WILLIAMS

It's about Will, Mr. Percy. Or--it's that--
it relates to Will. Not just about him.

LEROY nods gravely.

WILLIAMS

There's some people out to get him.

LEROY

Out to get him--how?

WILLIAMS

You know how much I respect him. Known him
since we were little.

LEROY

Who's out to get him and why?

WILLIAMS

Jack Peeler. And his crowd. They think--

LEROY

What do they *think*, Charlie?

WILLIAMS

Well. Don't know how to put it. They think
they've got the goods on Will and Ernest.
They think they can destroy you, too.

EXT. PERCY HOUSE -- DAY [April 25]

Drizzle. LEROY, WILL, and WILLIAMS board a motorboat. DRIVER
takes the boat down Percy Street.

WILL

Now it's both of you. What is this--silence?

LEROY

It's nothing special, Son. Things may be
getting beyond our grasp... Out of control.

EXT. K OF C BUILDING -- DAY

Motorboat delivers WILL to building, then moves on with LEROY and WILLIAMS.

EXT. LEVEE PIER -- DAY

TWO DOZEN SOLDIERS guard the pier, MAJOR PAXTON in command. WHITE WOMEN and CHILDREN are boarding a steamer, the *Control*. SOLDIERS keep at bay a crowd of ANGRY WHITE MEN.

A larger steamer, the *Minnesota*, eases in along the pier's other side. A restive THRONG OF BLACK PEOPLE awaits embarkment.

Further on down the levee: CHAOS, MISERY in the dank cold. A motorboat takes WILL alongside the levee. He scans the wretched hordes sharing space with unruly livestock, quarreling dogs.

Boat draws up to the pier. WILL gets off, eyes ANGRY WHITE MEN, turns from them, approaches PAXTON. Behind WILL:

VOICE

Nigger lover!

WILL slowly turns toward ANGRY WHITE MEN, his face rigid with disdain. WHITE MEN scowl, sneer. One steps forward, drawing open his suit jacket: tucked into his waistband: TWO REVOLVERS.

WILL

I'm not afraid of trash like you.

MAJOR PAXTON stands by. He shakes his head: exasperated.

INT. LEVEE BOARD REAR OFFICE -- DAY

LEROY is on the phone. SONDRRA (office worker) comes in.

SONDRRA

Senator? Some gentlemen are here. They want to see you.

LEROY

(cups phone)

Send them in.

JACK PEELER, WHITE MEN # 1 and # 3, and three other WHITE MEN enter. Their faces are grim. LEROY ignores them. Into phone:

LEROY

Thank you, Mr. Hoover. I appreciate it.

LEROY hangs up, looks impassively at the MEN.

PEELER

You know why we're here?

LEROY shrugs. Not a care in the world. PEELER frowns.

PEELER

Those hands will not board those boats.

LEROY

Why is that, Peeler?

PEELER

We won't let them.

LEROY

(smiles)

Gentlemen, this town is under martial law.
And you are not the ones giving orders.

WHITE MAN # 1

Who's giving the orders?

LEROY

His name is William A. Percy. If you wish to
change policy, you must speak with him.

PEELER

We'll do more than that.

LEROY

(mildly)

Is that a threat?

LEROY's mildness packs an OMINOUS FORCE. The MEN stir.

WHITE MAN # 3

Senator, we don't want no violence. You're
in charge. Don't let this happen.

PEELER puts his hands on LeRoy's table, leans into LeRoy's face.

PEELER

In charge? We'll see who's in charge. That
sissy son of yours--what he's doing...

LEROY stands. PEELER straightens. Hatred SIZZLES between them.

LEROY

Get out.

PEELER smiles.

PEELER

Come on, boys.

PEELER turns to the door, waves the other MEN out. He goes through the door, turns back to LEROY: softly:

PEELER

We've lynched white people for less.

LeRoy sits, lights a cigar. PEELER's comment does not appear to bother him. Again, not a care in the world.

EXT. LEVEE PIER -- DAY

The *Minnesota's* gangplank THUDS onto the pier. ANGRY WHITE MEN shake their fists. WILL waves BLACK EVACUEES to the gangplank. EVACUEES shuffle aboard the steamer. MAJOR PAXTON stands by. His SOLDIERS separate EVACUEES from WHITE MEN.

ANGRY WHITE MAN

Paxton! Stop it! Stop it NOW!

Stone-faced, PAXTON does not reply. WHITE MEN CURSE, SHOUT.

A BLACK MAN with his FAMILY MEMBERS approach WILL.

BLACK MAN

Mistah Percy. We don't want to go.

WILL

What?

ANGRY WHITE MAN

They don't want to go!

WILL

(furious, to BLACK MAN)

Get on that ship!

WHITE MEN surge into SOLDIERS, who push back. BLACK EVACUEES press forward toward gangplank. SHOUTS, CRIES OF PANIC.

The steamer's horns BLAST. The CAPTAIN shouts from the bridge:

CAPTAIN

What the hell is going on down there!

WILL

Order! Order!

SCUFFLES break out among EVACUEES trying to board the steamer.

WILL grabs a SOLDIER'S pistol, FIRES REPEATEDLY into the air.

WILL

(to BALKY BLACK MAN)

If you don't want to go, GET OUT OF THE WAY.

(to Paxton, gesturing at ANGRY WHITE MEN)

Get them off the pier!

A HAND drops on WILL's shoulder. He turns, sees LEROY.

LEROY

Come with me, Son. We must talk a moment together.

(to PAXTON)

Follow orders, Major!

(to ANGRY WHITE MEN)

Violence will not be tolerated. If you draw your guns--you will be shot.

(to WILL)

Come on.

LEROY leads WILL down the levee toward a large National Guard tent south of the pier.

LEROY

We're in big trouble, Will. We're no longer in charge.

WILL

What's happened?

LEROY

More than you realize, I fear. We cannot control this situation any longer.

A SOLDIER guards the tent's entry. He nods as LEROY and WILL enter. Various supplies fill the tent's dim interior. LEROY and WILL find chairs in a corner, sit.

WILL

What's happened?

LEROY

Threats. Death threats.

WILL

You can't be serious.

LEROY

A few weeks ago, I predicted the rednecks

would get angry. Mad-dog mad. It's happened.
Jack Peeler's talking about lynching.

WILL
Lynching who?

LEROY
You.

WILL jumps to his feet.

WILL
I'll have him arrested!

LEROY
Sit down, Will. We have to think long term.

WILL angrily paces.

LEROY
There's another lynch target.

WILL
(sitting)
Who?

LEROY
Ernest.

WILL
What's--what's he got to do with this?

LEROY
I'd prefer not to get into details. Anyway,
I don't know them. And do not want to know.
(meets WILL's horrified stare)
Have you ever thought about your position
in this county when--

WILL
When? When what?

LEROY
I'm gone.

WILL sags.

LEROY
I've already lived longer than any
male Percy. And then my younger brothers--
both dead...

WILL

(bitterly interrupts)

All right. My position here. What about it?

LEROY

You'll have enemies. You'll need resources to fight them.

WILL

Common decency is all I'll need.

LEROY

No. You'll need respect and strong allies among the whites that matter.

WILL shudders.

WILL

Respect. Lovely. I'll need respect. Are you saying--I don't already have it?

LEROY

Of course you do. But not from vicious, ignorant men like Peeler.

WILL

I do not want or need their respect.

LEROY

No you don't but you do need allies against them. If you push those men over the edge they will ruin both of us. And all that our family has worked for. And then they will take it out on the colored folks, who will suffer the most if we make the wrong move now.

WILL shakes his head.

LEROY

We have a situation here. We are inches away from a war. If that war comes, many will die. Colored and white alike. We don't control things, unlike previous crises. Reconstruction, Redemption, the second Klan hereabouts. Then, we ruled. We no longer rule--even in Greenville.

WILL

Seems to me, we have a pretty tight grip.

LEROY

Not with lynch talk we don't!

WILL recoils.

LEROY

We must be realistic. We at least have influence. And we must use it.

WILL

All right, Father. How?

LEROY

You will call a meeting of the Committee and take another vote on evacuation. The Committee will vote to cancel it.

WILL

I feel--sick.

LEROY

You will pretend that you do not know the outcome of the vote. You'll argue against it. Nobly. With passion. But in the end you will accede despite your revulsion--which will be real enough. Don't get sick on me, now.

WILL

Everybody'll know that you--put in the fix.

LEROY

Yes. Which will give me influence over the planters, big and small, genteel and redneck. But, your integrity will be preserved. That is important. Decent folks will take note and honor you long after I'm gone.

Bleakly, WILL laughs.

LEROY

Hear me out. The hands on the levee will be angry. You will be firm. Very firm. Paxton will be only too happy to help you.

WILL

How can we be more firm than we already...

LEROY

You will rule with an IRON FIST!
(voice softens)
And thereby save many colored folks' lives.

WILL stares at his father.

LEROY

Meantime I'll handle the planters. Together,
we will prevent war. Race war.

WILL

And I will get--respect.

Wearily, LEROY nods.

WILL

That's one hell of a tradeoff.

LEROY

It's called survival. Your survival. The
blacks' survival. And Greenville's.

WILL stands. LEROY stands.

WILL

The Minnesota sails as planned.

LEROY

That's fine. They're already boarding her.
Oh, another thing. The weather.

LEROY follows WILL to the tent's entrance.

WILL

The weather?

LEROY

It will be better tomorrow. And we'll get
the tents we need.

WILL

How do you know that?

LEROY

I'm a betting man.

WILL

(to SOLDIER standing guard)

Telephone?

SOLDIER points. WILL picks up a phone, dials.

WILL

(into phone)

Charlie. Call in the Committee. We're
having an emergency meeting.

EXT. LEVEE -- DAY

Morning: BRIGHT SUNSHINE. BLACK LABORERS unload cargo from a large steamer moored to the pier. MAJOR PAXTON, WILL look on. SOLDIERS stand by.

PAXTON

Tents, Mr. Percy. Many tents.

WILL

In the nick of time.

(grins)

It's so warm today. Father predicted it.

PAXTON

The Senator is a wise man.

(grunts)

The nigras don't seem unhappy.

WILL

A lot of them really didn't want to go.

This is after all home to them, the only one they've ever known.

A well-dressed, light-skinned BLACK MAN approaches.

WILL

(to BLACK MAN)

Good morning, Mr. McMiller.

MCMILLER

Mr. Percy. Major Paxton.

(stares at the swollen river)

It is a nice day. Thank God!

(stares at WILL)

But we got a problem, Mr. Percy.

WILL

We have many problems, John.

MCMILLER

I reckon with the evacuation called off, you'll need a lot of hands.

WILL

Yes. We have to plug the rear levee.

MCMILLER

How do you plan to get those hands?

PAXTON

The way we've been doin' in it. We'll

round 'em up.

MCMILLER

Conscription. And pay? Do you plan to pay the hands?

WILL

We're running out of money, Mr. Mc-Miller.

MCMILLER points at ARMED WHITE SOLDIERS.

MCMILLER

The problem, sirs, is not labor and it isn't really even the pay. It's the guns. You've got black folks working at gun-point. Just like slaves.

(smiles grimly)

For the sake of this town, get rid of the guns.

MCMILLER walks away.

PAXTON

What do you think about that, Mr. Percy?

WILL

I don't know, Major. Maybe he has a point.

(frowns at deluged town)

But just look at that mess. We've got so much work to do.

EXT. PERCY GARDEN -- DAY

July 7, 1927, two-and-a-half months later. WILL sits at the table, eating lunch. ERNEST shovels muck from a flower bed.

ERNEST

Months aftah de flood. Weese *still* cleanin' up!

WILL

Not fast enough. Ernest, tell me something. Why do colored men hate working?

ERNEST

They be workin! Ise workin!

CAMILLE walks into the garden.

CAMILLE

Will, a phone call came in from Major Paxton. I think it's serious.

WILL

Somebody didn't get enough food because he didn't show up for levee duty?

CAMILLE

That new police officer, the young one, shot James Gooden.

ERNEST starts, loses his grip on the shovel.

WILL

Oh, no. I know him. He's a solid man. Why on earth did--you must mean Mosely. Why did Mosely shoot Gooden?

CAMILLE

Apparently because he refused to be conscripted. At any rate, he died.

ERNEST emits a soft wail.

CAMILLE

Did you know him, Ernest?

ERNEST

Aww, Miz Percy, Mistah Will! I just knew him to say hello. But this'll be trouble. A whole lotta trouble!

WILL

Why?

ERNEST

Folks'll go crazy!

WILL and CAMILLE stare at ERNEST.

ERNEST

It's da guns! Doze gawd-awful guns!

INT. RELIEF HEADQUARTERS -- DAY

WILL enters. A group of grim-faced BLACK MEN, including JOHN MCMILLER, await. RELIEF WORKERS sit tensely at tables.

MCMILLER

Mr. Percy!

WILL

Mr. McMiller, I have heard the terrible news. There is no need to shout.

MCMILLER

Did you hear that Mr. Gooden had worked all night when Officer Mosely invaded his home? That Mosely *shot him* when the tired man refused to get in the truck?

WILL

No. I hadn't heard that.

MCMILLER

This is it! We have *had it!*

MCMILLER storms out. BLACK MEN follow.

RELIEF WORKERS stare apprehensively at WILL.

INT. BACK OFFICE OF RELIEF HEADQUARTERS -- DAY

Two hours later. WILL chairs a staff meeting. MAJOR PAXTON, the MAYOR, the POLICE CHIEF, other OFFICIALS attend.

PAXTON

Every last operation has halted. Cargo unloading, shipments inland, clean-up efforts--it's all stopped! The nigras are *on strike*.

WILL

What are they doing?

POLICE CHIEF

Buying guns.

MAYOR

White folks, too. Everybody's arming. I don't need to remind you that at present, the town's white population is about 4000. There are eleven thousand blacks.

WILL

Yes. It doesn't help to be outnumbered in any war. But especially in a race war.

MAYOR

What on earth will we do?

WILL

Well. We'll stop the war, obviously.

PAXTON

How?

WILL

I will speak to the Negro community to-night. In a church of John McMiller's choice.

NERVOUS LAUGHTER.

MAYOR

You're joking, of course.

WILL

I'm quite serious. And I will go alone.

MAYOR

They'll tear you from limb to limb! They blame you, Will!

WILL

Where is Officer Mosely?

POLICE CHIEF

Down at the station.

WILL

Jail him.

(stands)

Put that imbecile in jail immediately! Announce that he faces a murder charge!

POLICE CHIEF

That won't save you if you set foot in a black church, Will.

WILL

We'll see about that.

WILL exits.

PAXTON

They do say that in Europe, the man fought with valor. And I believe I read that it was almost--"suicidal" valor.

OFFICIALS eye each other uneasily.

EXT. PERCY VERANDAH -- NIGHT

That night. CAMILLE and ERNEST, both tearful, confront WILL.

ERNEST

Mistah Will! Pleeeeze! Don't do it!

CAMILLE

Won't you at least call your father?
Maybe he can talk sense into you!

WILL

Father and I have already discussed the matter, Mother. It is my job to contain the Negroes, for their own well-being. It is Father's job to get bank loans for the whites, especially the ones who'd otherwise go under. We saw this coming. Don't you see? We must prevent a war.

EXT. HANDSOME, SOLID CHURCH -- NIGHT

WILL, alone, enters the church.

INT. CHURCH -- NIGHT

WILL walks down the aisle. The church is almost empty.

A LARGE BLACK MAN in clerical garb sits on the platform.

WILL

Pastor Weddington! Good evening.

WEDDINGTON

(stonily)

Good evening, Mr. Percy.

WILL

Quite a crowd, isn't it?

WEDDINGTON

They will come. Trust me, they will come.

INT. CHURCH -- NIGHT

Half an hour later. The church is packed with silent but INTENSELY SURLY BLACK MEN. Hostility RADIATES.

WEDDINGTON rises, moves to the pulpit.

WEDDINGTON

I will read from Scripture.

(pause)

When the Lord saw how great was the wickedness of human beings on earth...

INT. CHURCH -- NIGHT

Ten minutes later. WEDDINGTON concludes:

WEDDINGTON

...and only Noah and those who were with him in the ark survived.

(pause)

Join me in a hymn. You *know* which one I mean.

Hymn characterization from *Lanterns on the Levee*, pp. 266-267:

"It was a hymn I had never heard, a droning, monotonous thing that swelled, as they repeated verse after verse, from an almost inaudible mutter to a pounding barbaric chant of menace. I could feel their excitement and hate mount to frenzy. In the quivering silence that followed the last defiant roar from those dusky throats and deep chests, the preacher turned to me....His words were gaunt:"

WEDDINGTON

I present Mr. Percy, chairman of the Red Cross.

WILL walks to the pulpit. His eyes GLEAM.

INT. PERCY PARLOR -- NIGHT

Later the same night. WILL sits with CAMILLE.

CAMILLE

You told them that *they* killed Gooden?

WILL

Trying to reason with them was out of the question, retreat would have been fatal, and so I had no choice but to attack. And yes, in a sense they did kill Gooden. If they had done their duty unloading the supplies that are keeping them alive-- there would have been no conscription! We wouldn't have had police desperately looking for labor.

CAMILLE

You told them they have blood on their hands.

WILL

Yes. Because they do.

CAMILLE

And you made them pray for forgiveness.

WILL

Yes. On their knees.

CAMILLE sighs.

CAMILLE

Will it prevent the race war?

WILL

I don't know. When I asked for volunteers to unload the next boat, only four men stood up. Three of them cripples.

(smiles)

I think I put the fear of God in them. They roared at me with their hymn, but I roared back. By the end we'd let out a lot of roaring. It must have done some good.

CAMILLE

I don't know how you survived.

WILL

Father will understand it.

(gazes at thin air)

He'll understand it very well.

ACT III

EXT. COUNTRY AIRFIELD NEAR GREENVILLE -- DAY

October, 1927: Bare woods surround a primitive facility. One runway, two flimsy hangars, a one-floor control building.

CAMILLE and MATTIE SUE sit on a bench outside the control building, bundled up: it's chilly. CAMILLE looks frail.

They watch a single-prop airplane perform DARING AERIAL STUNTS.

CAMILLE

Now, tell me. How is he, really?

MATTIE SUE

Not well. He goes into these--black moods.

CAMILLE

And you trust him--

(looks at pirouetting airplane)

To do that?

MATTIE SUE

It's scary, of course. But it seems to help.
It's like hunting. Roy needs the thrill.

(pause)

And LeRoy? You must miss him.

CAMILLE

He's so busy in Washington, helping Congress
with the recovery program. Since the flood
last summer, he has worked so hard.

(pause)

Far too hard. Yes, I miss him terribly.

MATTIE SUE

That flood took a great toll on both of you.

CAMILLE

And on Will. In some ways he suffered the most.

MATTIE SUE

He is very high-strung.

CAMILLE

It's more than that. You know--the brutality
charges. Oh, it was simply dreadful. The worst
of it was, Will couldn't stop the abuse.

MATTIE SUE

Those colored newspapers up north cast him
as the villain.

CAMILLE

Yes. No wonder he sailed for Japan. He
had to get away...

(puts a hand to her chest)

But I must say, it improved his standing
in the community--

(gazes skyward)

What on earth is Roy doing?

The airplane HURTLES EARTHWARD IN A NEAR-VERTICAL DIVE.

MATTIE SUE

(leaps to her feet)

Oh! Oh, no!

Airplane PULLS OUT OF THE DIVE, makes a graceful landing.

INT. HOSPITAL CORRIDOR -- DAY

MATTIE SUE confronts ROY, who wears aviation regalia: a leather jacket, goggles hoisted to his forehead, etc.

MATTIE SUE

You almost killed her!

ROY

Mattie Sue--please...

A DOCTOR approaches.

DOCTOR

Mrs. Percy is fine. Just a bit unnerved.

(frowns)

I recommend that she see a heart specialist.

INT. GREENVILLE TRAIN STATION -- DAY

Three days later. ERNEST watches a train pull in.

WILL exits the train. A PORTER follows with trunks.

ERNEST

Mistah Will! Welcome home!

INT. PERCY CAR -- DAY

ERNEST drives. WILL sits in the back.

ERNEST

Japan! What was it like, Mr. Will?

WILL

Oh, it was all right. I liked the gardens.

(pause)

It was good to get away.

ERNEST

Like always, huh, Mr. Will?

WILL

Yes. Like always.

(yawns)

Tell me. Do people still hate me?

ERNEST

That depends. Do you mean white folks.
Or black folks?

WILL

You know what I mean!

ERNEST

Mr. Will. I have to say somethin'. Miz Percy--she's not doing so good.

INT. CAMILLE'S BEDROOM -- DAY

CAMILLE, in bed, is deathly pale. WILL sits in a chair beside the bed, holding her hand. A DOCTOR stands behind WILL.

CAMILLE

I'm all right, Will. Don't fret. I'm feeling better.

WILL

Father's on his way home. He'll be here tomorrow, Mother.

WILL stands, motions DOCTOR to the hall. They walk down it.

DOCTOR

Your mother is not in mortal danger. But she must not be subjected to any shocks. Bed rest and calm are what she needs.

WILL and DOCTOR descend the staircase.

DOCTOR

Tranquillity, Will.

WILL

Yes, yes. Of course...

At the foot of the stairs, a LARGE BLACK WOMAN bustles through the hall. A BEAUTIFUL BLACK BOY, about 13, follows her.

WILL

Who are you?

LARGE BLACK WOMAN

Louisa. [the "i" pronounced "eye," the "a" pronounced "er"]

WILL

What brings you here, Louisa?

LOUISA

(indignant)

Me? I am Miz Percy's cook!

WILL

What happened to Minerva?

LOUISA shrugs.

WILL
I see. And the boy?

LOUISA
Dats my Fode.

WILL
I'm Will Percy.

LOUISA and FODE bob their heads.

WILL
(smiles)
Nice to meet you, Louisa. Hello, Fode.

FODE gives WILL a brilliant smile.

DAVID (butler) walks in, notes the smile, glances at WILL.

DAVID
(to LOUISA)
Come along now.

INT. PERCY DINING ROOM -- NIGHT

DAVID serves LEROY, WILL, ROY, and MATTIE SUE roast quail with wild rice, okra, grits, hot breads. LEROY is haggard.

WILL
The quail is delicious.

LEROY
(to ROY)
You bagged these birds, I'm sure.

ROY
Just the other day. Before my little air show.

MATTIE SUE
Disgraceful.

ROY
Mattie Sue...

LEROY
Camille's been having spells for a while now. We can't blame it on Roy's antics in the sky.
(pause)
So much to catch up on. Me in Washington, Will in Japan, a marvelous new cook. What

became of Minerva?

MATTIE SUE

I gathered from Camille that, with you and Will out of the house, she--something about last summer, the flood. Her angry relatives. Noise in the kitchen.

LEROY and WILL exchange glances.

WILL

Those people have no idea how much we've done for them over the years.

DAVID stiffens ever so slightly, leaves the room.

INT. PERCY KITCHEN -- NIGHT

DAVID enters. ERNEST, LOUISA, FODE are eating dinner.

LOUISA

How does Mr. Percy like my quail?

DAVID

The Senatah likes it fine.

(glances at ERNEST, then at FODE)

And Mr. Will--he seems mighty pleased.

(to FODE)

You gonna make yoself useful around here?

FODE nods. ERNEST stops eating, shoves aside his plate.

INT. PERCY VERANDAH -- DAY

CAPTION: 20 Months Later

Late June, 1929: Shrubs flower. Shirtless, FODE clips hedges.

Gaunt CAMILLE sits in a chair, reading. SOUND OF: Telephone ring. DAVID enters verandah.

DAVID

Mrs. Roy Percy on the phone, Mrs. Percy.

CAMILLE rises, walks stiffly to the hall, picks up phone.

INT. LARGE LIVING ROOM -- DAY -- CONTINUING

Beyond picture windows lies a spiffy garden trimmed with boxwoods. The room's décor is fashionable '20s Art Deco.

MATTIE SUE sits on a sofa, a phone to her ear.

MATTIE SUE

Camille--how are you?

CAMILLE (OC)

Mending tolerably well. And you? Roy?

MATTIE SUE

I'm all right, but Roy--I'm very worried, Camille. The crouching beast...

(suppresses a sob)

Roy needs his uncle. I know LeRoy is taking care of you, this is so hard to ask. But--

CAMILLE (OC)

LeRoy's at his office. I'll call him right away. And Mattie--don't you let Roy go flying.

EXT. SPRAWLING, RECENTLY BUILT SINGLE-STORY BRICK HOUSE -- DAY

The house is set on the fringe of the Birmingham Country Club's golf course. Two large wings project from a central section. The tiled roof is pitched, allowing for an attic.

A Packard pulls into the drive. ERNEST gets out, opens the rear door. LEROY gets out, limps with a cane to the door, raps the knocker.

A short, wiry BLACK MANSERVANT opens the door. LEROY nods at him.

LEROY

Hello, Lige.

LIGE

A'hm so glad you came, Senatah.

INT. ART DECO-STYLE LIBRARY -- DAY

MATTIE SUE and LEROY sit in armchairs, facing each other.

MATTIE SUE

It's nonstop drinking. But he can't sleep. When he does, the nightmares come. He yells. As if something is stalking him--

LEROY nods.

MATTIE SUE

And so, I can't sleep either. I'm a wreck.

LEROY

He's in bed?

MATTIE SUE nods. A SMALL BOY, age 7, runs into the room.

BOY

Uncle LeRoy!

LEROY

Hey there, Phin! I hear that your Daddy gave you some beautiful toy soldiers!

PHIN

Daddy needs you bad, Uncle LeRoy. He's real, real sad.

LEROY

I know, Phin. That's why I'm here. Where are Walker and LeRoy?

PHIN

They're at summer camp!

(pouts)

I'm too young to go.

LEROY scoops up PHIN, hugs him, sets him on his knee.

LEROY

Next year, you'll be big enough. OK?

MATTIE SUE

Phinizey. Your uncle and I need to talk.

PHIN bursts into tears, clutches LEROY around his neck. LEROY pats the boy's back.

LEROY

There, there. All will be well, little man. I'm here to fix everything up.

(to MATTIE SUE)

Let's go see him.

MATTIE SUE leads LEROY from the library and down a hallway.

INT. BEDROOM -- DAY

Daylight glows behind closed drapes. ROY lies on a large bed. LEROY sits on the edge of the bed.

ROY

(slurring)

I guess I'm a mess.

LEROY squeezes ROY's arm.

ROY

Thanks for coming, Uncle LeRoy.

LEROY

Roy. I'd do anything for you, Son.

INT. SPACIOUS ART DECO-STYLE FOYER -- DAY

MATTIE-SUE and LEROY walk into the foyer from the library/bedroom wing.

LEROY

Where does he keep his guns?

MATTIE SUE

Why?

LEROY

Remember where his father killed himself.
In the gun room of the old house.

MATTIE SUE leads LEROY to the opposite wing. They pass through a dining room, a pantry, and enter a "moderne" kitchen. MATTIE SUE opens a door in a corner. A staircase ascends to the attic.

INT. ATTIC ROOM -- DAY

LEROY and MATTIE SUE look at an array of football gear, tennis racquets, golf sets. LEROY focuses on a GUN RACK.

MATTIE SUE

Should we lock the door?

LEROY

No. No, I don't think that's a good idea.

(pause)

It would send him the wrong idea.

INT. BIRMINGHAM COUNTRY CLUB POKER ROOM -- NIGHT

ROY and LEROY sit at a table with four other MEN, all holding hands of cards. In the middle of the table, a PILE of chips. A WAITRESS sets down mint juleps, serves ROY a different drink.

ROY

(to WAITRESS)

Iced tea?

WAITRESS

Yes, sir. Just like the last one.

ROY
(to LEROY)

I don't know how the hell you hauled me
out here. But you did.

ROY puts his hand on the table. He trumps the other players.

ROY
Ha-haa!

ROY scoops over the pot, exultant. LEROY beams.

INT. ROY & MATTIE SUE'S DINING ROOM -- NIGHT

ROY, LEROY, MATTIE SUE, and PHIN sit at the table. Each place
setting has a large china soup bowl on a plate.

LIGE comes in bearing a covered soup tureen, sets it before
MATTIE SUE. LIGE removes tureen cover: steam rises.

MATTIE SUE
Your favorite, Roy. New Orleans gumbo!

LEROY raises his wine glass, smiles at ROY.

LEROY
To the master poker player!

MATTIE SUE, PHIN
(glasses raised to ROY)
To the master player!

ROY
To my wonderful family. Thank you.
(sips wine)
I wish Walker and Little LeRoy were here.
And all the rest of us!

PHIN
Me, too.
(wrinkles his nose at the tureen)
They could eat my okra!

ROY laughs UPROARIOUSLY--a bit oddly. LEROY, MATTIE SUE exchange
tentative smiles.

EXT. ROY AND MATTIE SUE'S HOUSE -- DAY

MATTIE SUE walks with LEROY to his Packard. ERNEST stands by.

MATTIE SUE
I think he's much improved.

LEROY

Vigilance, Mattie Sue. And prayer.

MATTIE SUE

Thank you so much.

They embrace. LEROY smiles, gets in the Packard, waves.

INT. PERCY PARLOR, GREENVILLE -- DAY

LEROY and CAMILLE take seats.

CAMILLE

Mattie Sue called. She's so relieved. And she seems almost happy!

(smiles)

She said that she finally feels it's safe for her to leave the house and do some serious shopping.

LEROY

Roy did seem to get better. I'll take him hunting this fall.

INT. DARK ROOM -- DAY [July 9, 1929]

A door creaks open, creating a rectangle of light. Framed in the rectangle: ROY.

He flips a light switch. Tennis racquets, football gear, golf bags appear.

And the GUN RACK.

Methodically, Roy undresses, stripping to his underwear.

ROY takes a shotgun from the rack. He loads it.

GRIMACING, he puts the muzzle under his jaw.

He fingers the trigger: BLAM.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. ATTIC STAIRWELL -- DAY

PHIN SCRAMBLES up the stairwell, his face TWISTED with panic. MAID's voice echoes up from behind him:

MAID (OC)

Mastah Phinizy! Don't you go up there!

PHIN runs to the door of the athletic equipment room, stops dead in his tracks. PHIN POV:

Near-naked ROY lies on the floor, his jaw, face, forehead BLOWN OFF. Blood DRIPS from GOLF CLUBS. A gob of brains SPLATS.

INT. ROY AND MATTIE SUE'S HOUSE -- VARIOUS ROOMS -- DAY

PHIN runs through the house, SCREAMING:

PHIN

Nooo! Nooo! Nooo!

MAID chases PHIN, cannot catch him.

EXT. DOWNTOWN BIRMINGHAM -- DAY

MATTIE SUE and a FEMALE FRIEND emerge from a chic clothing store carrying shopping bags.

A NEWSBOY down the street hawks a late edition:

NEWSBOY

Leading Lawyer Commits Suicide! Leading
Lawyer Commits Suicide!

MATTIE SUE pales. She turns to her FRIEND.

MATTIE SUE

It's Roy.

INT. HOTEL DINING ROOM, FLORENCE, ITALY -- NIGHT

WILL and NORMAN DOUGLAS dine with two ATTRACTIVE YOUNG MEN. They are progressing languidly through the antipasto course.

DOUGLAS

When do you leave for Taormina, Will?

WILL looks at ATTRACTIVE YOUNG MAN #1.

WILL

It depends on Giancarlo. Gianni, would
you like to go to Sicily?

GIANCARLO thoughtfully chews *prosciutto con melone*. A HOTEL CLERK approaches bearing a silver tray. On the tray, an envelope.

HOTEL CLERK

Telegrafico, Signore Percy.

WILL opens the telegraph, scans it. He grimaces.

WILL

My God!

WILL REMEMBERS an event of many years before:

EXT. PERCY GRAVEYARD PLOT -- DAY

FAMILY and FRIENDS are gathered around an open grave. A PRIEST says words.

LEROY and CAMILLE can barely stand. JOHN PARKER approaches to sympathize. LEROY waves him off.

PARKER turns, sees 16-YEAR-OLD WILL standing a few feet away, a hand on MUR's gravestone. WILL is wretched, nauseous.

WILL LOOKS UP, SEES PARKER STARING AT HIM, HEARS:

PARKER

My God. It's come to this.

INT. HOTEL DINING ROOM, FLORENCE, ITALY -- NIGHT

DOUGLAS

Will, what on earth?

WILL

(snaps out of the flashback)

My cousin Roy. He shot himself. A tragedy. He was so much more than a cousin.

DOUGLAS

How much more?

WILL

Almost a son to my father. He replaced our own lost LeRoy Jr.

(shudders)

I thought it would come to this.

GIANCARLO

Will--what?

WILL

I will become the head of the family.

A moment of silence. GIANCARLO hides a smile.

DOUGLAS

Is that so bad?

WILL

You don't know the Delta.

DOUGLAS

Ah! Yes. That's true. I imagine that it's--
dreadful. But then, so is England. Will, my
dear. Like so many of us, you must become an
expatriate. You've got the money.

WILL

You don't understand.

(stares at something invisible)

I am talking about my family.

INT. MATTIE SUE'S HOUSE -- DAY

Funereal music plays. The reception rooms are packed with the
BUSINESS ELITE of Birmingham. In the living room, a PASTOR faces
the family, seated on sofas: a FORMIDABLE ELDERLY WOMAN, MATTIE
SUE, PHIN and his TWO BROTHERS (WALKER, 13, and YOUNG LEROY, 12),
LEROY, and CAMILLE. LEROY and Camille look frail.

MATTIE SUE wears elaborate JET-BLACK WIDOW'S WEEDS.

INT. MATTIE SUE'S DINING ROOM -- DAY

An hour later. FORMIDABLE ELDERLY WOMAN oversees the arrangement
of various dishes that family friends have brought to the post-
funeral reception: tomato aspic, pickled shrimp, fried chicken,
stuffed eggs, beaten biscuits, cakes, cookies. On a sideboard, an
array of liquor. CAMILLE approaches.

CAMILLE

(to FORMIDABLE ELDERLY WOMAN)

Nellie, where is Mattie Sue?

NELLIE

My grieving daughter? I don't know and I
am fit to be tied.

At the other end of the dining room, a MILD FUROR:

MATTIE SUE enters, widow's weeds SHUCKED: She wears a BRIGHT-RED
DRESS.

NELLIE and CAMILLE stare, AGHAST.

CAMILLE

(whisper to NELLIE)

What is she thinking?

NELLIE

(whisper to CAMILLE)

She's out of her mind.

(chokes up)

And she has been for a long, long time.

CAMILLE

What can you mean?

Fiercely, NELLIE shakes her head.

INT. PERCY BEDROOM SUITE, GREENVILLE -- NIGHT

LEROY and CAMILLE prepare for bed. Their movements are feeble: both have AGED CONSIDERABLY, almost overnight.

LEROY

Roy gone, like his father. Mattie Sue in a red dress. What are we coming to, Cam?

CAMILLE

What will Mattie Sue do?

LEROY

I advised her to stay in Birmingham, so the boys don't have to change schools. But she wants to flee to her mother's in Athens.

(sits on bed)

Honey. I feel so old.

CAMILLE sits beside LEROY.

CAMILLE

Nellie said something--about Mattie Sue. That she's crazy. Has been for a while.

LEROY

The red dress. What about it?

CAMILLE

I don't know. Nellie wouldn't say.

(puts a hand to her chest)

This is killing us, LeRoy.

They embrace, shuddering. They weep.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM -- DAY [October, 1929]

WILL enters the room. CAMILLE lies in the bed, eyes closed, her face ashen. LEROY sits bedside, drooping, his face ashen.

WILL

Father.

LEROY nods. CAMILLE'S eyelashes flutter. She smiles faintly. WILL kisses her on her forehead.

EXT. PERCY PLOT, GREENVILLE CEMETERY -- DAY

Percy family and friends bury CAMILLE. LEROY totters. WILL steadies him.

INT. PERCY LIBRARY -- DAY

WILL looks at the front page of the *Greenville Democrat-Times*: headline: CU:

October 24, 1929
CRASH!
Wall Street Reels

WILL looks across the room. LEROY dozes in his desk chair.

WILL

Father?

LEROY continues to doze. WILL quietly exits, with newspaper.

EXT. GOLF COURSE -- DAY

November, 1929. WILL makes a putt on a green. He turns to LEROY. LEROY stares blankly into the distance.

WILL

Father?

LEROY continues to stare blankly.

EXT. HOSPITAL -- NIGHT

Sign: "Memphis Baptist Hospital." A Christmas tree glows.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM -- NIGHT

LEROY, cheeks sunken, eyes closed, lies in the bed. WILL sits in a chair. A miniature Christmas tree pathetically blinks.

EXT. MEMPHIS PARK -- NIGHT

SOUND OF: A group of PEOPLE singing "Silent Night."

WILL sits on a bench, BITTERLY WEEPING.

CAROLERS walk by, see WILL. Song dies in their throats.

CAROLER

Sir-- Sir, can we help you?

WILL heaves, wipes his face.

WILL

No. I am beyond all help.

CAROLER

God bless you, sir.

WILL nods, bleakly grateful.

INT. APARTMENT LIVING ROOM -- NIGHT

Early January, 1930. A tastefully furnished room. Beyond windows, the Manhattan skyline GLITTERS. WILL sits with HUGER JERVEY (former Sewanee professor), LINDLEY HUBBEL (NYC friend), and another MAN (GERSTLE MACK). They sip martinis.

WILL

After the funeral, I didn't know what to do. That big house. Empty. Ghostly.

HUGER

Is staying in Greenville still the plan?

WILL

Yes. Oddly enough, I haven't changed my mind.

HUGER

You have two elderly aunts in Greenville, and some younger cousins. I guess that makes you--the patriarch?

WILL

Some patriarch. A patriarch presides. I preside over a bunch of tombstones! Yes, I have cousins. Three of them are little boys with an unstable mother, living in Athens. The other three grew up in Memphis, and they also have a questionable mother-- Uncle Willie took up with her when she was 15!

HUGER

Willie gave her an elegant education before they married. In TarrytownZ

WILL

Yes. Elegant enough. And she sent her sons to Stanford.

(waves dismissively)

But I preside over nothing. The family is a shambles. Starting with limp-wristed me.

HUGER

I've met Roy's widow, Mattie Sue. She's pretty. And she's charming. You say she has three boys.

WILL nods.

HUGER

Maybe they should move in with you. It'll be lonely in that house. You'll be at the mercy of those servants--who of course know *all* of your foibles.

WILL smiles.

HUGER

And *also*...

(a calculating glance at WILL)

It wouldn't hurt to have a household. Image-wise. A lovely lady presiding. It might dampen "bachelor" talk.

WILL shrugs.

GERSTLE

Why don't you move here to New York?

WILL

And do what? Practice law? The economy's in a nose dive. Not exactly the best time to look for work.

LINDLEY

You could do your famous strip act at the Apollo.

They all giggle.

WILL

I'd faint in coils.

GERSTLE

Who's ready for another martini?

LINDLEY

(hands on hips)

Wait a second, girls. Are we going out tonight?

HUGER

Gerstle, count me in for another martini. Especially if we're going out.

INT. LOBBY, APOLLO THEATER -- NIGHT

A STYLISH CROWD, mostly black, fills the lobby. WILL, LINDLEY, HUGER, and GERSTLE wait for drinks at the bar. They stick out a bit but are relaxed. A passing MAN appraises them.

LINDLEY

Are there places like this in Memphis?

WILL

In New Orleans, but not quite like this. Of course, if Huey Long takes Louisiana, all kinds of interesting establishments might spring up.

LINDLEY

Oh, look--

(indicates a SUAVELY HANDSOME YOUNG BLACK MAN)

That's Langston Hughes.

WILL

No kidding. I'd love to meet him!

HUGER and GERSTLE turn from bar with drinks. They see HUGHES.

GERSTLE

He's one of us, you know. But he's even more discreet than we are. You'd never see him at the Mount Morris baths.

LINDLEY

Introduce yourself, Will.

LINDLEY, HUGER, GERSTLE POV: They watch WILL cross the room and engage HUGHES in conversation. HUGHES smiles; they shake hands.

LINDLEY

Will moves fast.

HUGER

They're poets. Hughes of course knows who Will is. Maybe Will can help him, include him in that series at Yale.

LINDLEY, HUGER, GERSTLE move to a table, take seats. At an adjoining table FIVE MEN, two black and three white, laugh gaily.

LINDLEY

It's ladies' night.

GERSTLE

It almost makes me nervous.

LINDLEY

Why?

GERSTLE

It invites a crackdown.

WILL joins them at the table.

WILL

Hughes is charming. We're having lunch tomorrow.

HUGER

Invite him to speak in Greenville. See what the neighbors think.

LINDLEY

That would invite a crackdown.

WILL

What are you talking about?

GERSTLE

I was just going to mention some friends in Berlin enjoying the huge homo party there, all the clubs, baths, bordellos. But with the Crash, politics is moving toward extremism. Either the Communists or the Nazis will take over. I doubt that either would be tolerant of the likes of us.

LINDLEY

Don't forget that years ago Herr Hitler, ne Schickelgruber, had that butch queen Rohm as his best friend. And that Hitler had been a painter in Bohemia and Vienna.

WILL

I wouldn't count on any of that for protection. Like Jews we make excellent scapegoats. In Germany, I fear for both

the queers and the Jews.

(gestures at the flamboyant crowd)

So all of this--it's Weimar, on the eve
of destruction? Are we surrounded by
secret police, taking down names?

HUGER

You should know, Will.

WILL smiles.

WILL

What do you mean?

HUGER

You're awfully good at spotting secret
police.

WILL

I am?

HUGER

Yes. In Greenville.

WILL

Oh, you mean the Klan. Well, we got rid
of them. I suppose that the populations
of all small towns collectively form a
kind of secret police. A vice squad.
Everybody spies on everyone else.

LINDLEY

I'd be arrested on arrival.

They laugh.

WILL

Huger, I've been thinking about Mattie
Sue and her boys. But not in terms of
camouflage. The vice squad already has
has my number. And I simply don't care.

LINDLEY

My God, it must be feudal down there.

WILL

I think I've figured it out. You do
exactly what you want to do, in my case
poetry and flowers and arias blasting on
the Capehart, and behave as if it's the
most ordinary thing the world. Because,

of course, it is.

LINDLEY

And nobody says anything?

WILL

Of course they do! They gossip like mad!
But not in public.

(smiles at HUGER)

And I think I'm going to give them
another reason to gossip. Huger, you've
read my mind. I'm going to take in
Mattie Sue and her kids.

HUGER

But not for camouflage.

WILL

Because it's the right thing to do.
The ordinary thing to do.

LINDLEY

Like poetry, flowers, arias.

WILL

Yes!

GERSTLE

How will the boys react to that?

WILL

I don't know. But I intend to give them
a better education than anything availa-
ble in Athens, Georgia.

HUGER

It's a new calling.

WILL

It's my duty to the family. To the Delta!

THE END