

LAST LAUGH

FICTION

Charles Butler

Get on now nag, let's getta going," Everett yelled, as he snapped the riding crop overhead. He adjusted the brim on his felted broad brim, beaver skin hat.

"You want some of this here shine. I just finished dripping this batch out before the last full moon," Everett exclaimed. "Whoo weee, this will make your soldier stand at attention!" Everett was missing three fingers from a distilling accident a few years earlier, where an explosion almost claimed his entire hand.

"Yea, pass the hooch," said his brother Vernon.

Vernon grabbed the flask and took a fast swig before he screwed the lid back on with a grimace from the burn that moved into his gut. A black raven flew from the road and cawed into the tree line out of sight. The familiar willow, not far from the plantation, appeared into view as they rounded the bend. Elegantly arched branches were undulating in the soft summer breeze. The barks of the hounds could now be heard with more intensity. The sun rested high in the Southern sky; the air was thick enough to slice. He removed a pouch of loose tobacco and his cherrywood churchwarden pipe.

"The beard and the smelly one will be too hard to kill," a man whispered in Creole from the back of the wagon.

"Put a cork in it, hamper down back there!" Vernon barked. "This here's Merica; you boys better get used to speaking Merican."

"You didn't happen to learn any French from that Jezebel you've been sticking it to?"

“I can barely speak English, what do you think I’m gonna know some God damn French for? I know about French toast and French fries, that’s about it,” Everett laughed.

“Ha-ha, you sure are dumb. We’re just about here now,” said Vernon seeing the acreage of cotton fields come into focus.

White tufts dotted the field of green and brown all the way to the far tree line. Men in unbleached linen shirts and straw hats slouched over, picking and filling large woven baskets. Several women also filled the ranks wearing cotton dresses and sunbonnets. Some walked with the large baskets through the rows of cotton in the direction of the mansion. Two white men stood on guard; one was armed with a rifle, the other held the leash of a large hound. Everett spit a large wad of dip on the road and a string of phlegm bungee corded back from his bottom lip and down his detachable bosom.

“Keep on now! Get along now nag,” he recited, snapping his whip.

Everett maneuvered the reins to the left with a slight jerk as the old Clydesdale begrudgingly complied. The horse loudly whinnied to express its dissatisfaction at once again being forced to follow a direction.

Everett’s brother Vernon smoked his pipe and sipped the flask of hooch. Vernon’s long lumberjack beard was soaked with moonshine as he carelessly traded between drags on the pipe and sips of the shine. A long punt shotgun laid across his lap, as he peered back at his human cargo in disdain.

In the flatbed of the horse carriage, two shirtless young men sat chained at the wrists and feet to one another. They wore oatmeal-colored culottes of cotton bazin. An older woman who was left unchained leaned against some barrels and burlap sacks of grain. She wore a one-piece frock of coarse Lowell cloth. The two men hunched over, gazed apprehensively trying to identify their surroundings. The woman sat poised in prayer, eyes closed, and she clutched a charm.

She was a large, older, grey-haired woman. The lines on her face told the story of her long, hard life. She had permanent furrows on her forehead and the flesh drooped slightly from her cheekbones. Her eyes were a cloudy blue from cataracts. She was quite muscular for her age from years of cane cutting in Haiti and spoke a fairly comprehensible form of patois. Almost left unpurchased at the auction’s conclusion, she had been sold practically for pennies, almost complimentary. Vernon believed she’d serve well with house chores and rearing the youngins.

Turning onto the long dirt driveway of the Dixie Estate, seven-foot-tall rows of Oak tree saplings stood in queues. The plantation’s owner hoped

to one day cultivate a green tunnel archway that would allow cool air to travel up to the house from the river opposite the main road. Vernon and Everett beamed with contentment, certain that the owner of the plantation, Bradley Dixie, would be happy with their purchases at the auction today. Sick of drinking moonshine day in and day out, they also looked forward to the thirst-quenching sip of some real Southern whiskey, maybe a hot bath and a hot meal from the kitchen, and better yet, a night out with one of the fair-skinned house servant girls.

Dixie Mansion, a French Colonial design with Spanish influences, was most prominently displayed. Intentional in its size and position on the property, a two-story Classical revival columned portico. Greek pillars adorned the front face, covered porches, a grand staircase in the entry, a gabled roof, and a ballroom. White all over except for the black shutters. The crow's nest on the roof allowed Dixie a vantage point of nearly all the happenings on his land. He waited at the large mahogany front door to get a firsthand look at his purchases.

He wore a black fedora and sported a handlebar mustache with a curtain beard. He was still quite a younger man, attestable to the fact his thick head of auburn hair showed no signs of graying. He had his hair combed to the left with a part that he constantly swiped into position behind one ear. He had piercing blue eyes and a nefarious smile that revealed his yellow cigarette-stained teeth. He wore a patch navy sports coat, white oxford popover; red, navy, and ivory wool flannel tie, a black alligator belt, gray wool herringbone trousers, and black cap-toe monk strap shoes. He smoked a long-stemmed cigarette and held a brass cane with a small alligator head for a handle.

"What's your name boy?" asked Dixie as he handled one by the jaw, examining his teeth. He poked, pinched, and fondled him; examining his body for defects that might affect productivity and reproduction.

"Moises," said the red-headed male.

Vernon pointed to the male with the afro, "Tell the boss your name boy?"

"Bacchus," said the other man.

Before he could even ask the question, the woman lifted her head, making eye contact, and stated "I am called Bilhah."

Dixie nodded as he scanned his human cargo in satisfaction and motioned to some servants to wait for his needs. Two young women scurried over with their heads buried to the ground, hands folded neatly at their laps.

“I would have these men and the woman bathed and clothed in new linens. Have them fed and well-rested. I expect them able and ready for duty in two days' time. If they are not prepared, I will hold both of you personally responsible and you will spend one week in the box,” said Dixie.

One of the girls lifted her head, she was toffee-toned in complexion with wavy long brown hair that unevenly protruded from her white linen headwrap. She had lazy almond-shaped amber-colored eyes. She moved immediately towards Bilhah, gently propping her onto her shoulder while guiding her toward her cabin. Though she was a house servant, she was permitted in a cabin in the slave quarters because she provided medical attention to the slaves also.

The second slave girl, who reacted a second too slowly, ambled towards the two men, motioning them to follow her towards the horse stables. They drug their feet as they walked, their arms drooped at their sides. They desperately needed care and attention, for they had not bathed in months and desperately needed to be cleaned. The girl had not anticipated having to scrub their naked bodies, as she was still a young woman and had not been given over to a man.

Bilhah received a full sponge bath with boiled water poured into a large wooden slatted tub. The young woman washed and combed out her hair, which had not received attention in months. She scrubbed her in bath water blended with lavender, rose, chamomile, peppermint, ginger, jasmine, and fir needles. Bilhah's scaly armor began to reveal her beautiful cacao-colored skin. The girl massaged her temples, the palms of her hands, and the soles of her feet. The girl was no medicine woman, but she had definitely learned some effective elder herbal secrets and potions.

“Oh, my child, I have not felt hands touch my skin with such love in so many years. You fill my heart with joy. What is the name of the angel sent into my life,” asked Bilhah with tears in her eyes.

“My name is Paloma,” the girl replied. “I apologize, ma’am, I am just doing my job... I didn’t mean to make you go on and cry now,” said Paloma.

“Child, these here is tears of joy, you don’t even worry, I’m just thankful for your acquaintance, that’s all,” said Bilhah.

“It’s the least I’ze can do, Dixie Land is not a nice place ma’am. You gon’ see. These white folks ain’t like some other plantations that treat the slaves real nice. You got to watch out for them Booshay brothers, they are always up to no good, looking to make times hard and cause trouble for everyone. You remember what I say now,” said Paloma. “We gon share the

same cabin, so we can take care of one another. If you are hungry, I can feed you, I got a secret garden I been tending to, so if you needs extra food, which you will, I can feed you. “

“Thank you, child. You don’t know how much the Lord has blessed me by placing you in my life.”

Bilhah's eyes lit up. She clasped the charm that was tied around her neck, yanking it off. She cracked the shell in her palms, revealing several small multi-colored seeds.

“Child, put these into the soil. These plants are from the land of our parents. They contain all the lost secrets of our people. When the plants have ripened, you come for me and I will return this favor,” said Bilhah with a hand grasping Paloma’s wrist.

Paloma turned the latch and unfastened the wood plank door. Bilhah sat crouched at the fire where she boiled a pot of tea. She turned and smiled at Paloma warmly. The pair had grown to care for one another, they lightened each other’s burdens, and made the days seem short together with laughter.

“Have some tea, my dear,” said Bilhah.

“Well, thank ya ma’am,” Paloma replied.

“You look like something is pressing you child, go on now and spill the beans,” Bilhah remarked.

“I need a favor please Bilhah and you mustn’t ask questions,” Paloma insisted.

“What do you need?” asked Bilhah.

“I need to get pregnant,” said Paloma. Bilhah’s eyebrows raised in surprise. She stood silent just staring at Paloma.

“Listen, Dixie needs help with his pecker, it just stays small like a little mouse, and it don’t work. He is always angry and if I can help him with his thing, I can fix the problem; and if he puts his child inside of me, it will make my days a little bit easier ma’am. Mrs. Dixie’s womb is barren and she can’t satisfy his desires. Plus, I wants to be a mother, but not just some slave breeder like a horse. I want a good offspring.”

“Wow, this is a whole lot you askin child. But you done right by me when you didn’t know me from a hole in the wall, so I’m not gon ask no

questions and I'ma do you this favor. But you playing with dark magic child. Make sure this what you want, cuz one day you gon have to give back fo it."

"Thank you, ma'am, and I'ze understands, but this really gon change my life, just wait and see," said Paloma.

Paloma lay breathing frantically, growing more concerned after her water had broken. Sweat beaded on her brow as her labor contractions began to pulse at five-minute intervals. The midwife on the scene became worried when the baby's feet crowned first, showing signs of a breeched birth. Mr. Dixie paced at the doorway with clear concern expressed on his face. The midwife approached Mr. Dixie to report an update.

"Mr. Dixie, the baby is coming feet first, I'm gonna have to slice her open to save the baby," said the doula.

"What are you saying, Agnes? Are you trying to tell me my Paloma must die?" he responded frantically.

"I am sorry Mr. Dixie, there's is no other way. I can't save her and the baby," Agnes responded.

"If she dies Agnes, then you die too! So, get back in there and save her now. I don't care what you have to do, just do it!" Dixie was growing frantic and unraveled with worry. His wife, Mrs. Bernadette Dixie, rubbed his shoulders trying to ease his tensions. She had not been able to provide him with the offspring he had begun to desire from her.

"Don't touch me, woman, can't you see I'm working? I can't lose my best breeding stock, I don't have time for this right now," said Dixie pulling away to continue pacing the hall. Agnes called for April, another one of the house servant girls always on call.

"Go get the old witch from the field. I'm sure she knows a thing or two about these things. Hurry on now, go!" said Agnes.

"Who, Bilhah?" asked April. "Are you sure Ms. Agnes you don't want to have Mr. Dixie send a rider to the doctor in town?"

"We don't have time for that April, and them doctors don't treat black folks. They only treat real people, white people, not niggers," said Agnes. Bilhah was interrupted by April while humming a hymn in the field where she was busy picking cotton. The servant girl updated her on the situation, instructing her to return to the big house immediately. Bilhah told the young

girl that she would meet her at the house in five minutes, needing time to gather some herbs and ingredients for her potions.

Bilhah quickly boiled up a concoction consisting of a baby mouse, human teeth and bones, rice wine, and roots from a plant near the swamplands that smelled like a skunk. The smell of the steam was putrid and sour as the contents boiled into a stew. The smell was a gag reflex-inducing concoction that left a mucus taste on the tongue. Straining the soup through cheesecloth, she set the tea in an aluminum tin cup.

Arriving on the scene, she served the tincture to Paloma. Paloma immediately spit it onto the floor, almost vomiting, but Bilhah held her mouth and insisted she swallow the serum. She placed a warm rag on her forehead and gently held her hand. Paloma's pain seemed to immediately reside and her tense exhausted body finally relaxed for the first time in three hours. With one hand on Paloma's stomach and one hand carefully inserted into her vagina, she slowly maneuvered the baby into the correct position, making sure the umbilical cord did not wrap around the baby's neck.

Almost an hour or two after the ordeal had begun, with a light smack on the buttocks, Paloma's seven pounds six-ounce son was born. Escaping almost certain death, Paloma's eyes said thank you without saying a word. Bilhah's promotion to the big house by Mr. Dixie, for saving Paloma and the baby, did not go unnoticed. She would be promoted to the new midwife and would also work in the kitchen from now on. The birth also did not escape the eyes of Mrs. Dixie whose eyes had not lifted off the half-white child. The child told the whole story of infidelity, of her marriage vows broken, and of her dignity insulted. Her enraged gaze remained fixed on Paloma and the newborn with certain evil intent interpreted.

She had named him Virgil. A week later, while Paloma was nursing her babe, Vernon Booshay entered unannounced and took the child from her arms while nursing him. Enraged with jealousy, Mrs. Dixie insisted the mother and child be sold off. Mr. Dixie's wife had made threats and attempts at murdering the child, was caught one night breaking into Paloma's room with a knife, waking the entire house with the screams and struggle that ensued. After the matter became a fixation and a constant source of argument, Mr. Dixie refused to part with Paloma and had the child sold off for a thousand dollars.

The terror did not end there for Paloma who now became the object of Mrs. Dixie's torment. Mr. Dixie had taken a new interest in April, who had just turned thirteen, and no longer provided a buffer for Paloma. Paloma had never worked a day outside of the big house since birth. Like her mother

before her, she was trained in the art of Southern bourgeoisie etiquette of cooking and cleaning. Mrs. Dixie had her removed to the fields, picking cotton from sun up to sundown. Her delicate fingertips had now become rough and sore with cuts and wounds from her arduous task. Her soft, supple skin had become dry and rough like leather. Her dimpled ear-to-ear smile had become a creased frown with glabella lines. Her soft, full, long, wavy hair became coarse and stiff. Though still very beautiful, stress was winning the battle over youth in this contest.

She was verbally abused, physically abused, and she was starved. Vernon, with Mrs. Dixie's sponsorship, began paying uninvited nightly visits to her. Bilhah who slept in an adjacent shack was forced to hear her tortured countless nights a week. Bilhah found her swinging from the beams of her shack tied with a bed sheet one morning. Paloma would no longer willingly endure a life so cruel. She was buried in a shallow unmarked grave.

Bilhah sat on the floor of Paloma's cabin, smudging the air with sage while speaking in Igbo. Only a single handmade slipper remained on the floor of the cabin, along with a bed, a small table, and a chair. She made a small shrine memorial and prayed for her soul, Paloma's soul. She had felt such deep sorrow for the loss, she decided this would be a way to pay her final respects to her ally. She burned a small burlap figurine in a dish, amongst some wildflower petals, and chanted some words of prayer. Bilhah sat meditating in the space until she felt that Paloma's spirit was able to cross over from purgatory. She prayed over the life of the parentless baby and that he was in hands that loved and cared for him in whatever capacity was possible.

Vernon and Everett sat in the barn on a haystack sharing some hooch while trading stories. Everett was piss-drunk laid back, barely conscious. Vernon sat thinking about Paloma and trying to figure out who his next victim potentially could be. The barn's double doors were slightly ajar, allowing a faint cool summer breeze to blow through.

"I'll be back Everett, don't pass out on me yet. I'm gonna drain the lizard."

Stepping outside, around the side of the barn, Vernon pulled his pants down and took a leak. He glanced towards Paloma's old cabin, seeing a low candle flame flickering. Having emptied his bladder, he pulled his pants up and went to investigate the light. He unhinged the latch and swung open the wood plank door, letting a cold draft escape the room, which blew out all of the small candles. The coals in the dish amongst the flowers continued to burn low. Vernon kicked over the shrine and stepped on the

smoking wicks, mashing the flower petals onto the planked floor. He glanced at the primitive box bed he had just begun getting used to sleeping in. The cabin creaked and moaned. A gust of wind rattled the opened door against its frame. A barred owl hooted, spooking Vernon momentarily.

“Fuck this shit, I’m going back to the barn,” Vernon mumbled as he spun around to exit the cabin. He took a swig of the hooch and removed his cherrywood pipe. He struggled to light a match to ignite the ball of tobacco. Suddenly, the wind whispered his name as the shadows of the room moved without light. “I not scared of no nigger ghost,” he yelled. He finally ignited the match and pulled the flame into the leaves of the pipe’s wooden bowl. He inhaled too deeply, coughing back into the pipe stem, causing embers to fly out. The wind grabbed one of the hot coals and steered it back onto Vernon’s beard. Soaked in moonshine, his beard immediately went up in flames and climbed his chin straps to the crown of his head. Vernon screamed in agony as his face began to boil and slowly drip from his skull. He crashed to the floor and slowly he surrendered to his flesh being cooked like pig roast. By the time Everett woke up and noticed his brother was gone, the cabin had burned to the ground, cremating his entire corpse.

“Bilhah, I must simply request you enlighten me as to the ingredients in your bread pudding. I swear in all my days I have never tasted something so rich and decadent. It is simply to die for,” said Mrs. Dixie.

“Ma’am I hardly reckon I could even go about tryna explain to you. I don’t know how to read or write, so I can’t record the recipe. I don’t know how to count, so I can’t tell you the measurements. I just follow the recipe my mammy showed me, I taste, I smell, I touch, and I listen to the food Ma’am. If you tried to do what I say, I reckon it still might not be the same thing,” Bilhah responded. “And if I shows you how to make it, you won’t need me no more, now will you?”

“You’ve made a very fine point Bilhah; I cannot argue against it. I am very happy to have you as my midwife. I recall how well you handled that awful girl Paloma and I most certainly would rather have you by my side than some fancy white doctor from in town, with all his fancy stuff and his pills. No thank you, my baby will only have the best.”

That night, as Bilhah sat sewing a small burlap doll, the dim lights of her room fluttered and the shadows stirred, even from angles the candle did not create. The wind whispered her name. Bilhah’s eyes were already aged and had lost clear focus from cataracts, but she knew who had arrived. She

calmed her breathing and lowered her heart rate, and entered into meditation, inviting the spirit into her presence. The whites of her eyes appeared as the retina rolled up into her head.

“Paloma, you must rest, this world is no longer your own. Let Virgil and this life go,” she whispered. Bilhah watched the shadows of a man and a boy move across the room before they dissipated back into the darkness.

“Bring them to me,” the wind whispered, “so that I may sleep. Bring them to me.”

Bilhah completed sewing her doll, blew out the candle, and rolled over to sleep.

On a sunny morning like many others, Bilhah prepared a pot of coffee and breakfast for the Dixies: fresh fruits, eggs, pastries, pancakes, oysters, boiled chicken, and beef steaks. Mrs. Dixie sat on the open porch reading a book while fanning herself lightly. Bilhah poured Mrs. Dixie a cup of coffee, adding warm milk and two cubes of sugar. Placing it on a saucer, she dipped her pinky finger into the coffee before continuing to stir it.

“Ma’am if you would have me do so, I can go fetch Mr. Dixie to join you for breakfast,” Bilhah said.

“Bradley is out in the swamps hunting hogs with some of the farm hands, so that won’t be necessary. You may return to happenings of your own desire, I can fetch for the new servant girl if I should need something,” said Mrs. Dixie.

Mrs. Dixie sat enjoying her book, nibbling and sipping intermittently. The wind picked up, swishing through the leaves of the trees, flipping a page in her book. Her eyes gravitated to the page it skipped, to the name Virgil, which concluded the chapter's paragraph. Her eyes grew blurred, she suddenly felt a headache and dizziness set in. Beginning to perspire, she fanned herself more furiously. She felt a sharp pain growing in her stomach that escalated into her falling to her knees and folding over. She vomited blood and noticed a puddle of blood growing near her knees. The stain spread out, staining the fabric of her white dress. She tried to yell for Bilhah, but the pain was too excruciating. She toppled over moaning, clutching her swollen belly. She would survive, and Bilhah shouldered her care once she found her, but she ended up losing the baby.

Bilhah had momentarily left as Mrs. Dixie fell sick, having returned briefly to her room. She went to her room and recovered the burlap doll she

had completed sewing. The doll had a black fedora, a handlebar mustache, and a curtain beard. She stabbed it in the crotch with a needle. Blood rose from the burlap doll's incision in the groin region. She stabbed it again through the chest and it also leaked blood from this puncture wound. She left the needle in the chest, returned it to a secure location and returned to Mrs. Dixie.

Bilhah was able to put a pause to her bleeding, as the dead fetus remained in her stomach. Loud yells and commotion suddenly erupted from outside. Everett was galloping up the driveway screaming incomprehensibly.

“Mr. Dixie had a horsing accident. He’s hurt real bad. We was tracking these hogs when the wind started blowing and we thought we heard some voices over the ridge. Mr. Dixie’s horse got to rearing up when we started firing on them hogs, next thing you know, Mr. Dixie got thrown for his horse there and landed on top of some cypress knees. One punched him clear threw the groin, the other one ran him through the back to the chest. I don’t think he is gonna make it, he’s bleeding out pretty bad.”

Bilhah boiled up a tincture to ease his final moments. He bled out when they decided to lift him from the spiky post. Before the light faded from his eyes, he mumbled “Palom...”