



BY JOHN HERSEY

For a Mississippi Negro
the price of admission
to the ballot box runs high—
it may even be

A LIFE FOR A VOTE

To protect the men and women of this story from reprisals, most names and geographic locations have been changed. The events described are literal fact.

One April morning last year 17 Negroes, country people, crossed the courthouse square in Athens, Miss., footing stiffly along, conscious of eyes on them, and approached the north door of the county seat, a brooding building of dark red brick with spiked turrets at its corners and a golden-domed cupola with a four-faced clock, which said it was half-past nine. These were cotton-and-soybean farmers from the vicinity of Noonday, 13 men and four women.

Out in front were Randoman Tort, known to Negroes in the county as "a broad-speaking man"—or, as the local red-necks would vehemently put it, a right uppity nigger—and Reverend O. O. Burring, with a straight, cautious carriage, and taciturn Albert Parrisot, who belonged to the N.A.A.C.P., and bear-bodied James Drake, president of the P.T.A. at the Noonday rural school near where the 17 lived. Empria Meeks had her two-year-old, Erma Jean, in her arms, because all her other 11 children were in school or gone, and there was no one to leave the girl with. Mrs. Tulip Caesar, a settled-aged lady, was with the group, and Meshak Lewis, and Billy Head and Elzoda Lee.

And with them, among the others, was Varsell Pleas, a solidly built 44-year-old farmer, a rather aloof man who walked with his head canted slightly back. His brown cheeks seemed festooned up into pronounced bulges, perhaps partly because of a habit he had of pursing his lips in thought before every utterance of speech; the whites of his eyes were yellowed from years of blown loess and bright sun, and the right eye had a disconcerting outward look, ever so slight, a minor cast. Pleas was not among the first, but as the group moved up the concrete path to the courthouse he found himself bunched with those who had been. He slowed his pace. He knew the gravity of what he and his friends were doing. They were putting their lives on the line. They were colored, and they wanted to qualify to vote in one of the roughest corners in all the South—in Ittabala County, Miss.

Varsell Pleas had learned through many hard years that the vote is the real issue

in Mississippi. School integration, job opportunities, cotton allotments, social mixing, mongrelization—all other problems, all slogans, all shibboleths give way to the issue of the vote, which is the means to power. In a few counties like Ittabala, the vote is in truth a life-and-death matter, and the reason is twofold. In Ittabala County, as elsewhere in the South ever since the 17th century, Negro labor has made possible a way of life the whites do not wish to give up. And in Ittabala County Negroes outnumber whites 19,100 to 8,200. In all the time since the Mississippi Constitution of 1890 was promulgated, only 26 Negroes have had their names entered in the book of qualified voters in the red courthouse in Athens; about 4,500 whites are registered today. The whites of Ittabala County mean to keep it that way; the Negroes intend to register.

The 17 had slowed down on the path for good cause: On the steps before them, in uniform, armed with a pistol and a billy, stood Sheriff Haralson R. Lee, who is the soul of the county's law and is not given to budging.

Pleas heard one of the Negroes at the front say, "Move on forward, folks."

"Hold on there," Pleas then heard the sheriff call out. "None of that goddamned forward stuff around here. What do you people want?"

Randoman Tort, whom the sheriff knew, now spoke up. "Mr. Lee, we only come to register."

"Register for what, Tort?"

"Register to vote."

"Who you fixing to vote for?"

"We might could vote for you, Mr. Lee, if you was running." Tort smiled as he said this, perhaps to signal deference, perhaps sensing the irony of the offer.

"No use to vote for me. I already been elected." The sheriff gave back the smile of the man who always has the last word. "All right, Tort," he then said, snapping off the good humor, "you all disperse yourselves and go on around to the south side of the courthouse and stop under that shade tree. Don't go in no big crowd, go in twos."

So the 17 did that, and they stood in hushed pairs and threes under the elm



tree at the northwest corner of the courthouse yard for a good while, waiting for something to happen. Silent in the sunlight near them, at the head of a slender shaft of stone, a stone man stood, a beautiful young soldier of the War Between the States, at whose unveiling, on December 4, 1905, Miss Annabell Tull of the C. R. Rankin Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy spoke these words in dedication: "... From his hands came down to you a wealth of priceless heirlooms: patriotism passed down from his forefathers who fought for rights in 1776, the same true patriotism that shone in 'Sixty-one to 'Sixty-five, heroism that did not fade in all the many changes from wealth to poverty, nobility that rose above defeat, faith in the right, generosity, courage, every trait of a people that make a nation great."

At length the latter-day vessel of those valued heirlooms, Sheriff Haralson R. Lee, came out to the tree, put his hands on his hips, and in what seemed to Pleas a very loud voice said, "All right, now, who wants to go first?"

The Negroes exchanged looks. At first no one seemed to want to volunteer.

Then Tort stepped forward and said he would be first. The sheriff directed him to the office on the right just inside the south door of the courthouse, and Tort walked away.

For two hours nothing happened, and

Pleas wondered what the officials inside could be doing with Tort. Pleas knew that the actual process of registration should only take about 15 minutes, long enough to fill out a form with 21 questions. This form was the Mississippi-white-man's means of keeping the Negro from voting. The black man had been fundamentally disfranchised in Mississippi under the state constitution that was adopted in 1890, at a time when most Mississippi Negroes were illiterate, by a clause requiring that every voter should be able to read any section of the state constitution or "be able to understand the same when read to him" or "give a reasonable interpretation thereof." In 1955, in the angry aftermath of the Supreme Court decision on school desegregation, the state legislature, taking into account the spreading literacy of southern Negroes, passed a bill requiring a written test for registration, on which the applicant must demonstrate that he could read and write a clause of the constitution and understand it. Whether the clause had been rightly understood was entirely up to the subjective judgment of the registrar, who in Ittabala County was Circuit Clerk James Z. Williams.

At about noon Tort came out and said he had not yet seen the circuit clerk. The lady in the office had said Mr. Williams was busy in court; Tort could sit and wait. Just now, two hours later, the lady had said, "Well, I'm going to dinner now.

You can come back after." And he had said, "Yes, ma'am, I'll be back after dinner." So the 17 scattered. Pleas went down with some others to a place kept by a Chinaman on Chickasaw Street to get something to eat.

By the time the circuit clerk's office reopened, the candidates had reassembled under the tree. During the dinner hour policemen had been brought in from other parts of the county; there were now some 10 or 15 uniformed and armed men standing in the shade of the courthouse near the tree, among them the familiar Noonday officer, Town Marshal L. O. Trent. Again there was a long wait; finally Sheriff Lee beckoned to James Drake to go in, and he did.

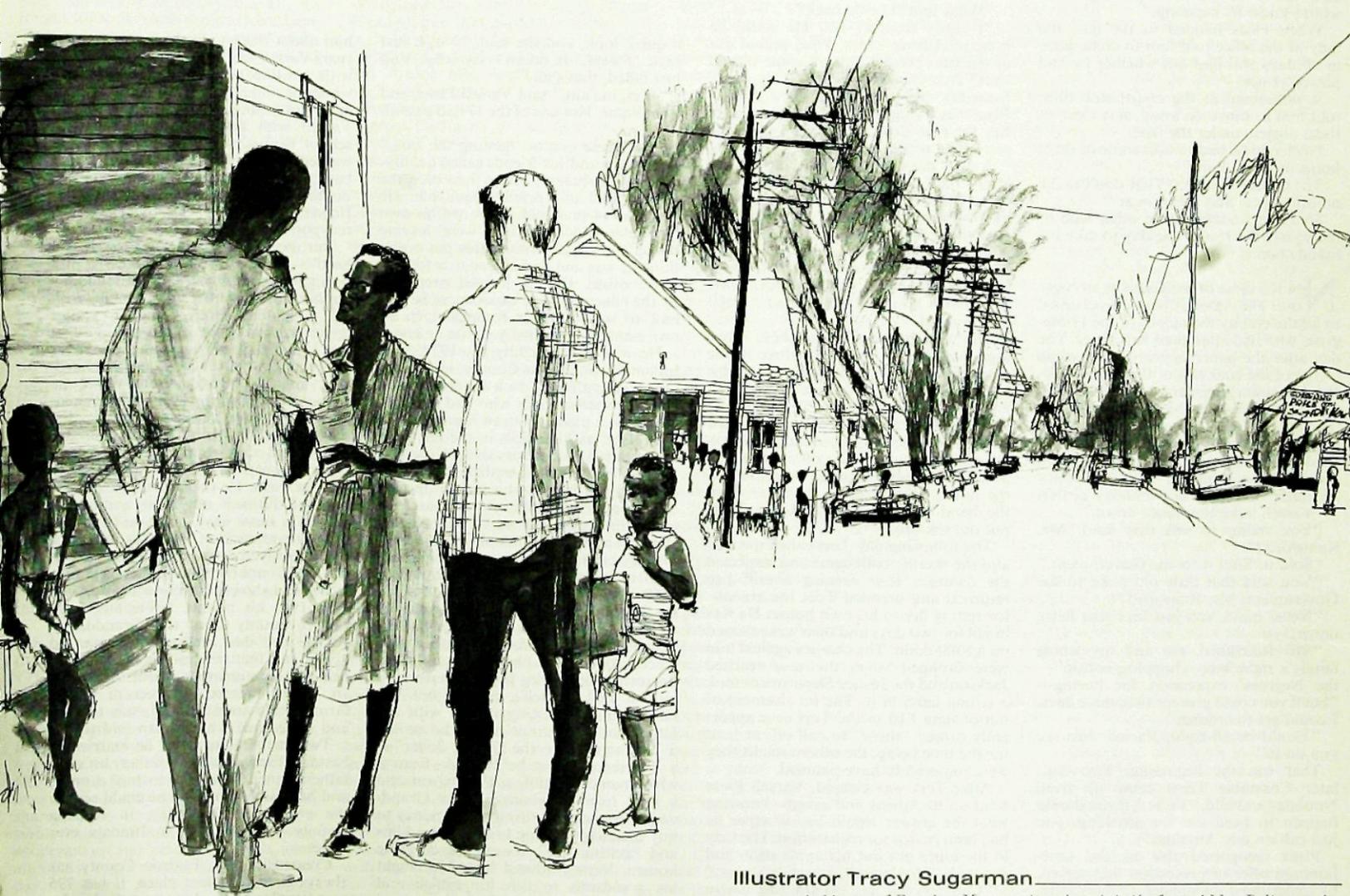
Standing under the tree, waiting again, Varsell Pleas could not help seeing that the group was causing a sensation in the town. People had come to watch all around one side of the square. Though court was supposed to be standing, white faces appeared in the courthouse windows; Pleas counted nine heads in one window. He wondered, Could Mr. Williams really be so busy? Pleas hated this building. He had lived just outside Athens for three years, from 1944 through 1946, and he remembered two cases that had come to trial here that last year. In the spring a Negro boy named Henry Larkin, crossing a street on a bicycle in Bula, nearby, had bumped into a white man, who had shot him dead; in court the de-

fendant had said that the boy had ridden the bike at him after he had bawled the boy out, and the accused had been acquitted by a jury in less than half an hour. Later that summer four white men had been charged with whipping a Negro man, Brutus Simpson, to death, because he had allegedly stolen some whiskey, and with putting his body in a lake down in the next county; the men had admitted having flogged Simpson but had denied having hurt him enough to kill him, and a jury had acquitted them in 10 minutes.

In midafternoon the Negroes under the tree saw Drake leave the courthouse, but he was not allowed by the policemen to rejoin the group. About an hour later Tort was admitted to take the test; he was out again rather quickly, and he, too, was kept from the others. At 4:30 Sheriff Lee told those who remained that the office was closed, there wouldn't be any more tests that day.

It took three days to test 17 people. The second and third days the police were out in even stronger force than on the first day—at times there were nearly 20 law-enforcement men on hand. Pleas wondered, Whom were they protecting, and from what? The cops were given chairs against the building. The Negroes were kept waiting under the tree.

Midway through the third morning Varsell Pleas's turn came, and he entered the building. At first the circuit clerk's office, with a long counter thrown athwart



Illustrator Tracy Sugarman

accompanied teams of Freedom Movement workers into the fear-ridden Delta country of Mississippi where he saw and sketched the whole drama of the Summer Project.

the entranceway, seemed dark as a crow's throat after the brightness out-of-doors. The circuit clerk was in, but Pleas was told to take a seat. After a few minutes Williams came out and said to the lady in the office, "I have to step across here a minute, be back directly." He was gone an hour. Pleas sat tranquilly; it had long since become obvious to the Negroes that a stretch-out was on, and Pleas knew there was no use getting upset.

Finally the clerk returned, and he beckoned Pleas to the counter and asked him his name. Calling Pleas by his given name from then on, the circuit clerk asked: Why did Varsell want to register? Had he been advised? Had anybody been teaching him? Had he been going to meetings? Were other Negroes from Noonday going to try to register?

A lifetime of practice went into Pleas's noncommittal answers.

Williams took Pleas into a very small room across the hall, scarcely more than a closet, with a single dim bulb hanging from the high ceiling, and handed him the registration form and assigned him Section 76 of the constitution to copy and explain: "In all elections by the legislature the members shall vote viva voce, and the vote shall be entered on the journals." Pleas had been studying the constitution for several weeks, and he knew several of the 28 sections of Article 3, the state's bill of rights, by heart, but there were 285 clauses in the whole document, and he had never happened to find out the meaning of the phrase "viva voce." Since then he has often wondered how many of the county's registered whites know its meaning.

When Pleas handed in the test, the lady in the office told him to come back in 30 days and find out whether he had passed or not.

A policeman at the courthouse door told him to move on away, stay clear of them niggers under the tree.

Pleas said he had to take some of them home in his pickup.

The constable said, "That don't make no difference. Stay clear, hear?"

So Pleas waited on the other side of the square the rest of the day to take his friends home.

Now the sense of danger came strongly out. The Athens *Courier* proclaimed to all the county the names of the 17 Negroes who had attempted to register. The day after the paper appeared, the white owner of the land east of Pleas's, an electrical-equipment dealer from Joshua City, named Rainsford, who did not live on the land but rented it out, and who had long before told Pleas he could fence a small plot for a table garden, drove to Pleas's house, which is in open country six miles northeast of Noonday center.

"Varsell, take that fence down."
"You fixing to sell that land, Mr. Rainsford?"

"Sold it. Sold it to the Government."
"You sold that little old piece to the Government, Mr. Rainsford?"

"Never mind, you just take that fence down."

"Mr. Rainsford, me and my whole family's right busy chopping cotton"—the Negroes' expression for hoeing—"but if you could give me two, three days, I could get that done."

"That'd be all right, Varsell. Just see you do it."

That was the beginning. Two days later Constable Trent came up from Noonday and said, "Varsell, if you should happen to need me for anything, you just call on me. Anytime."

Pleas recognized this as the time-honored offer of protection that served, by underlining the danger, to intimidate.

At the regular citizenship meeting at the Baptist church called Shore of Peace

the next Wednesday night, one of the men, in the spirit of the Mississippi state motto, *Virtute et Armis*, "By Virtue and Arms," urged all those who had tried to register to get up on their praying and to have their guns clean and ready.

When Pleas got home, he checked over his three shotguns and his rifle—weapons with which, for years, he and his three older sons had hunted small game in fall and winter months, to supplement the family larder.

One evening about nine o'clock, in the next week, a car drove in by Pleas's house and a white man with a beer can in his hand walked across the headlights. Varsell jumped out one of the back windows and looped around in the dark through his pasture to try to see the car. At the side door the man asked Mrs. Pleas if Varsell was home.

"He was here a minute ago," said Mrs. Pleas, who didn't like the way the man waved his beer can around. "He ain't in the house. Meshak Lewis, he was here a few minutes ago. Varsell was right out here talking to him. Children"—Mrs. Pleas called out at large to any of her 11 children (Varsell Jr., 19, Orsmond, 18, Robert, 17, Cleontha, 15, Pomp, 14, Ervin, 13, James, 12, Edward, 11, Icie, 9, Sussie, 7, and Larnie, 5) who might be within earshot—"where'd your daddy go?" Silence from the children. Actually Varsell Jr. and Orsmond had also gone out a far window, each with a shotgun; Orsmond said later that "if they'd have jumped Daddy," he himself would have aimed at tires first.

"He must have gone up to Noonday."

"How long's he been gone?"

"Must've just left."

"What time'll he be back?"

"I really couldn't tell. He could be gone to Athens." Mrs. Pleas peered out at the car. "Won't you all come in and wait? Ask your friends in." This was a formality, and both parties knew it; Mrs. Pleas was trying to find out all she could. But the man drove off. Varsell said he'd seen three others in the car.

A few days later—about two weeks after the registration attempt—word came from the domestic-help grapevine in Noonday that "they were planning something for eight of the people who had tried to register, and Ransom Tort, whose house was near the main highway, Route 57, was first on the list; it was not known exactly what "they" had in mind.

The very next night after these warnings Tort got his. At about three in the morning a fire bomb was thrown in his house, which caught fire. He ran out with a Remington automatic .22 and, seeing two figures, fired at them, and they fired back. The attackers, apparently not having expected gunfire, ran off after having discharged several shots at Tort and into the house. With buckets of water from the hand pump in the yard, the Torts put out the fire.

The following day Tort called the FBI and the sheriff; both came and inspected the damage. That evening Sheriff Lee returned and arrested Tort for arson—for setting fire to his own house. He was in jail for two days and then was released on a \$300 bond. The charges against him were dropped when the case reached Jackson and the Justice Department took a strong hand in it. The involvement of out-of-state FBI in the Tort case apparently caused "them" to call off, at least for the time being, the other attacks they were rumored to have planned.

After Tort was cleared, Varsell Pleas went up to Athens and asked—knowing what the answer would be—whether he had been passed for registration. The lady in the office got out his application and she said, "No, Varsell, you didn't pass."

"Can you tell me, ma'am, just where I didn't pass?"

The lady gave both sides of the sheet



"Now our people ain't scared to come to citizenship meetings."

a quick look, and she said, "No, it just says, 'Failed.' It doesn't say why. You just failed, that's all."

"Yes, ma'am," said Varsell Pleas, and went home. Not one of the 17 had passed.

After these events, "getting the box," as he and his friends called qualifying to vote, became, more than ever, the central goal of Varsell Pleas's life. He was now 44 years old, he owned his own farm, his older children were leaving home, and he had irrevocably put everything he was and had in jeopardy for this single cause. He felt himself prepared, by the education and experiences he had had, to vote—fully as competent, in his own estimation, as many whites he knew.

He was born on July 16, 1920, near Indianola, Sunflower County, in the rich Delta, seventh child in a family of nine, son of a sharecropper who had made 10 crops for a planter named Spurlack. On that place, as Pleas tells it, the bell rang at foreday, and the boss sat in a chair at the gear house with a leather strap in his hand for the blacks who turned up late. The croppers got six bits a day, and the owner furnished \$15 worth of food and clothing a month at his plantation commissary. A family with numerous children to work in the fields might clear \$300 when the crop was in; this had to get them through to the following spring.

When Varsell was eight, his father, having raked his shin on a barbed-wire fence, contracted blood poisoning; a doctor cut off his leg to try to save him, but he died. Varsell's mother took her family to Joshua City to live with her father, an industrious man who rented a few acres "for the fourth dollar"—a quarter of what he cleared—from a white named Ratliff, a Freemason and a kind man. In younger years Granddaddy Archer had saved some money to buy mules by making bricks in dry kilns and "getting out" boards for covering houses. Varsell adored him. He taught his grandsons to fish for catfish and grunters and gars in the Delta lakes, and he told stories that his father had told

him about slavery. In those Joshua City years Varsell was an everyday companion with a white boy, Jimmy Ratliff, with whom he milked cows and gathered eggs and went fishing, and Mrs. Ratliff helped Varsell with his lessons. He went to school through the seventh grade. He walked five miles to school and five miles back, and he remembers not the weariness but the roadsides fringed with dusty wildflowers—eyebright and pleurisy-root, maypop and spatterdock.

But then "things went out tough and hard"—the depression of the early '30's brought ferocious times for Granddaddy Archer, crowded on a small tenancy with his daughter's family, and in winter croker sacks did for shoes, and the diet was cornbread and sorghum syrup, over and over. In 1934 Varsell left this hardship and went to Jackson, where he found urban hardship even more squalid. He got a job at a white hotel, for one meal a day and six dollars a week and rare nickel tips, running errands on a bicycle, sweeping out the parlors, carrying out trash. He could live. He was 14, and salt fatmeat only cost a nickel a pound in those days, and you could get a 24-pound sack of flour for 40 cents. He even saved a few dollars. But it was not a life—not the kind of life his grandfather had showed him how to live.

In 1936 his mother wrote him from Leflore County to say that Granddaddy Archer had died, and she had married again, and that he should come up and help out his stepfather's farm. And so at 16 Varsell entered a career of cotton farming. He worked hard, sun to sun, and he learned what a man had to do.

Two years later, at 18, he married in haste and soon became a father; his stepfather loaned him \$100 to buy a mule, and he found some land he could rent in the vicinity of Noonday, in Ittabala County. He has lived in Ittabala ever since.

Created in 1827, Ittabala County has always been a violent place. It has 795 square miles of good land on the border between the rich Delta and the loam-



and-loess hills, land worth fighting for—and Choctaws, Chickasaws and Yazoons fought for it as it was stolen from them. The county has long had a large proportion of Negroes who own land; today 69 percent of the cultivated land is in Negro hands.

After his first crop Pleas cleared \$250, and he bought a second mule. By 1941 he had saved enough to put the first installment down on a six-year-old Ford truck, and he began hauling stave blocks and pulpwood, and he was soon earning as much as \$40 a week. Then his marriage went bad, and he moved west of Athens, where he rented, alone, a small farm in the hills. He was classified IA in the draft, but, for some reason that he never understood, the draft board just didn't get to him.

In Athens, in his 23rd year, he met Holly Bell Chronister, a beautiful light-brown-skinned girl from outside of Joshua City, the daughter of capable people, a carpenter and a practical nurse, and herself better educated than most—"promoted to twelfth." She was spirited, emotional, hardworking and bitter-edged. Varsell married her, and the next year, while the announcers were talking on the radio about the invasion of Normandy, Varsell Jr. was born, and the next year Orsmond was born, and the next year Robert was born. Pleas needed a bigger place, and he found one he could rent near Noonday. Landing there changed his life.

Four years earlier, under authority of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act of 1937, the New Deal's Resettlement Administration had bought a number of failing plantations in that area—Cincinnati, Intention, Harper's, Yazoo, The Bogue, Persimmon Tree—and had set up a series of projects for Negroes, men just like Varsell Pleas, who had spent their lives as frequently moving tenants and sharecroppers in a restless search for a stable living. At first the projects were cooperatives and rentals; then, a year after Pleas began renting up nearer Noonday, the Farm Security Administration took them over and made long-term loans to the Negroes to enable them to buy plots of land of about 60 acres each.

Pleas soon heard that the red-necks had nicknamed the federal projects Nigger Paradise, and that made him think they must be all right; he went to the FSA office and applied for a unit. But so many had already filed applications that the plots were all gone.

As time passed, "the projects," as the Negroes continued to call them, looked better and better, and Pleas decided to wait out a turn to join one. He worked hard and lived frugally, putting all he could save into building a small herd of Guernsey-Jersey cows. As the years went by, he saw the farmers on the projects begin to work with tractors; he was still mule-farming.

Eight years and five more children after his first application, Pleas got his chance. He heard of a farmer in The Bogue who had fallen behind in his payments, and Pleas arranged with the man and with the Farmers Home Administration, which had taken over the projects, to assume the farmer's indebtedness, \$728, and to buy the farm, on a federal 40-year, 5 percent mortgage (the white man's banks in Athens charged Negroes 8 percent and 10 percent) for \$6,104. To pay off the other man's delinquency, he borrowed \$460 from Holly Bell's family and sold three cows. The FHA made him a five-percent operating loan, with his chattels as securities, for equipment, seed, fertilizer and pesticides, and he put up five more cows as down payment on a small Ford tractor.

After these deals his herd, his show for years of sweat, had dwindled, but for the first time in his life he was his own man. He now had 59 acres of good, high loam-and-sand earth, with no low swags or ditches with standing water, and no clayey "buckshot" soil, and he had an industrious wife, and a tractor, and a feeling, new and strange, that some white man or men in Washington, D. C., were aware of him as a human entity.

Now came a time of building up. Since even the most industrious Mississippi Negro could not live on terms of equality with the Mississippi white, the project farmer turned to a prestige of things. There was an approved order of purchases. Pressure cooker first. Then, before the first summer was out, refrigerator—

\$40 down, with three years to pay. Then, after the first cotton-and-soybean crop had been sold and the FHA interest of a little more than \$300 had been paid in, a clothes-washing machine. (Water for the washer came from a hand pump in buckets and was heated in caldrons over a wood fire in the yard.) And the next year—emblem of, and contributor to, prosperity—a freezer, in which, after slaughter, cuts of hogs, fowl and beef cattle could repose till needed for the table. More and more, Varsell Pleas was building a life insulated from the whites, whom he saw only in stores. The FHA even had a Negro supervisor. By his third year in the project he had a total income of \$10,000, and he paid off all his debts on appliances, and he bought eight cows—money in the bank.

Varsell Pleas, a Mississippi Negro, could not believe in the long duration of good times, and sure enough, a turn for the worse soon came. After the Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, in May, 1954, the white men in the state, who had long had a saying, "The way to keep a coon from climbing is to trim his claws," got out their shears and went to work.

At first the curbs were legalistic and economic. The new voter-qualification forms were introduced, closing down the Negro's chances of registering. Credit in stores and for farm goods became tighter. The dirt roads in Negro areas were "pulled" less often than earlier by the road scrapers. A great blow to Pleas came in 1957, when the Federal Government, from whence in the past had come beneficence, introduced crop allotments. Pleas was told that he could plant no more than 11 of his 59 acres in cotton—hardly enough to make tractor farming worthwhile. From then on he began to feel a pinch; he started taking three-percent emergency loans from the FHA each summer to pay for "poisoning" his cotton, as the farmers called spraying for armyworms, boll weevil and spider rust.

Then, with the '60's, came violence and outright cheats. Pleas began to hear of the White Citizens Councils and, later, of a resuscitated Ku Klux Klan and of a group that called itself Americans for the Preservation of the White Race. Ugly

threats were passed in the towns, and Pleas heard of beatings. Negroes disappeared; bodies were found in lakes. Pleas saw, close at hand, a struggle for the land, as the whites began to use every possible means to drive off Negro landowners. In five years eight families lost their land in The Bogue, and one of them lived next to Pleas.

In this case the farmer, named Cheer, had borrowed \$325 from Mr. Rainsford, the merchant, when Cheer's wife had had to go to a hospital for a goiter. Rainsford seemed openhanded, and said there was no hurry about repayments; he later gave Cheer credit to buy a tractor. Two years later, after Cheer had borrowed money a third time, Rainsford agreeably said he could ease the terms and times of repayment on all these loans if Cheer would like to take out a second mortgage on his house; Cheer signed, and Rainsford had "cotched" him. On Cheer's first tardiness in payment of interest, Rainsford's former easygoing manner vanished as with a clap of hands, and the mortgage was foreclosed. Cheer moved his family onto a nearby "good" plantation, Mr. Pine's, where he and his wife and children worked for three dollars a day apiece; he lasted one year there, then drifted to the notorious Sutter plantation, where the hands got two dollars a day; and the next year he left for Chicago. To Ittabala County Negroes, Chicago has always been the symbol of the outside world, and Pleas had noticed that two kinds of Negroes went there—young ones on the way up, and older ones, like Cheer, on the way down.

Not an excitable man, but one in whom there is an inner firmness like a metal armature, Pleas began in the early '60's to talk around with other intelligent Negroes in the projects, "to seek up in," as he puts it, "and see what we could do to eliminate these problems." They agreed on the need to be well informed. Pleas, like most of his neighbors, had a television set, and he listened intently not only to local news but to public-service programs on the race question, to *Meet the Press*, to United Nations debates.

One day in the summer of 1961 Pleas received a notice from the county office

of the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service saying he was overplanted in cotton by 4.4 acres. He drove to the ASCS office and said he was not satisfied with the measurements; his oldest two sons, who had studied agricultural surveying in high school, had measured his land, 10 square chains to the acre, and their figures did not agree with the county surveyor's. An official told him that he could put up \$15 to have his land remeasured; if he was right, he'd get his \$15 back. Pleas decided to risk the money. The surveyor returned, and Pleas and Varsell Jr. and Orsmond followed him as he made the new measurements. Pleas went to the office a few days later and learned that his sons' measurements had been correct, and he got his money back. That saved acreage made \$800 difference in Pleas's income that year, and confirmed Pleas's suspicion that the county office of ASCS dealt carelessly, to say the least of it, with Negroes. Ever since then he has been saying to his neighbors, "It's better for the one who stands up for his rights than for the one who keeps it cool."

By now Pleas and his friends realized that their essential helplessness stemmed from their want of the vote, and when, in the early spring of 1963, they heard that The Movement—as the Mississippi Negroes refer to any and all civil-rights efforts—had begun work on voter registration in Leflore County, they drove the more than 50 miles to Greenwood and were directed by Negroes to the office of the Council of Federated Organizations, an amalgam of the leading civil-rights groups working in Mississippi, and there they asked for help. C.O.F.O. began sending a young teacher, Joe Merriam, from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, down to Noonday for citizenship classes, and suddenly everything began to fall into place for Varsell Pleas and his friends: They were "going into The Movement."

Joe Merriam found the Noonday Negroes extraordinarily sophisticated about local politics. Pleas could tell him the specific duties of the county sheriff, treasurer, assessor, surveyor, school trustees, and road supervisor, and he knew all the incumbents' names, and which were fairly decent, and which were vicious; he knew that his taxes helped pay for white schools that were far away from, and far better than, his own children's schools, and that he was taxed for a public library to which he was not admissible, and that no one was doing anything about the fact that airplane "poisoning" of cotton was killing the fish in Ittabala Lake, and that school only ran eight months in Noonday. Merriam concentrated on preparing the Noonday people to register. He unfolded to them the intricacies of Mississippi laws on the franchise, and he explained that even if one has registered, he must have paid a poll tax for two years before he can vote in state and local elections. He told of the investigative and protective powers of the Justice Department. He began teaching the state constitution; the first clause Pleas memorized was Section 14: "No person shall be deprived of life, liberty, or property except by due process of law."

In April the 17 went to Lexington and stood under the tree.

The rest of that season Pleas worked unusually hard at his farming, because he had arranged to rent nine acres of cotton land from a Negro widow who lived nearby in The Bogue.

One day in the fall, when he was out picking cotton with his whole family and a number of hired hands—he could have rented a cotton-picking machine but preferred to hire Noonday Negroes to pick by hand, in order to give them work—a boy drove up in a pickup and ran into the field to tell Varsell that some of the red-necks down in Jade County,

the border of which lay about 10 miles south of Pleas's farm, had gathered together to kill The Movement's citizenship teacher down there—would he please call the FBI in Greenwood? Pleas went to the nearest phone but could not get through. He drove to Greenwood to the C.O.F.O. office, which was able to reach the FBI. Its agents drove down and rescued the man from his mother's barnloft, where he had been hiding.

In the weeks that followed Pleas harvested 44 bales of cotton, which brought him \$5,500, and almost exactly two tons of soybeans, for which he got \$2,325. From this crop cash he had to pay back an FHA short-term operating loan of \$1,800, plus five-percent interest, and an emergency loan of \$200 he had taken out, because during a wet spell he had had to have his cotton sprayed by airplane, plus three percent interest. He had had these expenses during the year:

FHA payments	\$400
Fertilizer and seed	550
"Poisoning"	300
Gasoline	500
Rent for widow's land	625
Food	400
Payment on a soybean combine (owned with two others)	350
Clothes (for 2 parents, 11 children)	400
Health	100
Insurance	150
Electricity	125
Cooking gas	75
Labor, cotton picking	300
Maintenance of farm equipment	100
Miscellaneous	200
Total	\$4,575

Since Pleas's fiscal year is based on crops rather than on the calendar, a part of his cash surplus had to keep the family going until the spring, when he could get his next year's operating loan. He had also sent Varsell Jr. off to Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College in the fall, and the boy's year in the trade school would cost \$500. It was a fairly favorable year, thanks to the widow's fields.

Every bit of Pleas's spare time was now devoted to The Movement. He attended citizenship meetings regularly, called on others to persuade them to go to the courthouse to register, studied further on the constitution, and went himself a second and a third time to take the test. He did not pass either time, nor had he expected to; he thought he should keep trying. In January he went to Athens to pay his poll tax, against the day when he might pass. He went to the ASCS office in Athens and asked that Negroes be represented on the county committee that sets crop allotments; he was told that the matter would have to go to the committee for consideration, and, of course, nothing came of it.

One day on an errand in Joshua City he ran into James Ratliff, his childhood friend, the son of kindly white parents. He had seen Ratliff occasionally over the years, and recently he had heard that his old companion was now a Citizens Council man.

"How do, Mr. Ratliff." Pleas had called him "Jimmy" before their voices had changed.

"What's wrong with you fellows down there?" Ratliff asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You all trying to get up something?"

"What do you mean, Mr. Ratliff?"

"I seen in the paper that you was up to register. You niggers ain't qualified to vote. You don't know what you're doing. I'd stay out of that mess if I was you."

After that Pleas was not so sure that the race problem could be solved simply by having children grow up together in integrated schools. He had heard a note of threat in the voice of his childhood companion.

In the spring reports came that The Movement was going to mount a big

Summer Project, for which many Northern students, both colored and white, would come to Mississippi. As the time for the project approached, tension grew, especially as it became known that whites—even white girls—were going to live in Negro homes. Then one day a C.O.F.O. man asked Varsell Pleas if he himself would take a couple of the students into his house; the C.O.F.O. staff man spelled it out that this would be a dangerous hospitality. Pleas said he'd like to think it over.

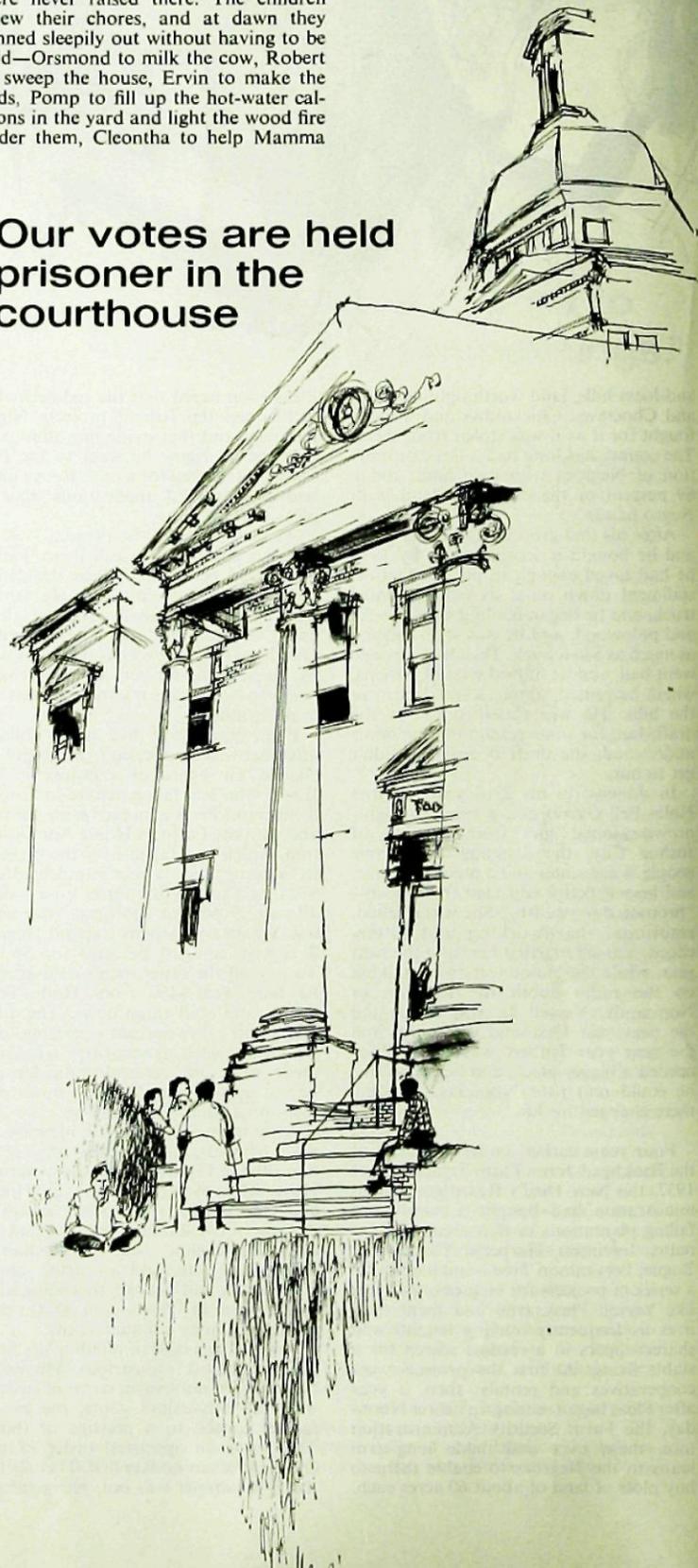
Varsell Pleas made a reckoning of what was at stake—besides his life, to the risk of which he was almost inured by now.

With all of the years' humiliations and strains, there was a priceless tranquility in the dusty, white six-room house on the curving dirt road in The Bogue. Voices were never raised there. The children knew their chores, and at dawn they fanned sleepily out without having to be told—Orsmond to milk the cow, Robert to sweep the house, Ervin to make the beds, Pomp to fill up the hot-water caldrons in the yard and light the wood fire under them, Cleontha to help Mamma

cook, Edward to churn, Icie and Sussie to clean up Mamma's room. James, the seventh, was off in the hills living with Pleas's mother, and caring for his father's herd of 16 cows and calves, the family bank account; Grandma got \$50 a month from Social Security.

In the muddy hog pasture around the barn were four fat full-grown swine and five shoats; a milk cow was in the meadow; chickens, guineas and turkeys quarreled under an ancient cottonwood; 20 fruit trees walked out across the table-vegetable field; wax drippings made a sanitary coating on the concrete floor of the outhouse, which the family spoke of as "the lavatory"; the clanking hand pump by the toolhouse gave plenty of cool, iron-tasting water.

Our votes are held prisoner in the courthouse



A Life for a Vote

Mamma had always had a green thumb—though of late years she had had scant time for the borders by the front path, and they had grown ragged; she kept a stand of tropicals on the porch beside the two rocking chairs, one home-caned with intertwined store string, where she and Daddy sat at sunset and talked, screened from the dusty road by a mimosa, a chinaberry, a castor-bean tree, and three slightly varieties of smoke tree. A foxtail pine gave thick afternoon shade across from the back door, for shelling or peeling or sewing.

One son was at Alcorn, a college of sorts; the second would go next fall to Mississippi Valley College, which was not accredited but was better than no school at all.

Now in the spring evenings the whole family gathered in the living room, on whose pale blue wood walls, among framed and cornucopied "arrangements" of imitation roses and grapes and poinsettias and calla lilies, hung three separate pictures of John F. Kennedy, one with Jackie and one with John Jr., and photographs of Varsell Jr. and his girl in the academic caps and gowns of Noonday Attendance Center; beside the television set was an open, gas space heater, and on it were souvenirs—china animals, a miniature wooden churn, a cute little iron model of a coal cooking range. On the linoleum-covered floor was a linoleum scatter rug, with black, white and red checks. The children disposed themselves on the heavy sofas and couches of the living-room "suite" and watched the programs—as the images flickered, Icie combed out and braided Cleontha's hair—until heads began to nod, one by one, and Mamma quietly said, "Sussie, go wash your feet and get in bed. Ervin, put Larnie to bed; put him in with Pomp tonight." It was considered a treat to have

the youngest for the night. By 10 all were down, the children in twos and threes.

At a citizenship meeting the next Wednesday night Varsell Pleas raised his hand and said he would take two students, if he could borrow a bed. The widow from whom he rented his extra acres did soon lend him a double bed which, by knocking down two built-in storage closets, he was able to fit in the back room along with the freezer and the washer, and he shifted from the side room, where there were two beds, the four children who had been sleeping there, and distributed them around. The beds in the house would be crowded through the hot summer—except for the guests, who would each have one to himself.

Before the students arrived in Noonday, there came on television one evening the foreboding announcement of the disappearance of three civil-rights workers in Philadelphia over in Neshoba County. It seemed that the worst fears for the summer were going to be realized. Down the domestic-servant grapevine trickled word, a few days later, that the whites were saying those "mixers" had scooted off to Chicago, where they were drinking beer and enjoying the publicity. But Varsell Pleas thought of Henry Larkin and Brutus Simpson and the citizenship teacher hiding in his mother's loft; he had no doubt the three were dead and in a lake or a swamp.

A week later the Summer Project came to Noonday, and two young men were assigned to Pleas: Tim Shat-

tuck, who was white, a doctor's son from Roslyn, Long Island, a Yale student, quick-witted and intense; and Bud Samson, a light-skinned Negro, a lawyer's son from Michigan who had been through the civil-rights wars as campus chairman of CORE at a midwestern university—he had a 100-day jail sentence on appeal up home, as a consequence of some sit-ins he had led. Elsewhere around Noonday were deposited two sophisticated Negro girls from Baltimore, who had demonstrated in Cambridge, Md., two California students, three white girls from various eastern colleges, a white Indiana boy and two more white Yale students. The leader of the project in the area was a C.O.F.O. veteran who had spent several weeks in the state prison farm at Parchman for disturbing the peace of Mississippi the previous summer.

Because the Mississippi police were following the Philadelphia pattern of arresting Project volunteers for trivial or trumped-up traffic charges, and because the maximum danger seemed to be upon release from jail after these arrests, the students wanted to follow state driving regulations meticulously. One of the rules was that they would have to replace their out-of-state license plates, on the three cars they had, with Mississippi plates, if they were going to stay in the state more than a month, and a few days after they arrived, Varsell Pleas drove up to Athens with some of the boys to help them with this transaction. When they left the capital, they were fol-

lowed for some distance, but nothing happened.

The next day, in a grocery store in Athens, Pleas got notice that the whites, too, had a grapevine. The proprietor sauntered over to Pleas and said, "Varsell, it true what they say, you got some of these agitators staying with you?"

"I got me couple of students, yes, sir."

"You ought not to let them stay with you. If they had no place to stay, they'd have to go back where they belong."

But Pleas was long since hardened to white intimidations. He sent all his children to the freedom school that the students set up in the Baptist church and in an abandoned house not far down the road from it. The children's regular public school had never excited them. It had an enrollment for 1963 of 510 but an average daily attendance of only 405.2—many children, especially on the plantations, stayed out to work in the fields. It was housed in a 20-year-old firetrap, with an oil-burning stove in each classroom, and it ran for only eight months of the year. Per-pupil expenditure was less than \$50 a year; many first-graders were eight and 10 years old; the Negro principal, who had six children, was paid \$4,800 a year; and the poorly trained Negro teachers, who got as little as \$3,000, were afraid to try to register to vote for fear of being fired. At the freedom school the children got the first taste they had ever had of unstinting kindness and solicitude from whites, as Yale and Smith students started in with the younger ones on fundamentals of the three R's. Robert, the third boy, a teenager, told his mother that he'd learned more Negro history in two days than he had in 11 years of public school.

Robert Pleas had been apt and keen as a small boy, but he had chugged nearly to a stop in school in recent years. He was a good farm worker, particularly on the tractor, poisoning cotton while the plants



In his future, a vote.



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ments of white girls in colored homes.

Now a wild man came one night to the Noonday citizenship meeting: Isaac (Zingo) Ostrowski, a 52-year-old contractor from Oregon, who told the Noonday farmers that he was going to build them the nicest meeting hall they'd ever see. Six feet tall, built like a pro-football tackle, Zingo had got a bee in his bonnet the previous winter, had visited Mississippi in the spring and had talked with C.O.F.O. leaders, then had gone back to Oregon and had raised, singlehanded, \$10,000. With a carpenter friend whom he had enlisted, and with a station wagon full of building tools, he'd taken off for the Mississippi Delta and had wound up in Noonday.

Mrs. Pleas was elected secretary of the new community center that he was to build, and one of the neighbors leased an acre not far from the main road. Zingo ordered lumber from a Jackson firm, but there followed mysterious delays in delivery; so Zingo made a phone call to Tennessee, and a few days later a big shiny trailer truck from that state drove in and unloaded a heap of things. The farmers at citizenship meetings arranged to procure volunteer labor to help Zingo. Pleas put in a day; workmen began arriving in parties from all over the county, as word went around that a Negro hall was being built where movies would be shown and meetings would be held, and that there was going to be a free library of 7,000 volumes, and a kitchen, and a room for kids, and running water and two flush toilets. When the floor was laid down, everyone turned out with hammers and worked, colored residents and white students together; Randoman Tort said it was the first Integrated Nailing ever held in Mississippi.

Robert was soon head-over-heels in The Movement; a factor in his sudden dedication may have been the attractiveness of one of the Negro girls from Baltimore, Charlotte Bunson, a student at the University of Maryland, daughter of a high-school vice principal. Robert spent much time around the Freedom House, a second abandoned farmhouse, across from the freedom school, where Charlotte and other staff workers lived. There he became interested in what he overheard about the voter-registration canvassing that Tim Shattuck and Bud Samson and others were doing, and soon he got himself excused from freedom school to go out on the voter drive.

The first day he went with Pete Marston to The Bogue. At each house Pete would talk for about 15 minutes about the vote, and about going to the courthouse. His being white was both an advantage and a disadvantage, for though he had to overcome a reflexive suspicion and dislike, he also commanded, even from Negroes three and four times his unripe age, a certain passive respect and obedience, no matter how grudging, that had been bred and drilled into them from birth and from long before birth. Having Robert with him, a local Negro farm boy whom most of The Bogue people knew as the son of Varsell Pleas, was a help. They took notes:

Mr. Aurelius. Says he backed down but thinks he will go if he has some support. Mr. and Mrs. Aurelius Jr. Both are scared. Should return.

Mrs. Cunniger. Has tried three times. Mary and T. C. Hampton. Uncertain and fearful. He is reported to be informer to Mr. Pine, white planter. Wife, however, might come around. Man is 85, wife 62. Don't like it here but afraid to vote. Mrs. Shueker. Has tried once. She is 72. Will go down if she feels the energy. She is coming to citizenship meetings.

Mr. Joe Perry Chesnut. Wife works for school. Intimidated through the school system.

Mr. Whitsett. "May have to go to hospital soon."

were low, but now he talked halfheartedly of finishing high school and of trying to get into the Air Force. He had driven a school bus the previous year for clothing money; had found chemistry and history tolerable but had failed English—he had despised his English teacher, who could not speak as grammatically as his mother and father. What he liked best was hunting. When the muscadines began to ripen, and corn was solid in the ear, and the persimmons were right, then the raccoons would come out, and Robert sometimes winged three or four in an evening. He was a sweet shot—a squirrel would run up a tree to get away from the family Winchester in his hands, but if that squirrel poked two inches of head around to see if the coast was clear, Robert would decap him at 50 feet. Now, however, the freedom school was getting Robert interested, and at meals the two students, Tim and Bud, would fire him up to work for the race. Pretty soon he was saying he thought he'd bone next year, and get to college if he could, and work in The Movement anyway.

Bud and Tim came in excited to the Pleases one night, reporting that at one of the houses over near the highway a white man had been seen fumbling around in the backyard with a flashlight. The owner of the house, with a shotgun on his arm, accosted the man. It turned out to be Bubba Goodheart, a local farmer who had just been made a deputy sheriff in order, it was said, to keep an eye on the invaders. Brought into the cone of a large battery light, Deputy Goodheart shouted that he had had instructions from "higher up" to "protect" a student named Peter Marston. Where was this boy?

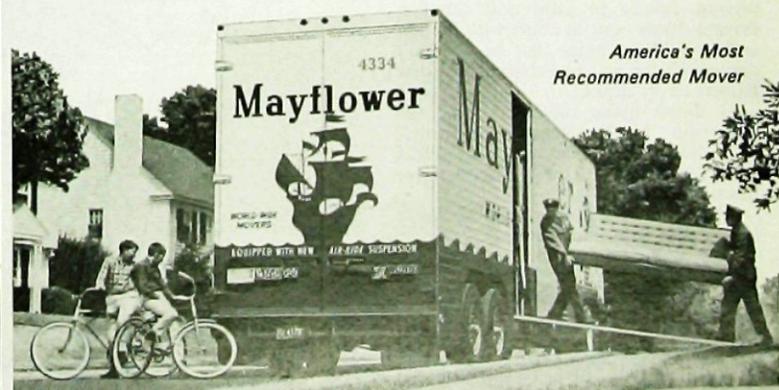
One of the Project workers asked Deputy Goodheart why he hadn't just come straight to the front door, if that was his errand.

The deputy said he'd got lost. There was in fact a Harvard student named Peter Marston in the Noonday contingent, and it came out later that there had indeed been orders from Jackson to look out for him. Pete was the son of a wealthy Boston corporation lawyer, a Harvard graduate, one of whose former college classmates was now a big shot in the White Citizens Council down in Jackson. Pete's father, who disapproved of his being in Mississippi at all, had asked the Citizens Council friend to "keep an eye" on Pete, and an official friend of the friend had obligingly ordered a tail put on the boy. Bubba Goodheart had come blundering forth to carry out this command. Pleas and all his friends believed that the reason he was in the backyard was to try to spy out the sleeping arrange-



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Mr. and Mrs. Rankin. He works for white builder in town, both scared. Eddy, the son, is very sharp, says he will go in a full car.

Mr. Sam Harbison. Uncle Tom. Will vote when all Negroes are allowed to vote.

For Varsell Pleas and others of the older generation, citizenship meetings continued in the rickety church next to where the studs of the new meeting hall were already being framed. This church, with a slightly tilted steeple, contained five rows of crude benches, and its walls were decorated with offering banners and a calendar with a picture of Jesus protecting a lamb and a C.O.F.O. poster of a Mississippi highway patrolman out of whose eyebeam jumped the question IS HE PROTECTING YOU? Here the Noonday farmers debated whether to try to found a new cooperative store. The farmers felt at the mercy of the white merchants in Athens, and they wanted the economic independence of a low-price supermarket that would belong to Negroes throughout the county. They sought legal advice on this idea from The Movement in Jackson. A miniature power struggle was developing in citizenship meetings between the firebrands and the more cautious heads; Pleas, always an aloof man, was not in either faction. "I'll just try to splice in and get you folks to quit arguing," he said once.

Toward the end of June a large shipment of used clothes, collected in northern drives, came to Noonday, and Pleas volunteered to distribute it. He picked out a few pieces to fill gaps in the wardrobe of his own family—little Larnie was soon sporting a pair of too-large and somewhat frayed sailing shorts, safety-pinned with an overlap at his waist, so that down the sturdy dark thighs ran strings of yacht-club burgees—and then undertook the dangerous work of hauling bundles to the miserable shacks of plantation sharecroppers. The white planters had made bluntly clear their hostility to the Summer Project, and to The Movement as a whole. The threat: "If you want to get in that mess, you'll have to move off my land." Pleas was a Baptist, and he attended, as had numerous plantation Negroes, Fair Heaven Church, which had recently hired an itinerant preacher from downstate named Burroughs, a registered voter who preached voting. When word reached the planters, Mr. Pine and Mr. Sutter, that Reverend Burroughs would get his flock worked up with the spirit to where he could do almost anything with them and then would switch off to registering, the planters refused to let their Negroes go to that church anymore. The half-naked children of these depressed and hopeless people flocked around Pleas like sparrows when he drove up with cartons of clothes.

On the first of July, Robert had an accident with his father's tractor; he collided with a carload of Negroes who had clearly been drinking. The others were let off, but Robert, the son of a Negro who had tried to register, was booked for reckless driving, failure to yield and drunken driving. Pleas went to court with his son and he told the judge that he wouldn't argue with the first two charges, but that Robert never drank.

"I didn't make these charges," the judge said. "Mr. Goodheart made them."

"I didn't think that was fair," Pleas said. "As far as I know, Robert never has taken a drink."

"All right," the judge said, "we won't charge him with that this time."

This was another confirmation, for Pleas, of the importance of standing up to the white man, in cases where he felt he was right. Even so, the fine was \$55.

Now the solid summer heat came, with temperatures in the 90's and the air as still as a shameful secret, day

after day after day. Mrs. Pleas sat in the shade of the foxtail pine trying to cool herself with a cardboard fan with an ad on it for STROWDER'S FUNERAL HOME AND BURIAL SOCIETY. Summer nuisances hummed and crawled—sandflies and mud daubers, robber flies and stinkbugs. The men worked hard poisoning the cotton, and nerves wore thin.

As the meeting hall arose, a massive affront of raw lumber visible to all eyes from Route 57, so also did tension rise in the area. Red-necks drove their pickups and cars slowly along the dirt road past the building, looking it over.

At four in the morning, on Sunday, July 26, a Negro named T. O. Lacey, who lived not far down the road from the construction, was awakened by a flickering light, and running out, he saw a student's car, which had been parked in front of the house opposite, in flames. He awakened the people across the road, hosts and students, and they tried vainly to put the fire out with water from a hand pump. At daylight nothing was left of the car but a shell. A shattered gallon jug, which had evidently contained kerosene, was found on the front seat.

After that three Negro families, Pittman, Jones and Tort, who lived along the road, set up an armed night watch, some sleeping during the first part of the night, some staying up till late. In early July, The Movement supplied three short-wave radios for these three families, so when an unknown vehicle drove in the head of the road, the word could be passed along. One night Bunell Jones set out in his pickup to patrol, and a Negro student staying in his house jokingly asked him, "You going out in that dark night all alone?"

"No," Jones said, "I got thirty-two brothers with me, and six cousins"—two 16-gauge shotguns and a revolver.

Pleas, who lived three miles from the new building and was not involved in the watches, was putting himself more and more deeply in danger, however, by repeatedly taking people to the courthouse in Athens, on gas furnished by collections at citizenship meetings, to try to register. Because no applicants ever passed, taking

people to register came to be called "making a waterhaul"—or, getting no place. But the whites noticed. "Here comes old Varsell," Pleas heard a deputy sheriff say once. "He sure is up to his ears in it."

One of Pleas's guns was old, and he decided to replace it. (Section 12 of the constitution affirmed "the right of every citizen to keep and bear arms in defense of his home, person, or property," and no license was needed.) But in the hardware store in Noonday the dealer refused to sell him one. "Guns is put up now," he said. Pleas drove to Jackson and bought a new gun, no questions asked, at Hunt and Whitakers. He took to retiring early, so he would be easy to wake from two o'clock on—when most of the violence against Negroes in the state had been taking place. A shotgun stood at the head of his bed, another by Orsmond's, and one by Robert's. Every night four thin dogs and two thin cats lay down in the dust at Pleas's back door, and the racket they raised when anything moved in the neighborhood quickly awakened the house.

One evening late in July, Tim Shattuck, who had been trying to make friends with white-shy Larnie, the five-year-old, and had once heard Larnie muttering about "the wheet," asked his host to tell him honestly what he thought about the white students having come down from the North for the summer.

Pleas, after the usual pause for thought, said in an unemotional voice, "It's the best thing that's happened since there ever was a Mississippi. I just love the students like I love to eat. Listen: They showed they're willing to die for us—two of those three at Philadelphia. If more come down here, I'd get out of my bed for them and sleep on a pallet in the tool shed. They're doing things we couldn't do for ourselves in years on end. They've taken away a lot of fear of the courthouse, and people ain't so scared to come to citizenship meetings anymore. They're giving some of our older kids subjects they should have had in school all along—French and typing. And they're so natural—like brothers and sisters. An-

other thing: The governor is going to have to be more careful what he says now, because a lot of bad smells are getting out to the outside world that never did before. And we got out-of-state FBI in here, and federal lawsuits. It's all changing, it is sure enough changing, right this summer. I hope you can come back another season. If you can't, send somebody else in your place."

Tim asked, "What about the whites? Are we making it worse for you with them?"

"No," Pleas said. "About the whites, there's bad ones and right decent ones. The bad ones been shooting colored people all along and throwing them in lakes, a bunch of students don't change that. The all-right ones, they're kind of gagged up. But we're going to set them good ones free—ourselves and them. These white folks have ridiculous fears. I tell you, we don't want nothing from them but stop. The Negro people ain't going up after them. We country Negroes don't do people that way. I think we got more real religion in our blood than the white people; we been told since weaning, 'Don't throw stone for stone.' But they better not come messing in our homes, setting fire and getting up a big killing scrape. That won't never scare us. That ain't never going to keep me from taking folks up to the courthouse. Because I tell you something, Tim, we're going to get the vote in three to five years, and when we do, the Negro man's vote is going to count just as hard as the white man's vote. I'm paying my poll tax to keep ready."

A few days later Tim had a story to tell the Pleases; it was a story which, against the background of the three killed at Philadelphia, made a big impression on Robert Pleas:

Tim had just got out of one civil-rights car in Athens, that morning, and was waiting to be picked up by another to go canvassing in Meeks, when a man of about 40, in a blue sport shirt and khaki work pants, stepped out of a knot of men, pointed at Tim's nose and then touched it repeatedly with a forefinger, and said, "You ain't dung. You ain't

Under the summer sun, lessons in citizenship



even dung. You ain't as good as dung." Tim, who had been trained in passive responses to abuse and violence, stood absolutely still and looked straight in the man's blue-gray eyes. The man began hitting Tim in the face, forehead and backhand, and then, as others began closing in with glistening eyes, Tim suddenly assumed "the nonviolent crouch"—dropped to his knees and formed a ball of his body, folding his hands over the nape of his neck, so that as many vital places as possible were protected. The man, who seemed startled by this bizarre defense, kicked him halfheartedly a couple of times and then walked away; the others also drew back.

At about this time the emphasis of the voter-registration drive changed. The student canvassers began registering Negroes for the Freedom Democratic Party, which planned to challenge the seating of the regular Mississippi Democratic Party delegation at the Democratic National Convention. Robert Pleas began working hard on freedom registrations, and this work took him closer to danger and clinched his commitment to The Movement.

One day he was canvassing in Meeks, a mean town on the eastern border of the county, with Bud Samson, the Negro CORE student. They were standing on the front porch of a house, signing up a Negro woman, when a white deliveryman arrived. He asked the boys what they were doing. Bud explained. The man asked a question.

Bud answered, "Yeah."

The man said, "You mean, 'Yes, sir.'"

Bud said, "Where I live we don't talk that way."

"You're where I live now, boy."

"OK, if it'll make you happy. Yes, sir."

The man asked for identification. Bud gave him a clipping from a Chicago paper, showing his picture and identifying him as a leader of a sit-in.

"This you?"

"Yes." Omission of sir.

"You got a hard head, ain't you, you colorblind little bastard? I might have to soften it up for you."

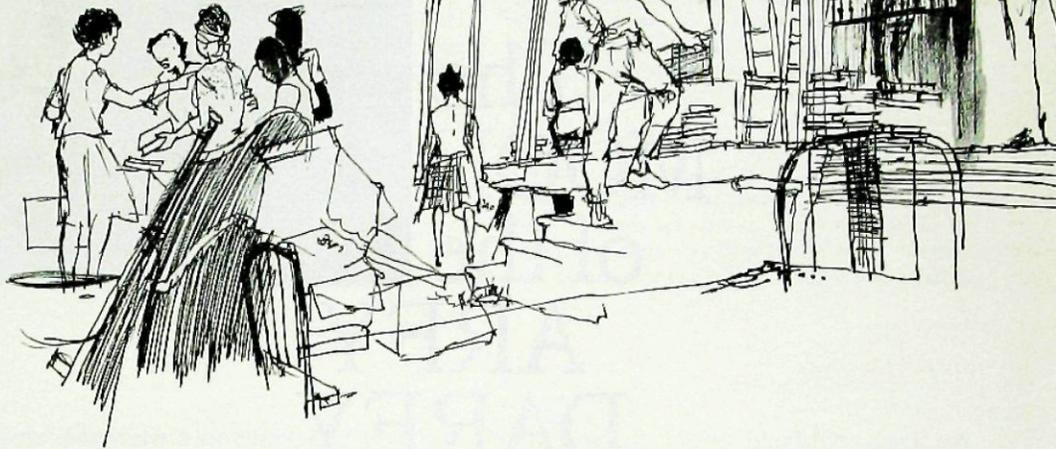
The man moved toward Bud, and Robert, to his own astonishment, found himself making a definite move. He reached his draft I.D. card out toward the deliveryman as he moved on Bud, and this served to distract the man. With further abuse and warnings he left.

The next week Varsell Pleas was told his son Robert would not be given back his school-bus driver's job in the fall.

Now came two pieces of news that lifted all the Noonday Negroes' spirits. The Mississippi State Democratic Convention, mindful of the challenge to be offered at the national convention by the Freedom Democratic Party, postponed until after Atlantic City the question of how to handle the ballot in November, whether the party's electors should be designated for Johnson or for Goldwater—so that for the first time since Black Reconstruction days Negroes had been able to influence directly the course of Mississippi politics. And then the bodies of the three dead civil-rights workers were found—that showed the FBI really meant business in Mississippi, and maybe the roughest of the whites would think twice before they hurt anyone.

In the hottest weather, in August, came revival time. For a week Varsell Pleas was somewhat turned aside from work for The Movement as he went to revival meetings at Fair Heaven Church every evening at eight. On Saturday night, after meeting, he and Holly Bell sat up late into the night reading the Bible aloud to each other and talking about what they had read. The next morning Varsell went to clean the leaves and scare

The courage to build has replaced the old fears



the water moccasins out of the edge of Mrs. Hodgkins's pond, and at noontime Preacher Burroughs, with Pleas's help for the immersions, reaped 14 souls. The temperature of the air was over 100, and when Pleas got home, he kept his wet clothes on till dinner time.

A white tablecloth was set on the kitchen table that noon, and before dinner a quiet young man from Lockfire, rather scholarly looking, with steel-rimmed glasses, named Louis Weems, drove in with Pleas's 79-year-old mother. All sat down to eat. Pleas said blessing. Then Pleas's mother said, "Louis here just spent five months in Parchman."

"Whatever for?" asked Holly Bell. "You ain't that kind of boy, Louis."

And then, over a baptism-day dinner of chicken and dressing, sweet-potato pie, rutabaga and greens, black-eyed peas, fried tomato, and hot biscuit, Louis Weems, speaking in genteel tones, told the pillar of Fair Heaven Church and his wife, fresh from the week of hymns and conversions, how, having run into debt on his hill-farm wages of three dollars a day, and needing \$50 in a matter of hours, he had gone out with two others and stolen three hogs, which they'd sold in Athens for \$85. Then he told about life at Parchman, how he'd worked like a slave under a driver in the cotton fields, how he'd become a "walker," counting sleepers inside the wire at Camp Eight, and how he'd been cut on the arm one night by a real bad boy.

When the story and the meal were done, and everyone sat sweating at the table, it had come round to seem to Varsell Pleas, and he said so, that the crime was not in the hog-rassling but in the pay the man had gotten and the credit squeeze that had driven him to the theft.

"That's right," Holly Bell said. "You ain't never been that kind of boy, Louis."

"I did the wrong thing," Weems said, "and I paid off with my five months."

The roof was on the meeting hall. None of the insurance agents in Athens would write a policy for the building. The sightseers were coming in droves, white men moseying past at five miles an hour. Tort was talking about holding an Integration Ball after the place was opened. Everyone expected a bomb.

On Saturday night, August 8, a Negro man named Stanley Chunn was walking along near the meeting hall, headed out 57 for a beer, when a car drove by and dropped something out on the ground not far from him. He thought it was just some trash, and he walked on. Three or four minutes later—he had nearly reached the highway—there was a sharp explosion back on the road. Negroes gathered from all around—nothing but a hole in the dirt road. Everyone guessed that the white men, intending to bomb the meeting hall, had lit their long fuse in their car, had been startled to see a Negro walking in the road in an area known to be heavily armed, and had dropped the device in the road and skinned out.

The next morning FBI men came to investigate—and word was passed that they were men with out-of-state accents. Within two days the Negro grapevine had told the Noonday people exactly which white man had bungled the bombing—a certain deliveryman from near Athens. He had done a poor job; they'd no doubt be back.

In a farm-equipment store in Joshua City one day the proprietor, Mr. Scott, said, "What are you all going to do when those white people leave you and go back on home?"

Pleas said, "What do you mean?"

"You're going to be coming up here to your old white friends in Joshua City after they've gone, asking for our help. The help just might not be here anymore."

Pleas understood the implied threat. Everyone had been speculating about new outbreaks of violence when the Summer Project pulled out, but Pleas knew that there would not be a sudden break. Three white students planned to stay on for good in Noonday; what had started as a summer drive was turning into a permanent program. So successful had the summer effort been that the C.O.F.O. people were talking of expanding their project into at least two adjacent states, Alabama and Arkansas.

So Pleas answered with a certain confidence. "It ain't going to be any different, Mr. Scott. I always figured we helped each other: You give me credit, I buy your cultivator and harrow and poisoner and all like that."

This answer, delivered in gentle tones, left Mr. Scott thinking about an implied

threat too. Pleas could buy elsewhere.

The great sky cooled as autumn came on. Pleas began picking cotton, the combines moved through the soybeans.

The two oldest left for college, but the younger ones could pick till school began at the end of September. Integration, just beginning in first grade in Jackson, Biloxi and Leale County, was far off for them, but it was rumored that they might be involved in a school boycott in November to protest the conditions of their schooling.

Robert and a local girl, Dearie Mae Jones, of one of the night-watch families, went off in a bus with student friends of the summer to the National Democratic Convention, and Robert, who had never before been farther from home than Jackson, demonstrated on the Atlantic City boardwalk while the politicians seated two Negroes as delegates from Mississippi. Varsell Pleas arranged a \$2,300 FHA housing loan, for 33 years at 4 percent, to install running water in his house, add a bathroom, put on a new roof, and build a new front porch. He kept going to citizenship meetings; he was working on the new co-op store, but voting came first with him, as always.

The Justice Department had brought a suit against the circuit clerk in a nearby county, charging discrimination against Negroes in voter registration, under the 1964 Civil Rights Act; and as soon as that case was won, as Pleas confidently expected it to be, he planned to go up and try again to register in the Ittabala Courthouse. They'd find new gimmicks to prevent him, for awhile, he supposed, and they might try to hurt and even kill some Negroes, and he supposed he might be on their list for all he'd been doing, but he was not afraid; some day it would not be a waterhaul.

This year Election Day would pass him by, but with prayer and hard work, keeping guns clean and not venturing away from the house at night, going to the courthouse again and again, he thought that he would, at last, get what he wanted. He expected things to grow worse in Mississippi before they grew better, but he had made his personal reckoning and had long since decided that a vote was worth a life—without a vote a life was not one's own.

THE END

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