Big Meeting

A STORY

By Langston Hughes

The early stars had begun to twinkle in the August night as Bud and I neared the woods. A great many Negroes, old and young, were plodding down the dirt road on foot on their way to the Big Meeting. Long before we came near the lantern-lighted tent we could hear the early arrivals singing, clapping their hands lustily, and throwing out each word distinct like a drum beat. Songs like *When the Saints Come Marching Home* and *That Old Time Religion* filled the air.

In the road that ran past the woods, a number of automobiles and buggies belonging to white people had stopped near the tent to allow their occupants to listen to the singing. The whites stared curiously through the hickory trees at the rocking figures in the tent. The canvas was rolled up on account of the heat, except behind the pulpit, and the prayers for all the sinners in the county that had not yet seen the light. And, although it was a colored folks' meeting, the whites liked to come and sit outside in the road in their cars and listen. Sometimes there would be as many as ten or twelve parties of whites parked out there in the dark, smoking and listening, and enjoying themselves, like Bud and me, in a not very serious way.

Even while old Aunt Ivey Davis was singing, a big red Buick drove up and parked right behind Bud and me beneath the tree. It was full of white people, and we recognized the driver as Mr. Parkes, the man who owned the drugstore in town where colored people couldn't even buy a glass of soda at the fountain.

"You'll hear some good singing out here," Mr. Parkes said to a lady in the car with him.

"I always did love to hear darkies singing," she answered from the back seat.

Bud nudged me in the ribs at the word *darkie*.

"I hear 'em," I said, sitting down on one of the gnarled roots of the tree and pulling out a cigarette.

The song ended and an old black woman inside the tent got up to speak. "I rise to testify dis evenin' fo' Jesus!" she said. "He's ma Savior an' ma Redeemer an' de chamber wherein I resuscitates ma soul. Pray fo' me, brothers and sisters. Let yo' mercies bless me in again and again, and each party of new arrivals swung into rhythm as they walked up the aisle by the light of the dim oil lanterns hanging from the tent poles.

Standing there at the edge of the road beneath a big tree, Bud and I watched the people as they came—keeping our eyes open for the girls. Scores of Negroes from the town and the nearby villages and farms came drawn by the music and the preaching. Some were old and gray-headed; some in the prime of life; some mere boys and girls; and many little barefooted children. It was the twelfth night of the Big Meeting, and they came from miles around to bathe their souls in the sea of song, to shout and cry and moan before the flow of Reverend Braswell's eloquence, and to pray for all the sinners in the county that had not yet seen the light. And, although it was a colored folks' meeting, the whites liked to come and sit outside in the road in their cars and listen. Sometimes there would be as many as ten or twelve parties of whites parked out there in the dark, smoking and listening, and enjoying themselves, like Bud and me, in a not very serious way.

When we arrived, old Aunt Ivey Davis was just starting a familiar song:

*Where shall I be when that first trumpet sound?*  
*Lawdy, where shall I be when it sound so loud?*

And the rapidly increasing number of gathering worshipers took up the tune in full volume sending a great flood of melody billowing beneath the canvas roof. With heads back, feet and hands patting time, they repeated the chorus

...
all I do an' yo' prayers go with me on each travellin' voyage!"

"Amen! Halleluiah!" cried my mother.

Just in front of us, near the side of the tent, a woman's clear soprano voice began to sing:

\[ \text{I am a poor pilgrim of sorrow} \]
\[ \text{Out in this wide world alone...} \]

Soon others joined with her and the whole tent was singing:

\[ \text{Sometimes I am tossed and driven,} \]
\[ \text{Sometimes I don't know where to go...} \]

"Real pretty, ain't it?" said the white woman in the ear behind us.

But I've heard of a city called heaven
And started to make it my home.

When the woman finished her song she rose and told how her husband left her with six little children, her mother had died in the poor house, and the world had always been against her—but still she was going on!

"My, she's had a hard time," said the white woman in the ear, facetiously.

"Sure has," laughed Mr. Parkes, "to hear her tell it."

And the way they talked made goose flesh come out on my skin.

"Trials and tribulations surround me—but I'm goin' on," the woman in the tent cried, and shouts and exclamations of approval broke out all over the congregation.

"Praise God!"

"Bless His Holy Name!"

"That's right, Sister!"

"White folks and devils beset me—but I'm goin' on!"

"Glory be to God!" cried the worshippers. "Halleluiah!"

The woman began to weep at the top of her voice, "I ain't got no friends—but I'm goin' on!"

"Jesus yo' friend, Sister! Jesus yo' friend!" came the answer.

"This world is not my home," she yelled. "God bless Jesus! I'm goin' on!"

"Dat's right! Yes!" cried Sister Mabry, Bud's mother, bouncing in her seat and flinging her arms outward. "Take all this world, but gimme Jesus!"

"Look at mama," Bud said half amused, sitting there beside me smoking. "She's getting happy."

"Whoo-oo-o-oo-o! Great Gawd Almighty!" yelled old man Walls near the pulpit. "I can't hold it dis evenin'!"

"Dis mawnin', dis evenin', dis mawnin', Lawd!" somebody cried.

"Pray for me—cause I'm goin' on!" said the woman. And in the midst of the demonstration she had created she sat down exhausted, her armpits wet with sweat and her face covered with tears.

"Did you hear her, Jehoiber?" some one asked.

"Yes, He heard her! Halleluiah!" came the answer.

"Dis mawnin', dis evenin', dis mawnin', Lawd!"

Brother Nace Eubanks began to line a song:

\[ \text{Must Jesus bear his cross alone an' all de world go free?} \]
\[ \text{No, dey's a cross fo' every one an' dey's a cross fo' me.} \]

Slowly they sang it line by line. Then the old man rose and told of a vision that had come to him on that day many years ago when he had been changed from a sinner to a just man.

"I was layin' in ma bed," he said, "at de midnight hour twenty-two years ago at 714 Pine Street in dis here city when a snow-white sheep come in ma room an' stood behind de washbowl. An' dis here sheep, hit spoke to me wid tongues o' fish an' hit said, 'Nace, git up! Git up, an' come wid me!'... Yes, suh! He had a light round 'bout his head an' hit said, 'Nace, git up! Git up, an' come wid me!'... Yes, suh! An' ever since dat night, Brothers an' Sisters, It's been a chile o' de Lamb! Pray fo' me!"

"Help him, Jesus!" Sister Mabry shouted.

"Amen!" chanted Deacon Laws.

"Amen! Amen!"

"Glory! Halleluiah! Let de halleluian roll! I'll sing ma Savior's praises far an' wide!"

It was my mother's favorite song, and she sang it like a pean of triumph, rising from her seat.

"Look at ma," I said to Bud, knowing that she was about to start her nightly shouting.

"Yal," Bud said. "I hope she don't see us while she's standing up there, or she'll come out here and make us go on up to the mourners' bench."

"We'll leave before that," I said.

For I've opened up to heaven all de windows of ma soul,
An' I'm livin' on de halleluian side!

Rocking proudly to and fro as the second chorus boomed and swelled beneath the canvas, mama began to clap her hands, her own lips silent now in this sea of song she had started, her head thrown back in joy—for mama was a great shouter. Stepping gracefully to the beat of the music, she moved out toward the center aisle into a cleared space. Then she began to spring on her toes with little short rhythmical hops. All the way up the long aisle to the pulpit gently she leaped to the clap-clap of hands, the pat of feet, and the steady booming song of her fellow worshippers. Then mama began to revolve in a dignified circle, slowly, as a great happiness swept her gleaming black features, and her lips curved into a smile.
I've opened up to heaven all de windows of my soul. . . .

Mama was dancing, dancing before the Lord with her eyes closed, her mouth smiling, and her head held high.

Now I'm livin' on de halleluian side!

And as she danced she threw her hands upward, away from her breasts, as though she were casting off the cares of the world.

Just then the white woman in Mr. Parke's car behind us said, laughing, "My Lord, John, just look at the niggers shouting! It's better than a show!"

But something about the way she said it made my blood boil. That was my mother standing up there shouting then. Maybe it was funny, maybe it was better than a show, but no white people had any business laughing at her. If mama thought there was something better in heaven than white folks gave her here on earth, then what business did they have laughing at her?

I looked at Bud, but he didn't say anything. Maybe he was thinking how often we made fun of the shouters, too, and laughed at our parents, and thought they were crazy—but deep down inside us, we loved them and sympathized with them, and understood why they came to Big Meeting. Working all day all their lives for white folks, disappointed and poor, bossed and underpaid, no wonder they wanted to fool themselves into believing there was a "Halleluian Side."

I looked at mama standing there singing, and I thought about how many years she had shouted and prayed and praised the Lord in church meetings and revivals, then came home for a few hours' sleep, and got up early to go cook and scrub and clean for white folks year after year. And how in spite of all her praying—and working, too—we had lost the little house that my father left us; and my brother had been run out of town for cursing a white man who struck him; and the people where mama worked kept cutting wages until now she got only six dollars a week, hardly enough to live on, and nothing to save. She was getting old, too, and I wondered how I was going to take care of her, without a job except on Saturdays shining shoes in a barber shop. We were poor as hell, but, "Pray, son," mama was always saying, "and maybe things will be better."

Maybe was right! I didn't believe in prayer, nor in churches and revival, nor in the illusion of some wish-made Friend far off in the sky who would take all your troubles away. And I hated preachers who kept fooling the people. Life was hard enough without kidding yourself about it.

I'll sing my Savior's praises far an' wide!

Nevertheless I looked at mama shouting happily there, and I understood. Grotesque and old and foolish, maybe—but what else did she know, what other way than this to find release from the cares of the day and a never-to-be-realized hope? And I didn't want any white folks, especially white folks who wouldn't let a Negro drink a glass of cocoa-cola in their drugstore, or give one a job, sitting out in a big car laughing at her.

"Gimme a cigarette, Bud. And if these pecks behind us say any more, I'm gonna get up and tell 'em something they won't like," I said.

"To hell with 'em," Bud answered. "The dumb bastards!"

I leaned back against the gnarled roots of the tree by the road and inhaled deeply. The white people were silent again in their car, listening to the singing. In the dark I couldn't see their faces to tell if they were amused or not, but I knew that that was mostly what they wanted out of Negroes—work and amusement—without paying for it.

To a great hand-clapping, body-rocking, foot-patting rhythm, mama was repeating the chorus now over and over, while Sisters leaped and shouted, and perspiring brothers walked the aisles bowing left and right, bassing:

For an' wide! . . . For an' wide!

Beating time, shaking hands, laughing aloud for joy, and singing steadily—when at the back of the tent the Reverend Duke Braswell arrived.

A tall, powerful, jet-black man with a head like a giant, he moved up the aisle. With long steps through the center of the tent he strode, his woolly iron-gray hair uncovered, his green-black preacher's coat reaching to his knees, and his fierce eyes looking straight toward the altar. Under his arm he carried a Bible.

Once on the platform, he stood silently wiping his brow with a large white handkerchief while the singing swirled about him. Then he sang, too, his voice roaring above the others, his white teeth shining, his big mouth red inside. Finally he held up his palms for silence and the people gradually began to hum, hum, hum, hands and feet still patting, bodies still moving—but at last, above the undertones of song and the broken cries of the shouters, he was able to make himself heard.

"Praise God, Brothers and Sisters, I believe I'm on that halleluian side! . . . Amen! . . . Brother Garner, offer up a prayer."

Reverend Braswell sank on his knees before the crowd and every back bowed. Brother Garner, with his head in his hands, lifted his cracked old voice against a background of moans:

"Oh, Lawd, we come before you dis evenin' wid fear an' tremblin'—unworthy as we is to enter yo' house an' speak yo' name. We come before you, Lawd, cause we knows you is mighty an' powerful in all de lands, an' great above de stars, an' bright above de moon. Oh, Lawd, you is bigger den de world. You holds de sun in yo' right hand an' de mornin' star in yo' left, an' we po' sinners ain't nothin', not even so much as a grain o' sand beneath yo' feet." His words were meek with humbleness. "Yet we calls on you this evenin' to hear us, Lawd, an' to send down yo' sweet Son Jesus to walk wid us in our sorrows, an' to comfort us on our weary road cause sometimes we don't know which away to turn! An' we pray you dis evenin', Lawd, to look down at our wanderin' chillens what's gone from home. Look down in St. Louis, Lawd, an' look in Memphis, an' look down in Chicago at our long-gone chillens tonight! An' if they's runnin' in sin, Lawd; if they's usin' Thy name in vain dis evenin', Lawd; if they's gamblin' tonight, Lawd; if they's doing any wrong—reach down an' pull 'em up, Lawd, an' say, 'Come wid me, cause I am de Vine an' de Husbandman, an' de Gate dat leads to Glory!'"

"Help him, Jesus!" weeping mothers cried, remembering their sons in far away cities.

"An' whilst you's lookin' down on us dis evenin', Lawd, keep a mighty eye away cities. "An' whilst you's lookin' down on us dis evenin', Lawd, keep a mighty eye on de sick an' de 'licked. Ease Sister Hightower tonight, Lawd, layin' in her bed at de pint o' death; an' bless Bro' Carpenter what's done come out to meetin' here dis evenin' in spite o' his
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broken arm from fallin' oS his roof. An' Lawd, aid de pastor dis evenin' to preach yo' word an' to fill dis tent wid yo' Spirit, an' to make de sinners trem­moaners' bench an' find rest in Jesus! We ask Thee all dese favors this eve­ning. Also to guide us an' bless us wid Thy bread an' give us Thy wine to drink fo' Christ de Holy Savior's sake, our Shelter an' our Rock. Amen!

There's not a friend like de lowly Jesus. . . .

Some Sister began a hynn, high and clear after the passion of the prayer.

No, not one! . . . No, not one!

Then the preacher took his text from the open Bible. "Ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your hearts shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you."

The big black man slammed shut the holy book and walked to the edge of the platform. "That's what Jesus said befo' he went to de cross, children—'I know not, an' all alone by hisself He would go to His death. Yes, sir, he knew! So He got up from de table an' went into de garden to pray. In this hour o' trouble, Jesus went to pray!"

Away back at the tent of some old Sister began to sing:

Oh, watch with me one hour
While I go yonder and pray. . . .

And the tense crowd took up the song, swelled it, made its melody fill the hit tent while the minister stopped talking to wipe his sweating face with a white handkerchief.

Then to the hummin' undertone of the song, he continued, "They called it Gethsemane—that garden where Jesus fell down on His face in de grass an' cried to de Father, 'Let this bitter hour pass from me! Oh, God, let this hour pass.' Because He was still a young man who did not want to die. An' He rose up an' went back into de house—but His friends was all asleep. While Jesus prayed, His friends done gone to sleep! But, 'Sleep on,' he said, 'for de hour is at hand.' Jesus said, 'Sleep on.'

'Sleep on, sleep on,' chanted the crowd, repeating the words of the min­ister.

"And He was not angry with them. But as Jesus looked out o' de house, He saw that garden alive with men carryin' lanterns an' swords an' staves, an' de guards fell upon our Lord an' took Him prisoner. The disciples was awake by now, oh, yes! but they fled away because they was afraid. An' de mob carried Jesus off. . . . Then Peter followed Him from afar, followed Jesus in chains till they come to de palace o' de high priest. An' there Peter went in, timid an' afraid, to see de trial, an' set in de back o' de hall. Peter listened to de lies they told about Christ—an' did n't dispute 'em. He watched de high priest spit in Christ's face—an' made no move. He saw 'em smite Him with de palms of their hands—an' Peter uttered not a word fo' his po' mistreated Jesus. Oh, no, not a word!"

"Not a word! . . . Not a word! . . . Not a word!"

"An' when de servants o' de high priest asked Peter, 'Does you know this man?' he said, 'I do not!' An' when they asked him a second time, he said, 'No!' An' yet a third time, 'Do you know Jesus?' An' Peter answered with a oath, 'I told you, No! . . . Then de cock crowed.'

"De cock crowed!' cried Aunt Ibe Davis, rockin' back and forth. "De cock crow! Oh, ma Lawd! De cock crow!"

"De next day de chief priests taken counsel against Jesus to put Him to death, an' they brought Him befo' Pilate, an' Pilate said, 'What evil hath He done?' But de people cried, 'Cruci­fy Him!' because they didn't care. So Pilate called fo' water an' washed his hands. . . . Then de soldiers made sport o' Jesus where He stood in de Council Hall. They stripped Him naked, an' put a crown o' thorns on His head, a red robe about His body, an' a reed from de river in His hands. They said, 'Ha! . . . Ha! . . . So you're de king! . . . Ha! . . . Ha! . . . Ha! An' they bowed down in mockery befo' Him, makin' fun o' Jesus. An' some o' de guards threw wine in His face. Some o' de guards was drunk an' called Him out o' His name—an' nobody said, 'Stop! That's Jesus!'"

The Reverend Duke Braswell's face darkened with pity and horror as he pictured the death of Christ. "Oh, yes! Peter denied Him because he was afraid. An' Judas betrayed Him fo' thirty pieces o' silver. An' Pilate said, 'I wash ma hands—take Him an' kill Him.' An' His friends fled away! . . . Have mercy on Jesus! . . . His friends done fled away!"

"His friends!"

"His friends done fled away!"

The preacher chanted, half-mooning his sentences, not speaking them now. His breath came in quick, short gasps with an indrawn, 'Umm!' between each rapid phrase. Perspiration poured down his shiny black face as he strode across the platform wrapped in this drama that he saw in the very air before his eyes. Peering over the heads of his audience and out into the dark­ness, he began the ascent to Golgotha, describing the taunting crowd at Christ's heels and the heavy cross on His shoulders.

"'Til a black man named Simon, blacker than me, come an' took de cross an' bore it for Him . . . Umm!
Then Jesus were standin' alone on a high hill, in de broilin' sun, while they put de crosses in de ground. No water to cool His throat. Nothin' to shade His achin' head. Nobody to say a friendly word to ma po' Jesus! ... Umn! Alone, in that crowd on de hill o' Golgatha, with two thieves bound an' cryin', an' de murmur o' de mob all around. . . . Umn! But ma Jesus never said a word! ... Umn! They laid they hands on Him, an' they tore de clothes from His body— an' then, an' then," loud as a thunder clap the minister's voice broke through the little tent, "they raised Him to de cross!

A great wail went up from the crowd. The cries and shouts of the congregation rent the night air. Bud and I sat entranced in spite of our­selves, forgetting to smoke. Aunt Ibey and Sister Mabry wept. The white people were silent in their car behind us. The minister went on in­toning.

"They brought de nails, four long iron nails, an' they put one in de palm of His left hand. An' de hammer said . . . Bam! . . . An' they put one through His left foot . . . Bam! . . . An' one through His right foot . . . Bam!"

"Don't drive it!" a woman screamed. "Oh! For Christ's sake! Don't drive it!"

"An' they left ma Jesus on de cross! . . . Nails in His hands . . . Nails in His feet . . . Sword in His side . . . Thorns circlin' His head . . . Mob cuss­in' an' hootin' ma Jesus . . . Umn! De spit o' de mob on His legs . . . Umn! His body hangin' on de cross . . . Umn! Gimme a piece o' His garment, souvenir . . . Umn! Castin' lots fo' His garments . . . Umn! Blood from His wounded side . . . Umn! Streamin' down His naked legs . . . Umn! An' droppin' in de dust! . . . That's what they did to ma Jesus. They stoned Him first. They called Him everthing but a chile o' God. Then they lynched Him on de cross."

"My God! Oh, my God!" some one screamed as an old woman began to sing:

_Were you there when they crucified my Lord?_  
_Were you there when they crucified my Lord?_  
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_Were you there when they crucified my Lord?_  

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_Were you there when they crucified my Lord?_  
_Were you there when they crucified my Lord?_  

"Help! Help! Help ma Jesus!" cried Sister Watson, staring straight ahead of her.

"Were you there when they crowned Him with the thorns?"

No hand clapping now, no swaying of bodies as they pictured in song the tremendous death of Christ.

"Were you there when they pierced Him in the side?"

With an uncontrollable shriek, young Mandy Givens rose from her seat and fell backwards to the ground while, behind the pulpit, the Reverend Duke Braswell stretched wide his arms against the white canvas of the tent. In the yellow lantern light his body made a great crosslike shadow.

"Let's go," said the white woman in the car behind us. "That's too much for me!"

"It's time for you to go," I said, real loud, from where I was sitting at the root of the tree. "They're about to call for sinners—to come and be saved."

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**SPRING CRY**

*By Raymond Holden*

The days are gone that were  
Prophetic of this day,  
Now on the branch the fur  
Of leaf buds and the spray  
Of blossoms before leaf  
Glistens and startles me  
Who said that winter and grief  
In one should cease to be.  
Dissolved in the wine light  
The stone of winter is gone  
But in my heart the night  
Is still not done, not done.  
It will not ever pass,  
Flesh being not content  
With meaning, wanting the meant,  
Wanting the actual grass  
Not its green light, the true  
Not merely truth, the loved  
Not love untouched, unproved,  
Not love, not love, but you.