

# THE LAST-BORNED

A STORY

BY JAMES McADORY

CLYDE squatted in the dust in the shade of the chinaberry tree and listened to the low moans coming from his mother's bedroom. He was confused and frightened that his mother was going to have another child.

Ain't fittin' fer ma to born another'n, he thought. I'm the last-borned. He scrubbed at the pale beard on his chin. Hit ain't just right fer ma to born this'un. Said I was to of been the last-borned. Hit ain't right — won't be the youngest when this'un come.

The moaning in the house seemed to grow louder. He put his fingers in his ears. He thought of Tuckie, the Negro midwife, who tended his mother.

Hadn't Tuckie stood in the dim light of the bedroom with her eyes popped out and said, "Mist' Clyde, this hyere one ain' right. You mama too old and done seen too much misery. You best git a doctor, Mist' Clyde. You best git a doctor."

And he had stood there in the dim

light and heard his mother groan, and he'd had to bite his lip to keep from running. I'm a-going on eighteen, he thought, but with Tuckie a-popping her eyes at me and ma a-groaning, and me not being the last-borned, hit was enough to make a grewed up man to run.

"I'll study about hit, Tuckie," he said then. "Reckon I can git a doctor, if'n I set my mind to hit." Then he hurried out to sit in the shade of the chinaberry tree to think out his problem.

He tried now to think, but Tuckie's voice kept coming back. "I tell you, Mist' Clyde, the Lawd ain' meant fo' Miss Eva to git this'un. They's somethin' terrible wrong — this hyere bein' the fourth day she done been tryin' to git shut of hit. She gonna die fo' sho, if'n yawl don' do somethin'." Tuckie's voice was low and quiet and dreadful.

Clyde rubbed away the gooseflesh on his arms. Hit's terrible hard on a man to think he were the last-borned and then come to find out he ain't

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the last-borned. But, if'n I put my mind to hit, I oughtta could think up somethin'.

Now above the moans, he heard the powerful sonorous tones of his father's voice lifted in prayer. Clyde shuddered. He was frightened to hear his father pray. His father prayed always before he beat Clyde. He asked the Lord-God to show Clyde the light, to steer him into paths of righteousness.

He'll start a-cursin' the Lord in a minute, Clyde thought. Then he'll fetch out the big whip and commence lookin' fer me. Best I git from here right now.

He stood and walked toward the rear of the sagging house. He jumped and tensed when Tuckie's husband called to him. "You oughtta not yell at me like that, Catfish," he said. "Near scared me outta my skin. And don't stand there a-poppin' your eyes at me." His voice was tearful.

"Ask you pardon, Mist' Clyde. I ain' meant to," Catfish said.

"Reckon you don't mean to breathe neither. Don't bother me none now, Catfish. I got a terrible worry to study at."

"Just what I wants to ask you 'bout," Catfish said. He rolled his eyes and looked at the ground. "Tuckie done told me Miss Eva need a doctor powerful bad." He glanced at Clyde. "Where you gonna git a doctor at, Mist' Clyde?"

"Reckon I can git a doctor, if'n I set my mind to hit."

"Sho, you can do most anythin',

if'n you set you mind to hit, Mist' Clyde. But Tuckie say you mother be dead time you mule-back to git a doctor. Tuckie know what she sayin'."

"Reckon Ma'll just got to hang on 'til I git back with the doctor," Clyde said.

"She cain' hang on much longer. Tuckie say she hanging by the skin of her teeth now."

"Ma ain't got no right to be a-bornin' another'n." Tears slid down Clyde's thin cheeks. "She told me I was to of been the last-borned. Now I cain't git this here thing straight in my head, Catfish. I cain't."

"The mainest thing is to git a doctor," Catfish said.

"They's a doctor — they's one up to Double Oaks."

"Shucks — cain't help you ma twenty mile from here." Catfish watched Clyde's face.

"He helped me when that rattle-snake bit my barefoot."

"You ma worse off than rattle-snake-bit, Mist' Clyde. You gotta git a doctor. You gotta make haste."

"Near died when that snake bit my foot, Catfish."

"Sho, you did. Hit would of kilt most mens — but you gotta git a doctor-man fo' you ma, Mist' Clyde."

"Pa said hit were the devil as bit me. Said that rattler was Beelybub-hissself. Laid me out with the big whip — 'cause the devil put his tooth mark on me. Catfish, hit weren't the devil — hit were a rattlesnake. Hit *were*."

"You gotta git a doctor-man fo'

you ma, Mist' Clyde. You gotta make haste and git a doctor."

"Pa'd beat the daylights outta me, if'n I took the mule to fetch a doctor. He'd take the big whip. . . ."

"Sho, he'd beat the red blood out you, Mist' Clyde. But you gotta git a doctor. You gotta git 'im in a powerful big hurry."

Clyde squatted on his heels. He shivered and shook. He clasped his knees and rocked and sobbed. "I'm — last-borned. I — I cain't git no doctor — I'm the — the last-borned."

Catfish squatted beside Clyde and patted him on the shoulder. "'At's all right now, Mist' Clyde. Shut off them tears. Ole Catfish git a doctor fo' you ma. He ain't nothing but a nigger-doctor, but he powerful good at borning young'uns. I git him, if'n you tell me, Mist' Clyde. Have 'im hyere in less 'n fifteen minutes, if'n you say so, Mist' Clyde."

Clyde squeezed his eyes tight-shut. Ain't got no right to put this burden on me, he thought. I'm the last-borned. "I — I don't know, Catfish. I just don't know. Cain't git hit straight in my head."

"We gotta git a doctor, Mist' Clyde. You tell me to, and I git 'im fo' sho."

"You — you tell me what to do. I'm the last borned — I cain't git hit straight in my head."

"You just don' worry you haid no more," Catfish said. "I git that doctor." He patted Clyde on the shoulder, stood up, and trotted away.

Clyde felt a great wave of relief as

he heard Catfish go. Then he heard the moans again and the wrathful voice of his father. He squatted there in the blazing sun and wondered how long it would be before his father came with the big whip. It seemed as if he'd done wrong, but he couldn't think what it was. He stared at the blurred sand between his shoes and felt that a part of him was slowly turning inward, putting a wall between him and the wrath of his father. Then he was asleep.

## II

Half an hour later when Catfish touched him on the shoulder, he started and fell backwards. He tried to get to his feet, but his legs wouldn't support him. The tingling and aching in his legs filled him with anguish. Tears spilled into his pale beard.

Catfish bent and lifted him to his feet. "Look out now, Mist' Clyde — you legs done gone asleep fo' sho. You best cling on to ole Catfish fo' a spell."

Again Clyde heard his mother moaning. His mother seemed to have been moaning ever since he could remember. Then he remembered the doctor. "You said you was a-goin' to git a doctor, Catfish. You just a-triflin' with me. You give your word you was gonna git a doctor fer ma."

"Sho, an' ole Catfish ain't tellin' no tale. There he behind us, Mist' Clyde — big as life hisself." Catfish turned Clyde and pointed at the old Negro who sat astride a frowsy, bleached mule.

"That ain't no doctor," Clyde said.

"Hit's a nigger — just a old nigger. You're lying to me, Catfish. Hit's just a old nigger."

"He a nigger-man all right," Catfish said. "But he a doctor, too. He been a-borning young'uns fo' more'n thirty year. He skin ain' white, but he a doctor-man all the same."

Clyde looked at the black bag which hung from the pommel of the saddle. He knew that big needles and little slivers of metal that cut and hurt were in the bag. He shivered and held on to Catfish. "Reckon he's a doctor. He's got a little black bag full of things. I reckon he must be a doctor."

"Sho, he a doctor, Mist' Clyde. You best git 'im in to you ma."

The thin, white-haired Negro slid out of the saddle and unhooked his bag from the pommel. "Catfish tells me we ain't got any time to waste, Mr. Clyde." The doctor's dry, gray face was as calm as his voice.

"You ain' got no worry," Catfish said. "He a good doctor. He come from over to Bailes County. Half the nigger-folk in Bailes County in he little black book."

"Ain't never heard tell of no nigger doctor," Clyde said. "But I reckon he's a doctor — he's got a little black doctor's bag."

"Name's Isaac Nathan, Mr. Clyde," the doctor said. He tugged at the skirt of his black poplin coat. "Maybe we'd better go in and have a look at your ma." He glanced at the sagging house.

"She — she might be better now," Clyde said. "She ain't a-moanin' and a-carryin' on now like she was."

"We best tell you pa we hyere," Catfish said. He glanced toward the front of the house. "You best tell 'im, Mist' Clyde."

"He — he ain't gonna like it," Clyde said. He whimpered. "He ain't gonna like it a-tall, Catfish."

Catfish took Clyde's arm and led him around to the front of the house. "He won' mind, if'n he know hit's fo' to save Miss Eva's life."

"Hit ain't gonna sit right with 'im," Clyde said.

"You go on in there and tell 'im," Catfish said. "Me an' the doctor wait hyere 'til you done finish tell 'im." He pushed Clyde gently toward the steps.

Clyde edged up the rickety steps to the porch. He paused at the door and squinted into the semi-darkness of the front room.

His father was on his knees at the fireplace. His hands were clasped at his chest, and he stared at the ceiling. His lips moved, but there was no sound. Then he saw Clyde at the door. He leaped erect. "Ain't nothin' fear-some to you, devil's son? Kin you look at God's own a-praying and not be a-tremble with fear?" His father spoke in a thin whisper. "You blaspheme a-comin' here and a-botherin' God's own while I'm a-prayin'."

"I — I — just want — ma's powerful sick," Clyde said. His voice shook. "Catfish — got a doctor to help — to help git shut of the new'un."

"Hit's the sin of Eve, your ma's a-paying fer. And hit's a sin to stop God's rightful punishment." The old

man's face shone pale and damp in the darkened room.

"Ma's powerful sick — Tuckie said she was — said she'll die, if'n she don't git — git some help," Clyde said. "Catfish done got this here nigger-doctor to help with the bornin'."

"Nigger-doctor?" the old man whispered. "You say nigger-doctor — a nigger with God's black curse on 'im?"

Clyde couldn't move as his father rushed across the room toward him. He saw his father's fierce, bearded face and then the small red veins in his eyes. He felt his father's fist crack against his head. He reeled backward and fell off the porch into the dust in the yard. He lay in the dust and shuddered and fought for breath.

He didn't know when Catfish and the gray doctor carried him beneath the chinaberry tree. He felt a part of himself turn inward, and a dark warm wall formed between him and his father.

### III

He awoke a few minutes later and saw Catfish and the doctor squatting beside him in the shade of the chinaberry. Sweat streamed down Catfish's face. The doctor's face was calm and dry and gray.

"You all right, Mist' Clyde," Catfish said. "You ain' hurted none."

"Head hurts," Clyde said. He groaned and sat up. "He hit my head." He glanced fearfully toward the house. His father sat in a straight chair propped against the wall in the

shadow of the porch. A shotgun lay across his knees.

"If'n he hadn't got that gun, we might of helt 'im while the doctor took care a you ma," Catfish said.

The moans coming from the house were less frequent now. They seemed to Clyde to come from far away.

"Hit me on my head with his fist," Clyde said.

"She ain't got a chance of pulling through," the doctor said. He tugged a large, silver watch from his coat pocket and wound it. He stared at the watch a long time before returning it to his pocket. "It's been so long, don't know whether I could help or not."

"Ain't got no cause fer a-hittin' me on the head," Clyde said.

"'Scuse me fo' speakin' it, Mist' Clyde, but you pa got more devil in 'im than he got the good Lawd." Catfish scooped up a handful of dirt and watched it run between his fingers.

"Said I were the devil's own rightful son," Clyde said. He whimpered and sniffed his tears. "Won't never make me say I'm the devil's son. I ain't marked by the devil — I'm the last-borned."

"You, pa sho ain' got no use fo' you," Catfish said. He scooped up another handful of dirt.

"Never done nothin' to 'im neither. He ups and whacks me all the time, and I ain't done nothin' to 'im."

"Reckon she'll be better off dead," the doctor said. He glanced toward the house. "No," he said. "I ain't got any right saying any person will be better off dead."

"He kill you one a these days, Mist' Clyde," Catfish said. "Best leave here like you brothers done." He scooped up another handful of dirt and poured it from hand to hand.

"I'm — the — the last-borned — Ma won't let 'im — kill — Ma won't let 'im." Clyde scrubbed the tears from his eyes.

"I don't like living," the doctor said. "There's no good in it. But just the same, I'd rather be alive than dead."

"You pa'd kill the ole devil, if'n he got the chanct, won't he?" Catfish said. "He think you the devil's son."

Clyde shivered. He felt that a bright, limitless space in which he could see and touch nothing was pouring around him. He felt he would be suspended and alone for the rest of time. He held himself tense and waited for the warm darkness to come between him and his father, but the wall didn't form.

The three men went rigid as the woman-screams came from the house. For a moment they didn't move. Then the doctor got to his feet. He clasped his hand and looked at Catfish. "I don't know what to do," he said. "I want to do something, but I don't know what to do."

"They ain' nothin' to do — he still got the gun," Catfish said.

Clyde got to his feet. The screams seemed to batter at his head as if they had weight and substance. He put his finger in his ears, but the screams seemed to grow louder. They seemed to come from inside his head.

He looked at his father. He saw the shotgun. He heard the screams. He saw the shotgun. He heard the screams. His head was full of screams. His father was on the front porch with the shotgun. His mother was on the bed dying. He wouldn't be the last-borned anymore. He wouldn't be anything after his mother died.

His head was full of screams, but he knew he was going to do something. He reached down and picked up a splintered whippetree from the trash-pile near the chinaberry. There seemed to be two of him walking across the yard, one who heard and listened to the screams and measured them, and the other who knew he was going to do something.

He watched his father get up and face him.

"What you want, devil's son? You done come fer more of the Lord's good punishment?" His father's voice was faint and withdrawn.

Clyde went slowly up the steps hearing the screams and knowing he was going to do something. He didn't look at the shotgun. He watched his father's mouth and heard a ragged whisper. "Kill . . . you."

He saw the splintered whippetree strike his father's forehead. He felt the jar of the blow in his arm and shoulder. Then he felt the heat of the gun-flash on his cheek. The screams turned to little bright slivers of light and filled his eyes with pain. The light from the slivers spun and sank until they were like glow worms in the dusk.

After what seemed like a long time,

Clyde heard the doctor's fogged voice. He heard Catfish answer.

"Just a little powder burn — nothing much," the doctor said.

"Like not to of had a head," Catfish said. "Never would of thought he could get up the spunk to do what he done."

Then Clyde remembered his mother and his father and the broken whippletree. An oppressive quiet seemed to hold the land. He sat up and glanced about the porch. His father lay on the floor near him. His hand still grasped the shotgun.

He sat there thinking how strange and different his father looked. Then he realized all at once that everything looked new and different. The two Negro men, his father, the yard and the sky had a new sharpness. He felt as if he'd been lifted out of a winter fog. The earth lay bright, sharp and green around him.

#### IV

"I — I'm sorry about your ma — and pa," the doctor said. His face sagged. It seemed even more gray than it had been.

There was silence for a long time. Ma and pa — both dead, Clyde thought. He struggled to return to the moment before he struck his father, but there seemed to be a wall beyond which he couldn't pass. His father and his mother, too, seemed like shadows, like remembered people in a dream. He glanced at his father and saw the shotgun. All at once he remembered the rattlesnake that had

bitten him on the foot when he was twelve years old. His childhood came flooding back so vividly that it seemed more recent than the death of his father and mother.

"Your mother's passed on," the doctor said. "I might have saved her, if — but she was — she was worn out."

Clyde looked at the old man lying on the porch. A plumb stranger to me, he thought. I kilt my pa, and him a plumb stranger to me.

Catfish glanced at the dead man and sighed deeply. "They's gonna be trouble," he said. "They's gonna be real trouble. I ain' a-wantin' to be no part of this trouble — Tuckie ain' neither."

Tuckie came around the side of the house. She stood at the edge of the porch and stared down across the valley. Then she took off her head cloth and dried her face.

"If'n you don't mind, Mist' Clyde," Catfish said. "Reckon me and Tuckie best go way from here."

"I reckon you better," Clyde said. "I reckon yawl better go."

For a moment Catfish hesitated, then he shrugged. "Thank you, Mist' Clyde. Hitch up the mule, if'n you want me to." Catfish went around the side of the house, and Tuckie fell in behind him.

Clyde looked at the doctor. The old man stared at the rotted boards on the steps. Clyde knew all at once that the doctor and Catfish were frightened. He searched himself for fear,

but he found none. It was strange not to feel frightened. Now that he wasn't frightened, it didn't seem possible that he'd been afraid so much of his life.

"I'll go in with you — to the courthouse, I mean," the doctor said. "Don't mind going. Anyhow, it's the

law. Got to make out death certificates."

"No need for you to go, if'n you ain't a-want to," Clyde said. "Reckon I can tell 'em how he got kilt."

"Got to go," the doctor said. His face was empty and still and gray. "It's the law."

## SCHOOL TEACHER

BY CHARLES ANGOFF

For forty-five years  
She taught boys and girls  
To read, write, and  
Recite "Evangeline."

For forty-five years  
Of evenings, Sundays and holidays  
She waited for the  
Warm miracle of love.

But the years  
And all their men  
Bowed politely,  
And cruelly  
Passed her by.

On her retirement  
The school gave her  
A pure silk scarf.  
Late that night  
She hanged herself with it.  
Four days later  
She was buried with it.