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INTERVIEW WITH EX-SLAVE

Everybody in the town of Mt. Pleasant, Christ Church Parish (across the Bay from Charleston) knows "Tena White, the washer," "Tena, the cook," "Maum Tena" or "Da Tena, the nurse" – the same individual, accomplished in each art, but best as a nurse.

The house where Tena lives is the second in a row of negro houses. The writer, calling from the gate, was answered by Tena, a middle-sized woman of neat figure. As the writer ascended the steps a friendly cur wagged itself forward and was promptly reprovved by Tena, who placed a chair, the seat of which she wiped carefully with her dress. The piazza was clean and on the floor a black baby asleep on a folded, cloth, with a pillow under its head. The writer was soon on friendly terms with Maum Tena, and was told: "As soon as my eye set on you, I see you favor the people I know. My people belonged to Mr. William Venning. The plantation was Remley Point. I couldn't zactly member my pa's name. I member when de war come though. Oh dem drums; I nebber hear such a drum in my life: De people like music; dey didn't care nothing bout de Yankees, but dem bands of music: My mother name Molly Williams. My pa dead long before that. All my people dead. I stayin' here with my youngest sister chile – youngest son. He got seven head ob chillum."

"I can do anything – wash or cook – aint no more cook though. Oh yes" and her eyes sparkled, "I know how to cook de turkey, and de ham wid de little brown spots all over de top. Nobody can collec' my soup for me; I first go choose my soup bone. One wid plenty richness. My chile say, 'While my Tena live I wouldn't want nobody else.' But I couldn't take de sponsibility now."

"Maum Tena, how many children did you have?"

"Maggie an Etta an Georgie an Annie, etc., etc." so fast and so many that one couldn't keep up."

"Wait, Maum Tena. How many were there in all – your own children?"

"I nebber had a chile."

"Oh, those were the children you nursed?"

"I marry twice. Caesar Robson an Aleck White."

"Did you ever sing spirituals?"

"No, I nebber had time."

"But you sang lullabies to the children."

"Oh, I sing someting to keep de chile quiet."

"Where is your church, Maum Tena?"

"De Methodist Church right here. I know I got for die some day. He keep me distance*, but when I look an see my flesh, I tank de Lord for ebbery year what pass on my head. Taint any goodness, tis His goodness. Nothing but the pureness of heart will see Him."

Tena was shocked and disgusted at the idea of the Lord being a "black man." She said with perfect certainty that he was "no such."

"We all goin to de same Heaven, and there aint no black people there."

The writer asked Tena her age; before she could answer, her great-niece came to the door and said, "She eighty-eight." Tena was indignant. Her eyes flashed. "I aint goin to hab nobody come along putting down my age what dunno anyting about it. I ought to be as high as nine. Let um be as high as nine."**

"If I didn't been round de house wid white people I wouldn't hab dis opportunity today, an dey good to me an gib me nuf to keep my soul an body together. My mother raise me right. When de Yankee come through we been at Remley oint. My Ma took care ob me. She shut me up and she gard me. De Yankee been go in de colored people house, an dey mix all up, and dey do jus what dey want. Dey been brutish.

“De beautiful tureen, stand so high and hab foot so long” lifting her hands, “an all de beautiful ting smash up, an all de meat an ham in de smoke house de stribute um all out to de people, an de dairy broke up, an de house an de cow kill. Nothin leave. Scatter ebberyting. Nothin leave.”

SOURCE: Tena White, Mt. Pleasant, Christ Church Parish, S.C.

Age: Approximately 90.

*Has lived a long time

** Meaning her age should be in the nineties.