

“GRAND, ROBUST,
A RICH AND VERY BIG NOVEL.”
—ALICE WALKER,
THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

The Autobiography Of
**MISS JANE
PITTMAN**



THE FAMOUS,
INSPIRING STORY
OF ONE WOMAN'S COURAGEOUS
BATTLE FOR FREEDOM.

ERNEST J. GAINES

Soldiers

It was a day something like right now, dry, hot, and dusty dusty. It might 'a' been July, I'm not too sure, but it was July or August. Burning up, I won't ever forget. The Secesh Army, they came by first. The Officers on their horses, the Troops walking, some of them dragging the guns in the dust they was so tired. The Officers rode up in the yard, and my mistress told them to get down and come in. The colonel said he couldn't come in, he was going somewhere in a hurry, but he would be glad to get down and stretch his legs if the good lady of the house would be so gracious to let him. My mistress said she most graciously did, and after the colonel had got down he told the others to get down too. The colonel was a little man with a gun and a sable. The sable was so long it almost dragged on the ground. Looked like the colonel was a little boy who had got somebody else's sable to play with. My mistress told me stop standing there gaping, go out there in the road and give the Troops some water. I had the water in a barrel under one of the chinaball trees. We knowed the soldiers was coming that way—we had heard the gun fire the day before, and somebody had already passed the house and told us if the soldiers came by be prepared to help in every way we could; so they had put me to hauling water. All morn-

ing long I hauled water to that barrel. Now I had to haul the water out the barrel to the Troops out in the road. Buckets after buckets after buckets. I can't remember how many buckets I hauled. The Troops was so tired and ragged they didn't even see me. They took the gourd from me when I handed it to them, and that was all. After they had drunk, they just let it hang there in their hands, and I had to reach and get it so I could serve another one. But they didn't even see little old black me. They couldn't tell if I was white or black, a boy or a girl. They didn't even care what I was. One was just griping. He didn't look too much older than me—face just as dirty as it could be. Just griping: "Just left to me I'll turn them niggers loose, just left to me." When I handed him the water he held the gourd a long time before he drank, then after he had drunk he let the gourd hang in his hand while he just sat there gazing down at the ground.

But these was the same ones, mind you, who had told their people they wouldn't be late for supper. That was before—when the war was just getting started—when they thought fighting a war was nothing but another day's work. "Don't put my food up," they said, "Don't put it up and don't give it away. I'm go'n kill me up a few Yankees and I'm coming right on back home. Who they think they is trying to destruck us way of living? We the nobles, not them. God put us here to live the way we want live, that's in the Bible." (I have asked people to find that in the Bible for me, but no one's found it yet.) "And He put niggers here to see us live that way—that's in the Bible, too. John, chapter so and so. Verse, right now I forget. Now, here them Yankees want come and destruck what the Good Lord done said we can have. Keep my supper warm, Mama, I'll be back before breakfast." These was the same ones griping out in the road right now.

Before all them had a chance to get some water, I looked up and saw another one coming down the road on a horse. He was hitting and kicking that horse

fast as his arms and feet could move. Hollering far as you could hear him: "Colonel, Colonel, they coming. Colonel, Colonel, they coming." He went right by us, but the Troops was so tired some of them didn't even raise their head. Some of them even laid down on the ground when he went by. "How far?" the colonel asked him. "I don't know for sure," he said. "Maybe three, four miles back there. All I can see is that dust way up in the air." My mistress handed him two biscuits and a cup of water. He looked at that bread and water like he hadn't seen food or water in a long time and he kept bowing and saying, "Thank you, ma'am; thank you, ma'am; thank you, ma'am." The colonel hit his boots together and kissed my mistress on the hand, then he told the others to get on their horses. He hollered for them in the road to get to their feet, too. Some of them did like he said, but many of them just sat there gazing down at the ground. One of the Officers had to come out in the road and call them to attention. Even then they wasn't in any kind of hurry to get on their feet. They started down the road, and I could hear that same one that had been griping before: "Just left to me I'll turn them niggers loose, just left to me." One of the other Troops told him shut up before he got both of them shot. Him for complaining, and him for being his cousin. He told him shut up or cousin or no cousin he liable to shoot him himself. But till they got out hearing distance all I could hear was that little fellow griping: "Yankees want them, let the Yankees have them—just left to me."

After they had made the bend, I went back in the yard with the bucket and the gourd. My mistress was standing on the gallery watching the dust rising over the field, and just crying. "Sweet, precious blood of the South; sweet precious blood of the South." Just watching that dust, wringing her hands and crying. Then she saw me standing there looking up at her. "What you standing there for?" she said. "Go fill that barrel."

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MISS JANE PITTMAN

“This is a novel in the guise of the tape-recorded recollections of a black woman who has lived 110 years, who has been both a slave and a witness to the black militancy of the 1960’s. In this woman Ernest Gaines has created a legendary figure, a woman equipped to stand beside William Faulkner’s Dilsey in ‘The Sound and the Fury.’ Miss Jane Pittman, like Dilsey, has ‘endured,’ has seen almost everything and foretold the rest.

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—Josh Greenfeld, *Life*

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