

Laud Today

By Richard Wright

Wright's unrelentingly bleak
landscape was not merely that
of Deep South, or of Chicago, but
that of the world, of the
human heart... He had survived
exile on three continents, and lived
long enough to begin to tell
the tale". James Baldwin

LAWD TODAY

Lawd Today!—a shout of triumph, or a cry of despair; an exclamation to express any strong emotion. And this book is full of strong emotion: fear, anger, love and hatred all have their place in this story of one day in the life of a Negro postal clerk in the Chicago of the depressed thirties. Last hired, first fired, envied for his sexual superiority, feared for the economic threat he represents, the Negro refugee from the rural serfdom of the South must work out his frustrations against a background of hostile forces he resents but barely understands. This is a savage world, redeemed only by ribald humour and a ferocious refusal to accept the inevitable. Few writers have possessed Richard Wright's insight into the problems of the Coloured man in a White society; fewer still have managed to convey it with such an intimate sense of participation.

Also by Richard Wright

NATIVE SON

UNCLE TOM'S CHILDREN

THE OUTSIDER

BLACK BOY

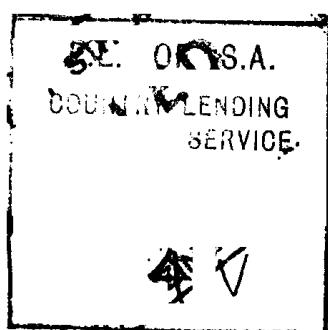
THE LONG DREAM

Lawd Today

RICHARD WRIGHT



ANTHONY BLOND



S.L.S.

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Part One

COMMONPLACE

... a vast Sargasso Sea—a prodigious welter of unconscious life, swept by groundswells of half-conscious emotion. . . .

Van Wyck Brooks' *America's Coming-of-Age*

Chapter I

No matter how hard he squinted his eyes and craned his neck, he could not see the top of the steps. But somebody was calling and he had to go up. He hollered, *Yeah, I'm coming right up, in just a minute!* And then he started. It was hard work, climbing steps like these. He panted and the calves of his legs ached. He stopped and looked to see if he could tell where the steps ended, but there were just steps and steps and steps. *Shucks, they needn't be in such a helluva hurry,* he thought as he stretched his legs and covered three and four steps at a time. Then, suddenly, the steps seemed funny, like a great big round barrel rolling or a long log spinning in water, and he was on top treading for all he was worth and that voice was still calling. He stopped again, disgusted. *Hell, there just ain't no end to these steps! I'm just wasting time! Ain't moving a peg! And that old sonofabitch up there sounds just like my boss, too!*

Jake stirred and burrowed his head deeper into a pillow. He sighed, swallowed, pulled his knees up, and turned his face from the sun glare.

The steps blazed and shivered in a mist of bright gold, as if about to vanish. Then they grew real and solid. He was still running, thinking: *That guy's still calling. What in hell can he be wanting? He hollered again, Keep your shirt on, for Chrissakes! I'm coming!* He was flying up steps now, mounting whole blocks of steps, miles and miles of steps, but even at that the end was not in sight. *What to hell? There's a joke here somewhere! Damn tooting!* He stopped, sighed, wiped sweat from his forehead, and looked to see how many steps he had covered. He was right where he had started! He shook his head, mumbling to himself, *Jeeesus, all that running for nothing . . . Yeah, there's a trick in this.* But that guy, that guy who had a voice like his boss, was still calling.

Jake turned and lay on his stomach. His head rested in the crook of his right elbow. His left arm clung close to his side, dingy palm

upcurled. He smacked his lips softly, as though over a dainty and dissolving morsel.

The steps stretched endlessly up. He was taking them five at a time now, not even pausing for breath. A deep sweet gladness suffused his limbs. He would get there soon if he kept this up. All steps ended somewhere. He yelled, *I'm coming! I'm coming!* Then the voice boomed so loud in his ears he stopped and tried to make out what it was saying.

Jake struggled out of sleep and propped himself upon an elbow. A pair of piggish eyes blinked at sunlight. Low growls escaped his half-parted lips and his hands fumbled comically for the runaway sheet. He swallowed several times and his Adam's apple jumped up and down from his chin to his collarbone, like a toy monkey on a string. His eyes smarted, watering. He saw the bed and the dresser and the carpet and the walls melting and shifting and merging into a blur. His loins felt heavy and exhausted. He closed his eyes and his mind groped, thinking, *What was I dreaming?* He remembered being on the very brink of something, on the verge of a deep joy. *Now what was I dreaming?* He tried to think, but a wide gap yawned in his mind. And that guy was still calling.

... Garrison, forerunner of Lincoln, was a man whose soul was aflame with a holy cause. Going against the advice of his friends and the warnings of his enemies, he declared himself outspokenly against slavery and oppression. ...

Gawddamn! That old radio woke me up! A vague sense of rows and rows of steps came again. *Now what was I dreaming?* It seemed very, very important that he should remember. He screwed up his eyes, but the dream steps were drowned in a vast blackness, like a slow movie fadeout. He had been going somewhere in a great big hurry; he had been thirsting, longing for something. But each time he had got almost to it, each time it was almost his, somebody had called.

... I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—and I will be heard. ...

Jake's mouth twitched. He flung one black leg from under the sheet and groaned. The air of the room was close. Heat was melting tiny cakes of grease in his nappy hair. He raised his hand and scratched at a thin stream of slickness oozing down the ebony nape of his neck. His face wrinkled, he opened his mouth and bawled:

"Lil!"

"Hunh?"

"Shut that door!"

"Hunh?"

"Shut that Gawddamn door, I said!"

He heard the door slam. *That bitch! How come she leave that door open and wake me up?* He settled down again and the mood of his dream came back. He imagined his loins straining against a warm, nude body. He breathed softly as the muscles of his diaphragm grew taut. A hot, melting ball glowed in his solar plexus. His head drooped and his lips touched the starched pillowcase. He doubled his legs, bringing his knees to the pit of his stomach. He felt the warm body pressing close to him, covering him, heating his blood. *Milkman! Milkman!* He jumped. *Gawddamn!* It was no use; he could not sleep anymore. Through a six-inch opening in the window came the harsh throb of an auto motor. He sat up, his eyes meeting a glare of sunshine pouring slantwise through voile curtains. *Gawd, is it morning already?* He wagged his head and tried to swallow a nasty taste. He made a wry face and tried again. *Arrrrrk! Naw.* He simply could not swallow it. He eased down again, his head striking a sharp edge. He fumbled with his hand and brought before his eyes a small, yellow booklet. UNITY, he read. A MAGAZINE DEVOTED TO CHRISTIAN HEALING. He saw the picture of a haloed, bearded man draped in white folds; the man's hand was resting upon the blond curls of a blue-eyed girl. Beneath the picture ran a caption: EVERY HOUR OF THE DAY AND NIGHT JESUS FLOWS ALL THROUGH ME. *What makes Lil keep all this trash in bed?* He hurled the book across the room, hearing the leaves flutter with a dry sound.

He stood up, dazed somewhat from sleep. He licked his lips and rubbed his eyes with the backs of his hands. His mouth gaped, revealing two rows of gleaming gold. It gaped wide. Wider. Wider still. Then it closed slowly, emitting a hippopotamic grunt, *Yyaaarph!* His eyes watered sympathetically as he stood rigid with

his head tilted backward. *Jeeesus, I feel rotten.* He drew a long breath; something itched deep in his nose. Then it came:

"Ker . . . ker . . . kerchoossneeeeeze!"

He bent double. When he straightened he wiped his nose and eyes on the sleeves of his red-gold pyjamas, and groaned:

"Aw, hell. . . ."

He was thirsty and his mouth tasted salty. He licked his lips and swallowed again to get rid of that disgusting taste. Adding to his sluggish confusion was a sickening hunger. His stomach felt like a vacuum with a black rat gnawing around inside of it. He got a cigarette from his pack and struck a match. His fingers trembled so the flame flickered out. *My nerves is just all shot,* he thought. When the cigarette was lit he screwed up his eyes and scratched himself, slowly, along the ribs, deep in the groin, around the navel, and between the thighs. He wanted a little more sleep, just a little more. But he knew it was useless. *How come Lil leave that door open? How come she turn that radio on so early?* He flushed hot with anger, but the smell of boiling coffee and sizzling bacon cooled him. He sighed, looking aimlessly around the room, at the curtains, at the sunshine, at the blooming red flowers in the carpet. His attention centred on his scheme rack, a little honeycomblike wooden case before which were piled hundreds and hundreds of tiny white cards. *Lawd, I ain't fooled with that scheme in almost a month now. And I got to go up and pass a test on it in about two weeks.* Merely to think of it made his head feel heavy. He had to learn that scheme, learn where each card went, and when it went where it went, and on what train. *Let's see now. Six o'clock sweat. Chicago and Evans. 15. Number 2. Except on Sundays. That's for Paris, Illinois. Then at nine-thirty comes Chicago and Evans. 9. Number 2. Let's see now. That's except Saturdays. Then comes ten forty-five. Yeah, that's Danville and Cairo. 131. No. 1. That goes by way of. . . .* He frowned, screwing up his eyes and biting his lips. *Where do that Danville and Carbondale go?* He could not remember. And he had nine hundred little white cards like that to commit to memory. Well, he would try to study a little after breakfast. After he had eaten a good meal his mind would be fresh and keen.

As in a dream he ambled to the bathroom, his fat black feet spreading like cobra heads upon the carpet. He turned the cold water

faucet in the washbowl and looked around for a glass. *That bitch! How come she can't never do nothing right? You can never find a thing you want when she's around!* Stooping, he cupped his fingers under the stream and gulped huge swallows of water overflowing the brim of his palms. *Yeah, I feel lots better now.* He stood up, fronting the mirror. The reflection showed a face round as a full moon and dark as a starless midnight. In an oily expanse of blackness were set two cunning eyes under which hung flabby pouches. A broad nose squatted fat and soft, its two holes gaping militantly frontward like the barrels of a shotgun. Lips were full, moist, and drooped loosely, trembling when he walked. A soft roll of fat seeped out of his neck, buttressing his chin. Shaggy sideburns frizzled each temple.

He ran his fingers through his hair, scratching an itchy scalp. He brought them away sticky and greasy. Thrusting out his jaw, he touched bristles on his chin. He needed a haircut and a shave. Badly. *Shucks, how come you got to waste a hour getting your hair cut? How come you got to shave every day?* He took down his mug and shaving brush and turned on the hot water. Wisps of vapour warmed his chest and face. *Christ, that feels good!* The smell of coffee and sizzling bacon became stronger. Slowly, he was waking up; even his mind began to work a little.

He cocked his head, poising his whitely lathered brush an inch from his chin. He heard Lil talking to somebody in the kitchen. He bent lower, listening. *What in hell can she find to talk about all the time? I certainly would like to know. And bawling her out don't seem to do a bit of good, neither. Yeah, she's going to keep on with her foolishness till I teach her a damn good lesson one of these days. And furthermore, it ain't right for a decent woman to stand talking common that way to strangers. And she knows that!* Jake sat the mug down, hurried to the bathroom door, and listened with his ear to the keyhole. *Still talking! And laughing, too! What to hell? What she think this is, a picnic?* He slammed down the brush and pushed through the door.

He entered the kitchen just as Lil threw back her head, laughing. Her shoulders were shaking. But when she saw Jake she sobered. The milkman hastily picked up his rack.

"Good morning," said the milkman.

Jake did not answer. He came and stood in the middle of the floor, his legs wide apart.

"You up already, Jake?" Lil asked in a strained voice.

Jake shook his head, his mouth twisting into a crooked smile. "Naw, I'm still asleep."

Lil fumbled for a dishtowel and began to polish an already glittering spot on the stove. The milkman groped for the doorknob.

"Well, I reckon I'll be getting along," he said.

"Be sure and bring me an extra pint of cream tomorrow," said Lil.

"O.K.," said the milkman, and was gone.

Jake slouched heavily into a chair and frowned at the floor. Lil went to the icebox and got a carton of eggs. She bit her lip and kept her shoulders stiff, as though expecting a blow.

"Lil?" His voice held a familiar, ominous portent.

She lowered her head an inch and placed a skillet on the stove. As she lit the gas her face was placid, as though she had not heard. Sometimes that forestalled him, pretending like that.

"Lil!" Anger was creeping into his voice.

"I hears you, Jake." She spoke placatingly.

"Act like it then!"

She broke an egg into the skillet. Jake's toes gripped the linoleum as though even they were angry with her.

"Woman, I'm still talking to you!"

She sprinkled salt over the egg.

"What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing."

"Don't you hear me talking?"

"Yeah, I hears you, Jake."

"Why in hell don't you act like it?"

She broke a second egg. A part of the white caught on the edge of the skillet and hardened slowly. Jake rose from his chair.

"Is you deaf?"

"Naw, I ain't deaf. I hears you real plain."

"I just wanted to know," he said. "On account of if you was, I can fix you so you can hear real good from now on."

His face was six inches from hers.

"What in hell can you see in a milkman's mug to make you want to keep talking to him all day—that's what I want to know!"

Lil cleared her throat, bent lower over the skillet, and fiddled the eggs with a long-handled fork.

"Now, listen, woman, I'm talking to you!"

"Nothing," she answered. "I don't see nothing."

"How come you keep talking to him?"

Business of turning the first egg over. Jake gripped her shoulder, pulling her from the stove.

"Ain't you going to talk to me?"

"Please, Jake, for Chrissake, let's don't start all that again!"

"Start what? What in hell you mean? Is you crazy! You's the one what's starting! Ain't I told you about that milkman before, a dozen times if one?"

Tenderly, Lil flipped the second egg over with a wide paddle. Jake gripped her arm, digging long nails into her flesh.

"I'm talking to you, bitch!"

"Yes, Jake."

"Ain't I told you about that milkman before?"

"Yes, Jake."

"How come you keep talking to him?"

Lil turned and faced him meekly. Her shoulders slumped as if she were placing all evidence before him for an impartial judgement, as if she were throwing herself upon his mercy, his ultimate sense of fairness.

"What you want me to do, Jake? Act like I'm wild? Can't I say good morning to folks when they say good morning to me? Honest to Gawd, I said no more to that milkman than I do to Mrs. Thomas. . . ."

"I ain't no fool! I heard you talking to that milkman ten minutes on end! I reckon he can't hear good, hunh? I reckon it takes ten minutes to tell him to bring you a bottle of cream, hunh? Woman, don't you try to play me cheap!"

"I ain't playing you cheap."

"You turned that radio on so I wouldn't hear what you was telling him!"

"Lawd, Jake. . . ."

"Now just say you didn't!"

She gaped at him.

"I ain't blind! I can see what's going on before my eyes! You

can't put a damn thing over on me, and ain't no use you trying. And I reckon that sweet laugh you gave him was part of the order, too, hunh?" He swayed his body forward, his face leering.

Lil sighed.

"I sure wish you wasn't so foolish, Jake."

He shoved her from the stove again.

"Don't you call me a fool!"

"I didn't call you a fool!"

"Watch out how you talk to me!"

"I wish you could look at things sort of straight."

"I can look straight enough to see what you doing!"

Lil turned on him. As she spoke her whole body shook as though she had lost control of her nerves. She seemed impelled by an imperious, inner need.

"Just 'cause you so loose you think everybody's loose! If you was half as fair with me as I is with you, we wouldn't never fuss. But it's just like a person who's cheating to think another one is. . . ." She stopped abruptly, choking. "And you know . . . you know . . . you know I ain't in no condition to dddo wwww what yyyou thinking. . . . You. . . ." The muscles in her throat grew tight with resentment and she could not go on.

"Aw, cut the sob stuff! It don't work with me! You ain't as sick as you always trying to make out! You can always do everything you want to do but *that*!"

"You ought to be 'shamed!"

"Aw, I'm on to you! You just done made up your mind that you ain't going to be no good to me, that's all. But don't you think you putting that much over on me!" He measured a distance of half an inch on his thumb and forefinger. "I know what you up to! You just one more no good woman, that's all!"

"If I is, you the cause of it! You the cause of it! You the cause of it!" she repeated monotonously.

"Shut up!"

"You the cause. . . ."

"I said shut up!"

The words died in her throat.

"You ain't no good and you ain't never been no good! You been that way ever since I married you! And don't think it's just lately

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