

Who Will Sing for Lena?

By Janice L. Liddell

PREVIEW: Act I—Scene 1

<On stage is a large chair: an electric chair in shadow at rear of stage. Lights rise on Lena in the chair.>

You don't know me from butterbeans; so it's no way you can care about me or about what's happened to me. I'm hopeful, though - hopeful when you hear my story you'll care—at least a little bit. It's too late to help me. I know that—so don't think that's what I'm expectin'. Naw, I ain't expectin' nothin' like that. Not now. I just want a few people to know my story, a few people to care.

Ooh Lord, I'm nervous. I never talked in front of a lot 'a people like this before—except for that one time. Not even in church. I use to go to church. But never had the chance to talk like this. Not in the Christmas play or Easter pageant. I could sing like a bird, though; had a solo or two in the church choir, but never could talk in front of a crowd. The first time I had to talk in front of a lot 'a folks was in court—in front of all them white folks. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Maybe I should start closer to the beginning. It's not a lot to tell, so don't go getting scared I'm gonna take a lot 'a your time. I won't. Most of my story is about work and it's only so much you can tell about somebody workin'. So I won't be long.

My first memory is me pickin' cotton. Yep, little bitty ol' me. I couldn't a been no more than five or six out there. Out there in them fields pickin' cotton with mama and 'nem for ol' Farmer Cox. Pickin' cotton. Yep, I wasn't much taller than them cotton plants but I could pick me some cotton. My little fingers picked it trash-free and clean—clean 'cept for the pink stains smudged on the soft white balls sometimes. Pretty shade 'a pink it was, too. I tried to wipe the blood from my fingers on the weeds or on my dress; tried to keep it off Farmer Cox's cotton.

Shouldn't even been in no fields. Should'a been somewhere singing nursery rhymes and playing ring games. I was singin' all right—out in the blazin' sun singin' them ol' field songs <*Sings a verse of a field song.*>

Lord knows that was some hard work and He sure knows I hated it, Hated it so much I was glad when I graduated to workin' inside. Graduated, yeah. That was the only graduatin' I did. When I was about ten or twelve Mama moved us from the country to town where she started cleanin' white folks houses and doin' their laundry. Took me with her. Inside work and we was glad for it.

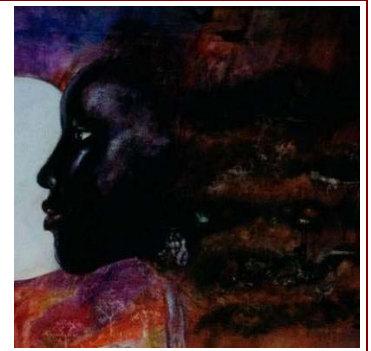
Ain't that something for somebody named Queen to be doin'. That was my mama's name, Queen, but everybody called her Queenie. Here Queen was choppin', cookin' and cleanin' for white folks and taking her princess along with her every step of the way. Her princess. Me a princess, now ain't that a joke. <*Laughs loudly, stops suddenly.*> Don't laugh too much; it ain't that funny. Shoot, I'd made up my mind by then that I was gon' live better than we'd been livin'. Maybe I wouldn't be royalty, but I sure wasn't gon' be nobody's slave. Uh-uh I promised myself that and I was nothing but a kid when I made that promise. Naw, I wasn't gon' be no slave. I was gon' have me some of them fine clothes I saw white folks in and I wasn't gon' work myself to death to get 'em.

Mama worked herself damn near to death and she never had two extra nickels to rub together. No sir, I wasn't gon' have her life. I was gon' be somebody's queen or somethin' else great. Maybe marry me a star, somebody like Clinton Rosamond or Canada Lee. Maybe I'd even be my own star.

I held on to that dream tight as a tick on a dog's behind. And when I was near bout twenty, I come up with the idea that we could earn money easier than workin' in white folk's kitchens or they damn fields. It was me and my best friend Lizzie, but it was my idea. We decided we was gon' open us up a Salon. Which I have you know ain't the same thing as a saloon. It's Salon, like they got up there in New York.

I been hearing about them Salons and rent parties and all that good stuff. Been hearing bout 'em from all the Negroes that NEVER been to N.Y. but had some kin up there or had some kin that had some kin up there. <*Laughs.*> Well me and Lizzie rented this little shack with money she had. Our plan was to cook up some fish and cole slaw, serve a little liquor, play some honkey tonk; I'd even sing. I tol' you I could sing like a bird. <*Sings a few bars of a popular tune of the period.*>

We made us a little money that first weekend, just with folks from the neighborhood. Not a lot, but enough to keep us going. Everybody was havin' a grand time 'cept we noticed the women what came wasn't spending hardly no money. They was just waitin' on the mens to buy them drinks and mens wasn't buyin' all that much for them womens. So the next weekend we invited mostly men folk. I'm telling you, we made us some money that weekend. The few womens that came still wasn't buyin' no liquor so the next weekend we didn't invite no women at all—just what we called our "gentlemen callers". That week, Lord'a mercy, we almost shoveled in the money.



We'd chat with our gentlemen callers sell 'em some good whiskey and have us a grand time. At around midnight, I'd sing a song or two, *<sings a few bars of a blues song of the period.>* then I'd put on some shimmy shimmy music *<puts on a dance song.>* After I'd belted down a couple of drinks myself, I'd tear up the floor. *<dances a few steps.>* Lizzie had a voice like a scrubbin'-board and two left feet. She couldn't sing or dance so it was up to me to set the mood. But Lizzie, that girl could really pick up some money.

I'd shimmy shake and hootchie coo so fast our gentlemen callers must'a been getting sea sick. *<Music plays she dances—music stops.>*

Man, they'd start throwin' money all over the place, mostly dimes and quarters, but every now and then they'd throw some paper too. After that Lizzie'd go around in her black dress that was tighter than new skin and bend over with her big butt spread out all up in they face. *<Bends over with butt towards the audience. Stands and returns facing audience.>* That's how she picked up our tips. 'Course whatever they'd thrown for my singing and dancing, they'd throw even more just to watch her pick it up. We'd be havin' us some sure 'nuff fun and makin' more money in a night than my whole family made in a week choppin' cotton for 'Ol Man Cox. Oh, we partied.

After a while though, hot food, steamin' music, good whiskey and the hootchie cootchie wasn't enough for our gentlemen callers. They wanted more. Yeah, they was wantin' more fun than we were givin' and when I found out how much they were willing to pay for that, Lord, Lord, I sure was game to sell it. Me and Lizzie both. Shoot, the Lord had blessed us with what them men wanted and was willin' to pay good money for. When we finally figured that one out, we started makin' more money that we ever knew existed. Shore couldn't make that kind'a money sellin' hot fish and whiskey.

I bought me some factory made dresses. Bought my mama some too. Put all kind'a good food in the house, even bought Mama a porterhouse steak all to herself. She'd been wantin' a porterhouse since she pinched a piece'a one she cooked for Miz Lovejoy. Thought my mama should be treated like a real queen for once in her life. Ooh wee, we were walkin' in some high cotton and didn't even have to pick it. *<Pauses then sings a popular up beat song. After a few bars—beat.>*

But I tell you, Negroes ain't for shit. They don't want to do nothing to get ahead, and they'll pull you down if they see you trying to. All them siddy hypocrites started complaining to the police about we runnin' a ho' house. A HO' HOUSE! That's exactly what they called our Salon. And us only giving our company what they wanted. That wasn't nothin', when word got out we were entertainin' a coupla WHITE gentlemen callers, all hell broke loose. Wasn't but one or two and we kept them separate from the other mens. Fact was they used a different door. Only time I ever heard'a white man glad to use the back door while the niggas used the front. *<Laughs.>*

One night we was having a real mellow party and all of a sudden the front door sounded like it was bein' torn off the hinges. I was back in the bedroom with one of my special gentlemen. Lizzie was up front sitting and drinking whiskey with a few what I call no-counts. By the time I came from out back, Negroes was diving out the windows and running all over the place. It was such a commotion you wouldn't believe.

I don't even know what happened to the gentleman was with me. It was like he walked through the wall or something. And good thing he did whatever he did. As he wasn't a Negro. I guess we would'a been in a heap more trouble if he'd a been found with me. Race-mixin' ain't tolerated at all here in Cuthbert or any other part of Georgia, far as I know. As it was, the Randolph County Sheriff drug me and Lizzie to jail for the night and charged us with runnin' a Lewd House. We was thrown into the workhouse for six whole months. They might'a lynched us if they'd caught my visitor and me together. The Lord was sure with us that night. But now that I think about it, I'm wondering why the Sheriff didn't come to the back door. Wonder if they wasn't givin' my back door user time to get out. Hmmmm. Like I said, the Lord was sure with us.

Ooh wee, you ain't never seen nothing like the county workhouse and I hope to God you don't ever see it. Not fit for human beins'. Just plain nasty. Women stuffed in cells tight as Lizzie's black dress. Some done got caught breakin' the law like me and Lizzie, some just poor with no place else to go to and some of 'em crazy as cows in a cornfield. You wouldn't believe it. Women coughin' sick, spittin' all kind 'a green nastiness on the floor. Some cryin', some singin' and some screamin' at the top of their lungs. Even had one almost have her baby on that filthy floor. And the food...Mr. Cox fed his hogs better than we what we got. I seen and heard stuff in that place I hope to God I never hear and see again. I know I been to hell, now.

But bad as that was, I bet it was better than what would'a happened if they'd caught me with my special gentleman caller.

Didn't wanna be nobody's strange fruit is all I can say. *<Beat.>*

END SCENE 1