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Letters from Forest Place

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This is a marvelously interesting collection of letters written over a period of thirty years by members of the Thomas A. Watkins family of Carroll County, Mississippi. The correspondence provides an intimate look into activities in the household of Forest Place during a period of great propserity and a period of decline. The letters reveal the poignant history of Dr. Watkins, a non practicing physician, his wife, and their two daughters. Some include passages written to various favored slaves, who in return dictated their responses.

Besides offering a glimpse into the domestic life on a cotton plantation, these letters picture the years both of abundance and of twilight at Forest Place. The national sectional controversy attracts only scant attention. This antiabolitionist family watches, comments to one another, and witnesses the nation's drifting toward disunion and civil war. When it comes, the war for them remains an awful event happening at a distance, but more and more its effects become the focal subject of the correspondence. The Watkins women make uniforms and engage in raising money to benefit units at the front. As early as 1861 the plantation begins to feel the pinch of shortages and the economic discomfort of shockingly high prices. Dr. Watkins is alarmed over the growing illiquidity of Mississippi state bank notes.

At war's end the family's economic stability has been eroded. Many friends and loved ones have been lost, but for Dr. Watkins the most bitter loss comes when his beloved wife falls ill in 1865 and dies. Through the Reconstruction the family has little relief from economic struggle. Poor growing seasons and uncertain prices eventually cause Dr. Watkins to sell Forest Place and move to Texas to live near his elder daughter. Eventually the remnant of the family left in Mississippi dies off or like the patriarch moves away. Now, only the letters remain.

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