FIRE ON ABEL'S ALTAR

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Half a million grassy acres of undulating prairie in the greater prairie of Texas. Shallow plumtree-shaded valleys among plain three hundred miles from the Gulf. . . Black land, Cross Timbers, Grand Prairie east to west. Treeless prairies where timber strips guide deeper streams cutting the stone that underlies the prairie sod. Rolling through deep valleys thick with elm, pecan, and spotted oak. Bald knobs and rounded hills dense with blackjack and post oak. . . Elm and hackberry defy the prairie. Mesquite grows, thin and stubborn. Coyote, rattlesnake, mockingbird, and antelope. Cold wind and driving snow, dry gullies washed by April rain. Dry summers under the hot sun. . . Sloping gently to the southeast, drained by a sluggish river flowing from the north. . . . . . Denton County. . .
PART I: THE PYRE

Chapter I

Dirty white clouds funneled to the east in the pale afternoon sky, sending hearse breezes to whistle on the greening branches of the May trees. Mounds and thickets lay behind them, east, and the land north, south, west rolled lushly with short, thick grass. Along the slender creek channels cottonwood and elm trees guarded green, lazy water moving slower than the travelers moved.

Charlotte Gonnough shivered, wished her husband would come and relieve her at the reins of the wagon. Her arms were stiff and tired, and the small life inside her belly protested against the roughness of the wooden seat and the rougher trail which the wagon followed west. Suddenly her husband appeared at the front of the wagon and leaped onto the seat beside her.

"Abel!" she cried, "I was wishing for you and you frightened me."

Abel Gonnough took Charlotte in his arms and pulled her face to his. "Ah, ma chere! News and good news!" he exploded. "Mister Cannon says we will be at the cabins before night!" Abel squinted at the thin, bluish clouds massing ahead of them. . . . "Before it rains if we are
lucky." Charlotte's pain was lessened by the news; the hot, sharp gnawing in her stomach ceased for a moment. She sighed.

"Before night!" she repeated. "But why has he not told us before?"

"He was not certain. . . . Not sure we could travel so far today." Abel sighed, relieved. "Mister Cannon says we have only to go uphill a little way and from there follow the slope to a level prairie and the settlement!"

His blue eyes shone in his dark face, creases of worry temporarily erased by elation. Charlotte looked at him, trying to remember how young he really was, forgetting for a moment that she too had aged with seriousness and responsibilities. She reached to touch his sun-cracked lips with her fingers.

"Ah, my Abel," she whispered, "is it possible that we are here at last?" She pulled his head to her breast. "Like Abraham you have led your people to a new home in the west."

"Yes," he said, his voice soft with humility, "since New Orleans we have followed a path straight to the sun." His eyes lingered on her face, caressing it, and suddenly he laughed, surprised and happy with what he saw there. "And when the sun sets today, my Charlotte, we will settle with it!" He stopped, swept her face with his eyes. "Who will believe we have come so far through the wilderness?"
"It is a miracle, Abel. God is kind to us because you are so good."

"God is kind to us because the men are so brave."

"And the women?" Charlotte asked, pretending indignation.

"Braver than any of us, cherie," he said gently.

"You were not meant to live as a beast in the wilderness."

"I am not brave, but greedy. I must have you even if it means traveling across the continent of America. Does Mademoiselle Mercier know?"

"She has been walking with the men since morning."

"She is incredible!" laughed Charlotte.

"Walking is not strange to her," Abel said suggestively.

"She has traveled great distances on the dark avenues of Pigalle." Charlotte heard the humor behind his words and replied in the same playfully scolding tone:

"Shh! You must not, Abel Gonnough. Annette Mercier is faithful to Herman LeBron and to her friends... She has endeared herself to me. What she has been is not important." She was serious, her last words a reprimand.

"Indeed she is useful," agreed Abel. "Without Annette, Herman LeBron is like an undisciplined mule, but with her beside him he is the guided power we need." He stopped talking, glanced appraisingly at Charlotte and added:
"You have done much with Mademoiselle Mercier."

"I have done nothing except listen to her," shrugged Charlotte. "She has never been really listened to before . . . . It makes a great difference." Abel laughed at her words and kissed her forehead, mumbling an indistinct word of approval only Charlotte understood.

"Two women and one hundred and fifty men from New Orleans to Denton County, Texas! It is a story, chere." For a moment Abel regarded his wife intently. "Charlotte, you are not sorry you left France?"

Charlotte Gonnough stared into the sun ahead of her, then at the sun darkened face of her husband. "The Palace of Versailles could not tempt me if you were not there, my Abel. I am never cold or lonely when I know you are near."

"I must never lose you, Charlotte. I must never lose you." He watched her a moment longer before he handed her the reins of the wagon. The intensity of his words lingered. "Now I must attend Herman LeBron's leg," he told her matter of factly. "The infection is worse, but he refuses to ride in the wagon." Abel found a small leather bag among the supplies of the wagon and examined its contents. "He says he will walk into the Land Office on his hands if necessary," Abel laughed, "but unless his leg improves rapidly he will be more than glad to ride in the wagon."

"Can I help, Abel?"
"Annette Mercier can hold his hand, chere. That is all he needs to make his pain bearable." Still examining the contents of the bag he asked: "Have you pains today, chere?"

"Ordinary pains," she lied, "not serious enough for a doctor to worry about. . . Go to your patients who need you."

"I shall be back as soon as possible," he told her, trying to keep the concern for her out of his voice. He glanced at the sun, not yet low enough to cast long shadows from the cluster of elm trees at the right of them. "In three hours we shall be on top of the ridge. . . From there we can see the cabins." He kissed her and was gone.

Charlotte watched him disappear, smiled happily at the clouds, black now and massing orderly in the bright sky. The journey was nearly over! The thought sent a contented, suspended feeling through her body, and memories washed across her mind like warm, scented water, memories of France, and Paris, and Abel Sonnough. . . Always Abel Sonnough, for before him she had had no memories. . .

Such a short time ago he had been a medical student at the Sorbonne, protege of her father, and—according to her father—a young man with a brilliant future. So great was the potentiality of Abel Sonnough that her father had insisted on paying his expenses through medical
school, and such a gesture by her father was a great tribute indeed, for Charlotte's father had never been recognized as a generous man! She laughed quietly to herself as she reminisced... She could not forget the first time Abel visited her home. When he entered the house his long face was flushed with walking, for he refused to spend money on transportation and had walked the seven miles from his rooming house.

"You are more beautiful than your father described, Mademoiselle," he told her in the careless patois of the section of Paris in which he lived. His words embarrassed Charlotte, but the young man did not notice.

"You are very kind, Monsieur," Charlotte told him.

"Not kind, Mademoiselle," he corrected, "but honest. That is why your father says I will never be a rich doctor." Charlotte blushed, saw her father chuckle behind his wine glass, while her mother stole admiring glances at the dark young man beside her on the couch, for he was different from the other young men who came to call on her eligible daughter. She wondered at his broad shoulders and slim waist, watched, fascinated, as he walked determinedly but gracefully among the fragiles of her drawing room as if he had walked through many such rooms, and she knew he had not. His strong brown hands caressed the shining glass that held his wine as if they were accustomed to such quality, and she found it difficult to believe that he
was an orphan of the streets whom a protestant charity organization had reared from infancy.

"You did not join the church they offered, Abel?" asked Charlotte's father.

"I joined no church, mon cher Docteur," Abel told him. "I took my name from the secretary of the mission when I was twelve... When I am old enough to choose a religion I shall do so."

"But your ideas are Catholic, mon cher, and that is probably what you will choose. And, are you not old enough now, Abel?"

"In years, Monsieur, yes. In experience, no."

Charlotte saw the frank stares which were exchanged by the two men, but there was not a trace of hostility. When the young man smiled at her she fell in love with the way his blue eyes narrowed and sent small lines toward his dark, heavy eyebrows. The white teeth his smile exposed were large and even, like the drawings of teeth in her father's office. Abel Gommough was extremely handsome, she decided, even though his pale brown hair grew in impossible disorder about his ears and neck and tumbled carelessly across his broad forehead in shingly clean disarray. 'How his women patients will worship him!' she said to herself.

"If your father will permit I shall call on you often, Mademoiselle," he told her at dinner.

"I shall beg his permission, Monsieur," Charlotte
announced. Her mother and father exchanged amused glances. When Abel was gone Charlotte put herself into her father's lap the way she always did when she needed something from him.

"I must have Abel Gonnough for a husband, Papa."

"I direct his career, ma petite chère!" he exclaimed. "I am sorry, but I am afraid I cannot make him fall in love with you."

"I will do that, Papa," Charlotte stated flatly. "It will happen. It will happen." And it happened exactly as Charlotte planned.

When Abel Gonnough became Docteur Abel Gonnough, Charlotte became Madame Gonnough, and Abel went into the practice of her father. Sensitivity and generosity brought him many patients, and although he billed them negligently, indifferently, he realized enough from his practice to live in luxury. Charlotte quickly saw that luxury meant little enough to her husband. He did not notice the rich drapes from the best shops in Paris that hung in their quietly elegant apartment overlooking the fashionable park; he walked indifferently across the costly carpets to touch a flower in bloom on the balcony, conferred with ragged, ill-at-ease patients across the gleaming daintiness of their furniture. But he always saw Charlotte, appreciated the luxury of her, and she was all he needed. As abruptly as Abel had entered her life, his enemies entered Charlotte's life, and her small world was in great chaos.
"He came to me as a patient and I treated him! Is this a criminal act, Charlotte?" Abel's blue eyes were black with anger as he told her.

"He came to you, Abel. He is a revolutionist and he came to you for help! In the books of state that makes you a criminal, my darling. You must tell them you were forced to operate on the man."

"I will tell them only that I damn to hell those who make it illegal to work and eat!" shouted Abel. "This Republic is no better than the France of Louis Phillips and his whores!"

"What can they do to you? What can they do?"

"They will forbid me to practice... They can make me leave France."

"Away from France? Away from life!" cried Charlotte. "Where could we go? You are needed here, Abel."

"No, ma chère, they do not need me here. I would only make more trouble... Charlotte..." Abel came to her, held tightly to her hands, searching her eyes for understanding. "Charlotte... Herman LeBron tells me of an American—from Texas, America—who is in Paris now to find settlers for his country."

Charlotte stared at her husband a long time before she could speak. "But Herman LeBron is a laborer, Abel. He has no family, no house."

"He has no family and no house because he would be a
farmer, Charlotte, but is forced to earn bread cleaning offices for people like your father and me. The bread he earns does not keep his soul alive."

"It is February," Charlotte said at last. "Could we make it to Texas in the winter?"

Abel smiled and kissed her, holding her close to him for a long time. "We could not, ma chere, but I can. I will go and prepare a place for you and the child. . . . When it is summer I will send for you."

"We will go together if we go at all," Charlotte told him firmly. "You can not leave such a big part of you behind."

"Impossible, Charlotte! You could never carry our child through a winter voyage."

"I shall die if I stay here without you! If I die there it will be beside you, and that I must have."

Abel touched her tenderly, brushed at her stubborn tears with delicate fingers. "No," he soothed, "it would be like uncaging the little bird that hangs in our parlor. He could never survive the snows and terrors of the forest. You must wait here."

If necessary I will follow you ten paces behind, Abel Gonnough, but when you leave France I will be with you." Charlotte knew she had won when her husband pulled her to him and pressed her hard against his body. "You will see
what a strong little bird you have uncaged," she said, holding to him fiercely.

"Then we will wait until spring," declared Abel.

"We will go when the American says we may go. . . . Tell me about this Texas, Abel. Can we make a home with savages and wild beasts?"

Abel laughed. "Mister Cannon says the Indians have been given land of their own north of Texas," he said with unexpected enthusiasm, his eyes shining with excitement. "Mister Cannon talks of great herds of buffalo and deer and streams brimming with fish. . . ." He reminded Charlotte of an eager boy looking through the window of a toy shop, and she found herself sharing more than a little of his excitement.

"Do we live in the mountains or the desert of this 'promised land,' Abel?"

"It is much like the countryside of Paris, ma chere!" explained Abel with much authority. "We can have fine vineyards, cattle for our own use. . . . It is no longer a wilderness," he pleaded, "but a place that will give us land and furnish us with the necessary supplies we need to build our own kind of settlement. . . ." He hesitated, then added softly: " . . . a free settlement, for free people."

Doctor Abel Gonnough was a wide-eyed boy embarking on a long holiday. She took his face in her hands and pushed at his disarranged hair with her fingers.
"Can you trust this Monsieur Cannon, Abel?"

"It is a gamble, chere... But I know that I will not be allowed to stay here, and so I like to think that Monsieur Cannon is an honest man."

She held his head pressed against her stomach, kept his face against her so he would not see her tears. "You want to go to this Texas, Abel... I will pray constantly that what Monsieur Cannon has told you is true." Her hands dropped from his face. "When will the trial be?"

Now the excitement was gone, his eyes and mouth narrow. "Very soon, be assured," he said gruffly. "France is anxious to rid herself of 'radicals.'" He looked away from her before he added bitterly: "Some day the people will realize that they are nothing but slaves, but perhaps not until the chains they carry bend them to the dirt!" Charlotte hushed his words with her fingers against his lips.

"If you would reform the world, my darling, you must work with the patience of a spider spinning a web in the wind. To make the poor suddenly rich would confuse them only, and they would be no better."

"Can wisdom come from a thing so beautiful?" he teased, but his eyes were filmed with tears.

"Will you come to the church and pray with me, Abel?"

"I do not know God that well, ma chere. Someday I will begin by asking small favors... . . ."

"In time you will know Him, mon Abel. You will be very
good friends. . . . There is a story in the Bible about a man named Abel. . . . Perhaps God is sending you to Texas to build your altar."

"Perhaps."

"You will build him a beautiful altar someday, my darling."

One week later the highest tribunal in France found Docteur Abel Gonnough guilty of aiding an enemy of the state. The accusations against him were absurd, contrived, but Abel sat, silent, while he heard himself disgraced as a socialist. . . . The sight of the courtroom, the pronouncement of the sentence, the two harried weeks he and Charlotte spent in preparation for the trip to America all kaleidoscoped into a meaningless memory of sight and sound, and at last, unable to believe so much had happened in such a short time, they stood shivering in the February cold of Le Havre, waiting to board the small boat that would carry a hundred and fifty-two French citizens to America, to the freedom of Texas. . . . But Charlotte shrank from the gray of the water, sky, the ship. Abel saw her fear, held her, comforted her, pitied her.

"A ship in the rain is like a wet flower, chere. . . . It is not until the sun shines on it that one sees the beauty of line and color."

"Who is the woman with Herman LeBron?" asked Charlotte.

"She is not for your acquaintance, ma petite. Herman LeBron has brought her here from the street where she walks."
"When we get to America we will not be what we were in France," Charlotte reminded her husband. "If she will be a friend I shall be one."

During the long, creaky voyage from Le Havre to New Orleans Charlotte Gonnoough and Annette Mercier became more than friends; they were two women in a group of one hundred and fifty restless men following a shrouded rainbow, hoping to find its gold, and each woman had something to give to the other. Charlotte Gonnoough knew her man; Annette Mercier knew men.

"Herman LeBrons is a crude peasant," Annette told Charlotte, "and he is often as simple as a child, but like a child he loves without restraint, and a woman who has never known love can not be loved too much." Charlotte was fascinated with Mademoiselle Mercier. The woman was not beautiful, for her eyes were veiled and tired most of the time, and her body was beginning to lose its thin waist, yet when Annette Mercier smiled—and she smiled often now—the radiance of her green eyes warmed an area around her, touched with beauty what she looked at, and Charlotte knew somehow that Mademoiselle Mercier was a woman who would never need beauty; she created beauty in what she looked at or thought about. In a few years Annette would be fat, faded, colorless as the drenched ship in the harbor of Le Havre, but in some inexplicable way she would still be very beautiful... As long as the sunlight could reach her emerald green eyes she would be beautiful.
"You will marry Herman LeBron, Annette?" Charlotte asked.

"If he asks me, Madame. . . If he does not. . . ." Annette shrugged her shoulders in a gesture of impatience, "I will make him a good wife anyhow." She laughed then, and the sound of her laughter reminded Charlotte of village church bells on a sunny morning. "The ox LeBron will marry me to get his six hundred and forty acres of land, if for no other reason!"

"And if you do not marry you will buy your own land?"

"A small bit, perhaps. . . . I do not need much land unless I have an animal like Herman to work it," Charlotte laughed with the woman, but she was curious about her.

"Where did Mademoiselle Mercier get enough money to buy land?" she asked Abel when they were alone.

"Aha!" he chuckled, delighted to display his sagacity, "my little bird has begun to notice life outside the cage! Mademoiselle Mercier, my naive pigeon, gave up a most lucrative practice in order to come to America."

"I am serious, Abel," protested Charlotte. "Are there rich people in Mademoiselle's section of Paris?"

"You will find that the rich are not always as generous as the poor, mon choux. Mademoiselle has also paid for Herman LeBron's passage. . . ."

Charlotte watched Annette laughing with the men, heard parts of ribald stories that made her blush. She was
amazed by a woman who could be so bawdily intimate and keep the respect of her intimates. The men treated Annette with the same politeness they showed Charlotte, and sometimes she envied Annette, but at all times she liked her. . . .

New Orleans glittered like a bright, multi-colored jewel on the dark shore of America. The settlers were delighted to find a part of old France in the new world.

"It is like the story books, Abel!" exclaimed Charlotte. "The carriages, the crowds, the laughter. . . . It is like the streets of Paris decorated for a holiday!"

"Mister Cannon says the winter has been unusually warm and wet. That is why the flowers are early."

Charlotte was enchanted. "And the streets at night are brighter than the Rue Montmartre! Is there such a city in Texas, Abel?"

"We will build such a city, Charlotte. In a few years there will be many cities like this one in America." But Charlotte shook her head.

"Not like this city. . . . Not unless the whole of France sails en masse across the ocean." And when the troup was ready to leave New Orleans Charlotte cried, but she did not let her husband see her tears.

From New Orleans the little group traveled west and north across the soaked, mossy lowlands which lead to pine forests carpeting the gentle slope of western Louisiana. Charlotte
and Annette rode in the covered wagon which Abel bought in New Orleans while the men of the troupe walked, pushing handcarts before them through the slushy cypress forests. Before them rode Mister Cannon on his horse, studying the rain-soaked trails and testing the firmness of the ground. Occasionally the caravan had to make tedious detours around shallow, wide pools which drowned the faint trail they sometimes found to follow. At the end of the first day the group camped at a small creek site which Mister Cannon said was more than twelve miles from New Orleans. The day had been a profitable one. Huge graybearded oaks and fat green elms bordered the banks of the stream, roofing the spot where the settlers prepared for the night. Annette Mercier came to Charlotte carrying two plump rabbits.

"Herman chased them through the grass and killed them with a stick. It is a wonder the poor beasts did not die of fright to see the monster LeBron in pursuit of them!" Annette showed no ill effects from the day's travel. "Do you know how to skin a rabbit, cheri?"

Charlotte could not answer. The limp creatures Annette carried in her hand made her suddenly, violently, ill; she turned from Annette and vomited on the grass. Before she knew what had happened she was sobbing in Annette Mercier's arms.

"Zut! I am such a fool!" cursed Mademoiselle Mercier. "Forgive me, please. . . .I did not think." She dripped cool water from a pail on Charlotte's hot face.
"It is all right, Annette. Please do not say anything about this to my husband. I...am not quite used to the wagon." Annette studied Charlotte's face and boldly looked at her distended belly.

"Sacre bleu! Your child will be here only too soon! The wagon will kill both of you!"

"No, I will yet learn to sit comfortably in the wagon," Charlotte assured her defiantly. "Thank you for the rabbits, Annette. I am quite all right now."

"I am unthinking. . . . Please forgive me, Madame."

"You are kind, Annette. It is I who must apologize."

Annette fetched a blanket from the wagon and spread it on the grass.

"Rest here on the grass, cheri. Annette will fix supper for you as she should have done in the first place."

Before Charlotte could protest Annette disappeared behind a clump of bushes, and she sank gratefully into the soft grass which kept the blanket off the ground. In an incredibly short time Annette was back searching for a pot.

"You have not told your husband you do not feel well," accused Annette.

"Can a woman have a child without a few simple pains?"

"The pains of childbirth are rarely simple, cheri. I know."

"You have had a child, Annette?" Charlotte regretted her question as she watched Annette raise her eyes from the
pot and gaze high and beyond the trees and hills. Finally she turned to Charlotte and her face was lighted by a smile that had something to do with what she had seen across the trees. She kept the smile as she talked.

"When I was very young," she nodded slowly, "I fell in love with a painter who came to our village..." She gazed again above the trees and across the hills. "He wanted to capture the gold and blue shadows of our countryside, he said." She gave a hollow laugh. "He appealed to me to let him paint me holding a gold and blue child... And he left me with such a child growing under my heart." Annette gave a slight shrug. "When my father noticed I was with child he gave me passage to Paris... And the Rue Simon."

"What happened to the child?"

"I gave it to the sisters at the church where he was born."

"And you never saw him after that?" Charlotte saw the corners of Annette's mouth spread upward in a smile, and she was again struck by the beauty she saw in the woman's face.

"I was not permitted to go back," she said softly, "but I rented an apartment overlooking the courtyard of the church, and I saw my little artist, bright and golden as the sun he worked in, trying to capture something he would never capture..." She was talking now to herself more than to
Charlotte. "...And I would wave to him—a lonely woman with many lovers waving to a child who would someday know the same loneliness..." Annette stopped.

"I am sorry, Annette."

"Sorry? I am not sorry. I was unprepared...You have seen a mother cat carrying a kitten down a busy street, looking for a place to hide it, finding no such place. Aha! It would be the same if Annette Mercier carried her baby down the Rue Simon. There are many waiting in the shadows for Annette, but the baby..." She dropped the cleaned rabbits into boiling water. "But it is different with you, Madame Gonnough. You have a husband who loves you as a woman should be loved, and he wants the child you carry," She came to Charlotte, put her fingers on her arm. Charlotte covered the fingers with her own.

"You must give him that child," Annette said kindly.

"You are a kind and generous woman, Annette Mercier. Perhaps you will find...what you are looking for with Herman LeBron." Her words caused Annette to smile, and the smile grew into a small laugh.

"I do not look for much, cheri," she said, patting Charlotte's hand, "nor do I look behind. Let them cook until the color is gone."

"Thank you, Annette. You are a good friend." The two women smiled goodbyes, complete understanding and deep affection between them now. Charlotte's nausea was gone,
but she dared not look into the bubbling pot over the fire just yet. She sank on the blanket and thought of the long, long journey ahead of her.

Slowly, slowly, the wagons, the carts, and the people traveled north, and on the afternoon of the twentieth day they came to the town of Shreveport. Here again the Frenchmen were welcomed by Frenchmen, but here was none of the glamour the immigrants had seen in New Orleans. Settlers on their journeys west from New Orleans usually chose to come up the Mississippi to Baton Rouge and from there via Red River to Shreveport, for at Shreveport supplies could be bought for the overland journey through Texas, and information could be had, unsolicited, from every corner of the town.

"Seems t' me Loosiana's th' place f'r Frenchmen t' settle," one of the provisioners told Abel Gonnough and Mister Cannon. "Don't reckon there's many out in Texas speak your language."

"We will not keep our language, Monsieur," Abel assured the merchant. "We have been speaking English since we left Le Havre."

"Don't say... Well, one thing you'll find in this here country is room for whatever language you want to speak. I get along with these here people just fine... Come here from Philadelphia eight years ago... Not much when I come
Quite a city we got now. Lots o' languages spoke here. . . . Whereabouts you goin' in Texas?"

"Denton County," Cannon told him. "Land colony there got a hundr'd square miles wait'n t' be settled."

"Any bother with Injuns?" the merchant asked. Cannon shook his head.

"Indi'ns all gone north to Indi'ns Territory," Cannon told him. "Once in a while a raid'n party o' Comanches comes lookin' f'r horses, but they bother th' people too much. . . . Last big scrape with th' Indi'ns came in '46. . . ." Few men from Denton took on a few hundr'd braves at a place called Birdville, Tarrant County. Cap'n Denton was killed there. . . . County took its name fr'm him. Not much Indi'ns trouble after that."

"Reckon some day them Redskins'll learn t' leave alone what ain't their'n," drawled the merchant. "Hardheaded cusses, 'though, most of 'em. . . . Reckon they'll be better satisfied now they got land o' their own."

"Perhaps," Abel agreed without conviction. He imagined the happy existence of the Indian in the territory they had just crossed. The trail they had followed from New Orleans to Shreveport was over the rich alluvial soils which lay deep on either side of the river, and rooted in the soil were magnificent cypruss and gum trees, spreading their green shade generously across the river and the trails. In the streams that fed the river were spectacular quantities of
fish such as Abel had never seen. . . . A beautiful, productive land. . . . Cannon told him that most of the Indians had been paid for their land, but Abel could imagine no price great enough to pay for the beauty of the landscape and the extravagant natural resources.

"Do you think that eventually the Indian will even be run out of his Indian Territory?" Abel asked Mister Cannon.

Cannon laughed loudly at the question. "I don't think that'll ever happen, Doctor. I've seen most of it. . . . Not much there 'cept a few ragged hills o' dark brown clay. . . . Purty scenery, but nothin' much t' attract a white man."

With enough provisions from Shreveport the settlers were ready to move west. The first part of the journey had been blessed with pleasant weather, but the sky over Shreveport was black and forbidding the morning of their departure. Abel wrapped his wife in his coat as a precaution against the unusual wind and sunless damp of April.

"You are thin, my Charlotte," he scolded. "You do not eat enough!" The child in Charlotte grew bigger, he noticed, but Charlotte seemed to grow smaller each day, like a branch when the sap of the summer is gone.

"You are too much the docteur," laughed Charlotte. "I shall soon enough be fat and ugly."

"I hear you in the night," he told her, "moaning beside me in the darkness. And when you wake you cling to me like a terrified child." He lowered his eyes, ashamed to look at her. "A hundred times each day I damn myself for your misery!"
"Ah, you are as bad as Annette Mercier!" she scoffed, trying to dismiss his fears. "It is nothing... A few chills, a little fever..."

"And something that makes you cry out in the night. What is it, chere?"

"I am afraid, Abel," she sobbed, pushing her face into the warmth of his arms. "I am afraid I am weak and useless to you!" Abel let her sob in his arms for a moment before he spoke, and when he did speak his words were barely audible.

"Listen to me, ma pigeons, and listen well to me, for too often I am careless and rough with even you, and when I think that I have hurt you it is like a knife turning in my heart." Abel's fingers stroked her hair. "Your love for me has led you far away from everything you know and understand. My crime was not your crime, yet I fear it is you who suffers most for all of us. Never feel useless to me, ma Charlotte," he said hoarsely, "for if you are useless to me, then the sun is useless to the earth." Charlotte stopped sobbing, but she stayed in the comfort of his arms, and for the rest of the day Abel rode beside her in the wagon, seldom speaking to her, as if his heart had been emptied of words. And for the next three weeks he rode part of each day by her side, leaving her only when emergencies demanded, and for Charlotte Gonnough the three weeks were as happy as any she had ever known. ...And in three hours the weary group would be at its destination! Abel is right, she thought. ...God has been kind to them because they are brave. ... ... ...
A noise from the horses caused Charlotte to lift her head. A sharp breeze, cooler than the air of a moment before, tugged at her bonnet. The blue clouds ahead of them were dark and thick now, turning mauve and black even as she watched, and the trees hissed as the puffs of wind from the clouds bore upon them. Rain! Clouds covered a third of the sky now, and an occasional jagged streak of lightning speared through their sides slicing them with white and red fire. Rain. . . Now a roll of thunder followed each explosion of pointed white light. . . It will rain before we reach our destination, Charlotte thought gloomily, and the group will be forced to stop and seek shelter in the heavily wooded area far, far to the left of them; the people will hover together in the pitifully small tents some of the men carried in their carts, prolonging their journey, delaying the triumph of their arrival. . . She prayed silently as she watched the clouds.

The cloud directly ahead of her, magnificent in its enormity, rose blacker and higher, a mountain of gray, thick granite, belching thunder now as regularly as the wheels of the wagon turned, its sound interrupted only by spectacular flashes of serrated white light. Rain. . . She could not turn her eyes away now, stared above and ahead, through eyes that smarted from gusts of wind which came more frequently, chillier, noisier. Charlotte pulled her shawl tighter about her as a few large drops of water splattered on the wagon, and quite as suddenly as it had begun the rain stopped, the
wind subsided noticeably, and the cloud rolled eastward, 
dividing the canopy of the sky into darkness and light, 
terrifyingly beautiful, awesome. . . . The eastern half of 
the sky, eerie and translucent, waited to be covered by 
the approaching blackness.

Abel jumped into the seat beside Charlotte, his lips 
pressed together in stern concentration; Charlotte knew 
something was wrong.

"Herman LeBron's leg is worse?"

"There is no change," Abel told her without looking at 
er. His eyes were narrowed on the clouds. "Mister Cannon 
says we may run into a storm before we reach the cabins."
He still did not turn his gaze from the clouds. "Can you 
bear to go a little faster, Charlotte? It will be better 
if we get there before the storm comes." He looked at her 
now, saw her nod in agreement. Thunder poured out of the 
cloud and bounced about the wagon as he touched the horses 
for more speed. "Take my coat and put all the blankets 
under you," he ordered. "Try to stay comfortable. . . . We 
will outrun the storm." Before his last word was out of his 
mouth the day had grown as dark as a winter evening. He 
pierced the darkness with narrow eyes and again touched the 
horses for speed.

Charlotte obeyed her husband without further question. 
As she spread the blankets across the wagon boards a roar 
of air pushed at the top of the wagon and sent her sprawling
across the unfinished bed. She was not hurt, but the
surprise left her motionless for a moment. Under her she
felt the jar of the wagon as thin wheels ground across an
occasional rock in the path, and all the while the cover
of the wagon throbbed noisily in the wind. A few drops of
water thudded to a stop on the canvas above her. She heard
Abel urging the horses to go faster, faster than the de-
sceding cloud.

"Pressez!" shouted Abel, "Pressez!"

His words were lost in the squall of the wind as it
dipped into the prairie. Trees bowed humbly as it tore
from the black cloud and whined by them, lifting dirt into
the eyes of Abel and the horses, and Abel drove blindly,
following what he hoped was the trail to the cabins, straining
to see the end of the rise and the beginning of the descent
which would lead them to shelter. . . . Now the horses were
no longer pulling; they had reached the top of the rise. He
felt them hold back an instant; then the wagon started down-
hill. Down, down, down, down into safety. . . . A sheet of
rain blew before the wagon now, but the wind ripped it apart
long enough for Abel to see three hundred yards, and spread
before them he saw the line of tall trees and the dim outline
of a cabin closer than the trees. . . . He had got Charlotte
to the log walls of a cabin at least! The clearing dis-
appeared as the heavy curtain of rain draped together across
the path, and a gust of wind pushed the wagon sideways,
lifting two of the wheels clear of the ground. The hill they were traveling down was not steep, and he whipped the horses into a run. Dark now. . . . What he could see of the world was as dark as the color of the howling cloud. . . . Faster, faster. . . .

Frightened by the noise of the cloud and the crack of the whip the horses jerked forward with a creak Abel feared might collapse the wagon, but in desperation he shouted at the horses to travel faster, for the sound of the storm bubbling out of the heavens was a thousand wagons hurtling across the heaving earth of the prairie, freezing him with fear for Charlotte. . . . He must go on now, faster, faster, down, down. . . . Wind and rain and dirt from the horses' hooves tore at his face. . . . Faster, down. . . . down, down, faster.

"Charlotte!" he shouted, but he knew she could not hear him, because the wind shrieked into him, pinning the words in his throat. He was deafened by the roar now, but some part of him knew that Charlotte screamed, and as she screamed he felt himself lifted from the seat, flung to earth. . . . Through the thickness of the swirling rain he saw the wagon rise into the air, hang suspended for the length of a breath, then slammed against the ground with a splintering crash. He tried to rise, but the wind held him down as securely as a strong rope, and he lay helpless. . . . helpless. A few yards from him the terrified horses wailed in short, wild
protest. Again he tried to rise, butting his head relentlessly against a more relentless wind.

"Charlotte!"

Something crashed into the back of his head, drove his face into the ground and strangling mud packed into his eyes, mouth, throat, lungs... He became a part of the darkness.

"Monsieur Docteur! Monsieur! Monsieur!" Abel heard a voice whispering in his ear, and in the blackness he thought it was the voice of Charlotte. Rain! Water... water on his head. Something wet on his forehead soaked through to his eyes, but he could not open them; he pulled at them but they were closed tight, blind.

"Monsieur!" the voice cried again. Now he recognized the voice of Annette Mercier... She wiped blood away from his eyes and he again tried to see through the darkness. Light! Annette's face, horrified and pale, above his own.

"Charlotte!" screamed Abel, felt Annette's arms tighten about him. "Charlotte...!" He tried to rise, fell.

"She is alive, Docteur. Wait until I have stopped the blood." Above them the sky, colorless canopy without a cloud. I have dreamed, he thought. I have dreamed...

In her excitement Annette Mercier babbled in broken French. "Oh Mon Dieu Seigneur! Oh Mon Bon Dieu! It is enough to dissolve the very bones... The earth has turned upside down!" Abel freed himself and ran to the shattered wagon.
"Charlotte!" He saw her covered with blankets beside the wreck of the wagon. He fell beside her, reached to find her pulse.

"Thank God," he groaned. Annette was kneeling with him. Under the cover of the blanket Charlotte Gonmough's body writhed like an animal caught in a net. Quiet now. . . Still. Abel put his ear against her heart.

"There! There are the cabins!" Annette screamed, pointing to a log structure a hundred yards in front of them. "Carry her there." Abel lifted the woman and the blankets and started to run. Ahead of him the cabin moved into the distance, disappeared, but was there when he looked again. How far! Too far. . . . Charlotte's muffled sobs from under the blankets urged him on, on. The cabin did not move now, and a man came from the door, ran toward Abel to help him, but Abel ignored him, rushed through the door. He placed Charlotte gently on the warped mattress in the corner of the cabin and threw off his jacket and shirt.

"Build a fire and boil water," he commanded. Annette grabbed the two iron pots that stood by the hearth and flew to the stream in back of the building. Without a word the man who had met Abel at the door pushed kindling together in the fireplace and sparked it to flame. Charlotte's groans were loud in the room. Abel worked mechanically, his hands obeying his throbbing brain without a lost motion. Perspiration soaked across his naked back.
"Chere, ma chere," he whispered soothingly into Charlotte's ear, but the immense pain had deafened her. The man in the cabin put a bottle of whiskey beside Abel as Annette hung a pot in the fire and threw on small wood to increase the flame. Abel watched, praying, and as he watched his wife's body it told him it was ready. . . . Hold, Charlotte, clinging, Charlotte.

Half an hour later there was no sound in the room except the spew and crack of the dying fire. Abel Gonmough sat with his palms pressed tightly against his eyes; Annette and the man watched him from a few feet away. Watching, waiting, spewing, dying fire.

"You could do nothing, Monsieur," Annette said at last, softly, the sound of the dying fire. "She knew you were with her." Abel sat as still as before. Finally he spoke:

"Where are the others, Annette?"

"Outside, Monsieur. Many prayers have been said. . . ."

"A God that does this will not hear us, Mademoiselle!" spat Abel. "A God that sends a cloud to destroy us will not listen to our prayers!" Annette saw the tears in his eyes through her own tears and walked to him, started to touch him. "I have prayed as no man ever prayed, Annette. . . ."

Before he finished speaking his head dropped forward to his knees. She touched his shoulder with her fingers and made a sign to the other man in the room, and they walked out of the house. Inside they left no sound but the smoldering sticks
in the fire; yet Annette Mercier could hear the agony of the man as surely as she heard the murmur of the stream as it washed by the edge of the little cabin. . . . Behind her the sun pulled its last rays into the blueness of the far away hills. She watched the shadows of the tired day creep across the stream. . . . . . .
CHAPTER II

Rain. Rain dribbed from the swollen belly of the morning sky, sending rivulets across and down the drenched branches, and in the clearing the long grass lay plastered to the black mud as if pressed there by a heavy foot. From the door of the cabin Annette Mercier watched four men push spades through the black ooze in monotonous rhythm, while sounds of busy hammers echoed dully through the wet morning. She took a pan of steaming porridge from the fire to Abel. Through the long night he had not moved from the table, but Annette had several times seen his head fall limply across his folded arms, protesting against the strained muscles in his naked back which held it defiantly erect. Many times during the night she went to him, her hand poised to touch him, to let him know she shared his loneliness, but each time she withdrew, and she watched in her own solitude, watched the palpable blackness of the night pass into the fuzzy gray of dawn. Dawn and rain, all night the rain.

"You must eat, Monsieur Docteur. The men are waiting for you. . . . You must tell them what to do." Slowly Abel raised his swollen eyes to hers; through the brown tangles of his hair he looked at her without recognition. She poured thick coffee into a tin cup and pushed it toward
him. "Some of the men are hurt... They need attention."

Abel Gonmough shook his head violently and rubbed hard at his eyes with his knuckles, trying to rub away the fog of the afternoon and night. From Annette his eyes traveled to the blanketed body of Herman Lebron in the far corner of the room.

"What happened to him, Mademoiselle Mercier?" Before she answered Annette turned from Abel to face the fire.

"When the wind came we stretched ourselves in the ravine. . . . Most of the men managed to push their carts under the shelter of the ditch. Except Herman," she added softly, "he left his cart to help me. . . . He went back for his little cart." Annette turned to face Abel, and as he watched, a patient smile lifted the corners of her mouth, a mouth made suddenly beautiful and sweet. "He was dragging it back with him when the tree fell. . . ."

"He was good," sighed Abel. "The best of us are already gone."

"There are things I do not ask to understand, Monsieur." Still the smile, less now, sadder now.

"Keep your faith and go back to France, Mademoiselle!" Abel muttered angrily. "This is no country for a woman. His voice was husky, hollow with anger. "It will murder you as it murdered her!"

"I will stay and work as I had planned, Monsieur," she said softly but definitely. "There is a reason for what has
happened. . . . Always there is a reason." Abel laughed at her words, but the sound of his laughter tore at the lining of his throat and was prisoned there. Annette saw tears wash his eyes.

"Let us hope that God has had His sacrifice!" shouted Abel, his white knuckles between his teeth to force back the tears. "But He is too anxious! In time I could have built Him a splendid altar!" he said harshly.

"Monsieur has not eaten," Annette said quietly.

Abel faced her angrily. "Heart of a whore!" he swore.

"Are you without feeling?"

Annette straightened herself before him, green eyes flashing darkly in her pale face. "If I have no feeling it is because it has been used up, Monsieur," she replied icily. "I am grateful for what I found with Herman LeBron! I do not mourn because it would be greedy of me." Abel's eyes lowered before her constant stare; he looked away, ashamed of his outburst.

"Forgive me, Mademoiselle," he said, rising, putting on his blouse and coat. Annette Mercier stood before him, blocking his way.

"Monsieur. . . . You have brought us to a new home. . . . The men are bewildered. This dampness has penetrated their spirits, and they are lonely and a little afraid. . . ." Her eyes were warm in pleading; what she had to say came hot off a fire which burned deep in the womb of her soul. "Tell
them they have done the right thing, Monsieur! Forget what has happened long enough to reassure them. . . They believe in you, Monsieur."

As he watched the woman some of the heaviness left his heart. He breathed deeply, felt the air travel to his stomach. Annette Mercier's eyes had not left his face; she saw him fill his lungs before he spoke:

"Do you believe in me, Annette Mercier?" A long moment passed.

"I will believe what you want me to believe, Monsieur," she said at last. Another long moment, a slice of silence as heavy as Abel's eyelids. "Drink your coffee before you go."

Abel put the scalding liquid to his lips and drank without tasting. When he finished Annette had her shawl about her shoulders. He touched her wrist.

"You do not need to go into the rain, Mademoiselle." His words had no effect. Her chin was as high as his own. He offered her his arm and the two descended the short steps of the cabin.

As Abel passed among the group of men huddled in front of the store he acknowledged their remarks of sympathy and touched a few cold hands in remonstration, but it was difficult for him to look bravely into the bedraggled faces, harder still to think of words which would give them the
courage they needed, the courageous words they waited to hear. He felt his own lack of strength. He noticed the crude bandages on several heads and hands, and for a moment he was thankful that at least he could relieve a small part of their physical sufferings. Abel smoothed his limp hair, swung himself to the narrow porch of the log building, still wondering what he could say to his men. His approach had been what it should be, he reasoned, definite, agile. And when he had his hands firmly on the log bannister fencing the porch he felt steady and straight, and he hoped his voice would not betray the twisted thoughts which seethed crookedly inside him. His shoulders were high above the bannister; the strength he felt there allowed his mouth to part in the semblance of a smile.

"My Comrades. . . ." Abel's powerful voice carried across the clearing, rattled through the wet leaves of the dark woods, and at the sound the men before him straightened visibly. He felt close to them, felt a warm feeling of deep affection and pity. Now he knew what he must say and he knew he could say it. They had not seen his fear; they must not see his fear. There was nothing but the waiting men.

". . . .Thank you for your patience. Our arrival was not what any of us expected, but let us give thanks that so many have come so far." . . . .So many have come so far, but Charlotte's once-warm body rests on a mattress of sodden
leaves that is not as soft as her fingernails touching my cheek timidly for the first time. ...Lips that breathed heat into my lips caress the scratch of a worn blanket, and the blood in the heart beneath the blanket is thick and still, like an unfed summer stream.

"Let us pray that we can stay together and build what we came here to build. ..." ...I came to build a world for my child, a towering world high above the stench of plenty rotting just beyond the reach of poverty, far from the blinding dust of battlefields where men lead beasts and beasts lead men to be strangled in the air they have powdered with their hooves. ...And my child is sleeping still in the tomb he was formed in, or watching from the window of a tower he would not leave because he liked not what he saw here....

"It will not be easy, my Comrades, for it will test our hearts and our muscles." Voice, strength, silence. "But what heart is greater than the heart of a free Frenchman? In liberation our muscles will grow stronger day by day, and we will carve 'Egalité' in the rocks and trees of this wilderness!" Abel looked at Annette Mercier's uplifted face, her green eyes shining at him through the mist. .... I have told them, Mademoiselle, and they believe what they hear! Listen to their murmuring voices! My words have released their fears the way Spring releases iceflows in the rivers of the mountains, and their fears will bounce across the rapids and disappear in the swaying sea. And now I see
your God, Mademoiselle Mercier. I see Him in the wet bark of the oak tree, in the glossy green leaves of the vine that spirals up the trunk, and in the depths of your green eyes that would bore through into my brain. Grief blinded me and left me faithless, but now I see. I see...

Abel was brought from his thoughts by a roll of thunder that shook the cabin. A black mass, moving leisurely across the sky from west to east, followed the thunder with a noisy shower of rain. He raised his hand.

"Mister Cannon has given us permission to use the cabins until we can build places of our own... The land company will furnish provisions, arms and ammunition to those of you who have none, and farming implements when we are ready for them. As quickly as possible the land will be distributed according to the contract... and, God willing, some of you will have your families with you within a year..." The group gave noisy approval to his last words, and he held up his hand once again.

"We are now Icarians in a New Icaria, and tomorrow we shall plant our flag and proclaim to the world our own 'Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite!'"

"Vive Icaria!"

"Vive Monsieur le Docteur!"

"C'est le brave!" Tear-wet, rain-wet faces shouted. Final applause was drowned in a torrent of water that swept solidly across the clearing and onto the porch where Abel
Gomnough stood. The crowd disappeared into the shelter of the scattered cabins. Abel raised his face to the rain, let the cool water wash his closed eyes. He felt better now, safer now. Then he thought of Annette Mercier, and he opened his eyes to find her standing a few feet from him, crouched under the leaking awning of the porch roof. He stared at her glistening face, suddenly remembered the men needed attention. She moved after him as he moved. In her hand was his medical bag.

"Stay here until the rain stops," he commanded.

"I will go with you to treat the men," she told him.

"Do as I say," shouted Abel. He took the small medical bag from her and stepped out into the rain. In a moment he was running. Annette Mercier stared after him.

When Abel returned to his cabin it was still raining. Several clouds had emptied a flood over the little settlement, and the ground beneath his feet swirled like a stirred pot. Now the thunder shook farther away in the eastern sky, and low horizontal layers of light appeared and disappeared on the opposite horizon. Abel stepped absently into the comfort of the cabin and stood dripping before the fire. The spring day was soaked and cold. When at last he looked around him he noticed that Annette Mercier had divided the cabin with a blanket attached to pegs in the walls and ceiling; she was tying a corner of the blanket to a peg with a piece of colored ribbon from her hair.
"Put your clothes to dry, Monsieur... And wrap yourself in the flannel sheet I put out for you. When you are dressed there is hot food."

Abel pulled the soaked clothes from his body and hung them across the bench near the fire. He watched thin steam pour off the wet material, and in the seconds it took to disappear he thought of sleep. Suddenly he was very tired...

Covered with the flannel sheet he sat on the bench and began to shake the water from his hair, listening to the small hiss the drops of water made on the burning logs. From a bubbling pot in the fire came the odor of onions, and greasy, minute volcanoes exploded on the surface, sending steam hissing into the coals. He pressed his bare toes against the warmth of the uneven hearth, enjoying the heat that traveled from the soles of his feet up his tired legs. Annette finished tying the corner of the blanket and came to stand behind him.

"The men, Monsieur Docteur?"

"Nothing serious, Mademoiselle... Liniment and sympathy is all they needed." His answer pleased her; she almost smiled.

"They are better now that you have talked to them."

Abel turned to face her, searching for more approval. He saw her smile disappear before it was quite formed.

"Les cercueils are ready, Monsieur," she said, quieter than at first. "Do you not think... we should bury them
before the rain comes again?" Her words caused him to listen; the pounding of the rain had ceased. Suddenly his whole body shook as if chilled by a cold draught. His feet pushed harder against the hearth searching for more warmth.

"Yes," he said flatly. "Yes."

"First you will eat," announced Annette. "It accomplishes nothing if you make yourself ill." As she spoke she scooped a dipper of soup and ladled it into a shallow pan. Abel inhaled the vapor from the pan and realized how hungry he was. When Annette Mercier had filled a plate for herself the two people sat at the table and ate without speaking. Thunder in the east was barely audible now. Bubbles from the stew still exploded into the fire, hissing in protest as they were consumed.

Abel and Annette followed the eight men and two coffins up the gradual rise of the hill, and behind Abel and Annette walked the group of settlers, their boots slipping in and out of the mud with a noise like suckling pigs. Mud, black, thick, sticky, gathered on the boots and clung there, resisting all efforts to dislodge it. Up, up the muddy slope, and then the two coffins were placed by the open holes. They stood in the wet silence, then Abel pulled Annette's hand against his damp shirt. Because they did not know what to do, the group of men stopped a few yards from the graves and bowed bare heads. A few boots sucked in and out of the mud.
"Do you have a prayer, Mademoiselle?" asked Abel. Annette shook her head.

"I have said them all..." Her eyes were as far away as her hand was close. As Abel lifted his head to the spotted sky a gust of wind playing about the slopes of the hill stuck its chilly fingers in his eyes. He curtained them against the grimness of the mud and clouds and opened his lips. The wind carried his words a short distance and tossed them away.

"Our Father which art in heaven..."

...Because I helped a man who tried to help France my Charlotte lies cold in a rough wood box. Hallowed be Charlotte Connough. Follow me through the wilderness, my love, and I will find a deep hole on a black hill when you die and both of us are dead...Sleep in the sunshine we sought and did not find. Dip your stiff fingers in the faded colors of the rainbow we pursued, and let your soft chocolate eyes lie beside me every time I sleep, for in sleep I can again press against your warmth and feel my heart pound as it once pounded, as it pounds in the memory of you....

"Forgive us our debts..."

...Forgive all the men in the world who have killed what they loved most, for they are expiated in the first realization. Thou shalt have no other god before thee. Deliver us from evil, for Thine is the power...And the
glory. . . .Forever. . . .We have walked through Forever, Charlotte, and we did not need to see it. We had faith. Sleep in your innocence. . . .And ever. . . .Amen. . . . So be it. I, Abel Gonnough, do solemnly verify that Charlotte Gonnough is dead and in a box held together by bright nails. Beside the box with bright nails is another box held together by bright nails, and in this box lies one Monsieur Herman LeBron, age thirty-one, rank: peasant. Who will miss you, Herman LeBron? Who will kiss you where you've gone? Adieu, ma petite Charlotte. I loved you. . . . Loved you. I love you now....

"Monsieur Docteur!" Abel felt a tug at his arm and opened his eyes. Without realizing it he had been kneeling by his wife's coffin, his hands gripping the unsmooth edge. He felt the saturated knees of his trousers, blinked uncertainly at the man above him. How long he had been on the ground he did not know, but the men were ready for the interment.

"It will rain in a few moments, Monsieur," apologized the man. Abel looked up at the threatening sky. A few drops of water splashed on the new boards of the coffin and stained it.

"Yes, Monsieur," said Abel.

The man standing above Abel nodded to his companions, and four men knelt by the crude box. Ropes under, under. Ropes and men at the other coffin. Nods to each other, and
the men lowered the boxes into the wet pits. When the boxes rested on the bottoms of the graves the leader of the men looked quizzically at Abel for a sign. A nod to the man, and the first spade of mud splattered to its destination. Abel shuddered. The mud would leak black water into the pale face of Charlotte before the hole was filled, and the thought churned Abel's stomach, sent a fountain of hot, sour water to wash the bottom of his throat. A tear, then tears, and they slid down the hairs of his beard and clung to the ends. Annette moved closer to him and found his hand as the sunless afternoon crept into the thickness of the forest like a weary animal and was swallowed by its dark jaws. As the two tiny crosses were pushed into the mounds of mud, the last few fingers of light were folded into the gray fist of twilight, and the sun was hammered into the distant hills. The day and the dead lay securely buried in the premature darkness. In the thicket a naked bird screamed for the comfort of his mother's wings...
CHAPTER III

May and June swallowed the rains of April and left no friendly drop for July. In the fields, plump weeds, nursed to fatness by the bulging clouds of early spring, bent their heads before the heat of August and burned to part of the dust. Through the last breathless days of the summer the creeks moved—brown, lazy serpents meandering through dusty weeds—but a part of the time, still the settlers did not stop building. Crude log, chinked with dirt and sweat, rose in the interstream triangle of the wilderness. Autumn yellowed the woods, and herds of curious deer nibbled tentatively at the few defiant green shoots, staring with round eyes at the people and the buildings. Sometimes a bewildered antelope left the safety of the woodland fringe to sniff at a fallen tree or plowed furrow; the rattle of a watchful turkey sent him loping to the protection of the forest. The men of New Icaria smiled as the first cool breath of September fluttered the little flag atop their village, for they believed the long, dusty summer was over. They welcomed autumn; they were home.

Memories of Charlotte came less frequently to Abel. Sometimes with the sound of a lost animal in the forest, or sometimes in the early night when the moon dripped cool silver across the sunburned leaves he thought of her,
wanted her, but he gave himself little opportunity to think of what he had lost. He was too busy with what he had found. From hot dawn until scorching sunset he worked with his axe and the rustic instruments the land office furnished, and each night he fell gratefully across the humped bed of leaves in the corner of his cabin. Patiently he scraped at the dry earth, preparing it to take seed; impatiently he waited for autumn and winter to pass. He longed for spring, longed to see his small fields green. To look across the clearing his hands had made filled him with an excitement he had never known. Calloused and black now were his surgeon's hands, but they caressed with a new tenderness. They were burned and black like the fired stumps in the fields, yet they were as gentle as the smile that played about his lips when he secretly watched the wild young things play about the forest. "Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite" were stamped across the faded little banner that fluttered over the settlement, and the words were stamped across the heart of Abel Gonnough. He was home, he was preparing. In the spring he would plant his corn, his cotton, build a small barn, fence more land. ... Winter could not last long in a land of such hot summers he knew. Spring would bring them new life. He thanked God for all he had and asked Him to hurry the coming of fall, to hasten winter on its way. Home, Abel, plant, Abel. Wait for spring.
He spent as much time as he dared talking with Mister Cannon about crops and machinery. The rich, dark soil underfoot promised wealth, but he knew he must learn much about the wind and rain of this new land. As thoroughly as he had searched through medical books a few years ago he studied the intricacies of farming. Mister Cannon talked long hours with him, helped him with unfamiliar words peculiar to Texas, and Abel thought he had found a true friend in America, but this happy venture was short-lived. From Stewartsville came word for Cannon to close the office at Icaria and report to Stewartsville where the land office maintained its main office. Cannon's recall left a void in the life of the settlement, but he left Abel words of encouragement and a promise to help him if he ever needed help. One day Abel was studying the shallow streams, thinking of a project which could divert water from the creeks into the fields. Cannon believed it could be done eventually, and Abel had not forgot the project. He was picturing the dusty fields soaked with water when one of the settlers came rushing to him. The man's hand shook as it grabbed Abel's arm.

"Monsieur Docteur!" blurted the man. "Il faut venir tout de suite!"

"What is it?" cried Abel.

"Tout de suite!" urged the man, still pulling at his arm. "Monsieur Baptiste. . . .He is on fire. . . .Vite! Vite!"
Abel grabbed the man and stared into his rolling eyes. "What are you talking about?" he demanded.

"Monsieur Baptiste, Monsieur Docteur," cracked the man hoarsely. "The heat has him. You must come." Abel let go of the man and went to his cabin for his bag. The man waited until Abel appeared with the bag, then he ran in the direction of the cabin used by Leonard Baptiste. Abel quickened his steps but he did not run. The man's vague terror annoyed him slightly. The man was inside the cabin when Abel entered. There was a smell of death about the room as Abel pushed through the door and looked about for Leonard Baptiste, found him thrashing about in the dark corner of the evil smelling hut. Abel pushed aside the skins over the windows and went to the man.

A dark pool of drying vomit stained the dirt floor next to the sick man's head. Abel held his breath against the odor and felt the pulse. The wrist struggled to free itself. On the rumpled bed Leonard Baptiste bared his teeth in pain and growled like a hurt animal. Faintly, only faintly, a pulse beat in the writhing body. When Abel touched his hand to the man's forehead he withdrew it with a shock. Fever boiled inside the body and scorched the skin.

"Help me get him outside," Abel told the man standing behind him. An examination was impossible in the stinking, dark cabin. Carefully they lifted the sick man out into the narrow rim of shade on the side of the cabin.
"How long has he been like this?" asked Abel. The man with him shrugged.

"Yesterday he will not eat, Monsieur... All night he drinks water, and now... What is it, Monsieur Docteur?"

Before he answered, Abel went back into the house for a pail of water he had noticed there. He found a piece of coarse cloth, and when it was saturated with the water he placed it over the eyes of the sick man.

"It is the sun," Abel told the man with him.

"Impossible, Monsieur," said the man with gestures.

"For two days Leonard has been in the cabin!" The man did not make sense. Abel knew that Leonard Baptiste was dying.

"What are you saying?" Abel growled in annoyance. He had seen several sunstroke cases during his internship in Paris.

"His leg, Monsieur Docteur," the man told him, pointing. "He can not walk for two days... He stays in the cabin."

Abel looked where the man pointed. The leg was swollen and blue about the ankle. As quickly as he could, Abel examined the leg for marks.

"A snake?" he asked. The man with him shook his head.

"The tree, Monsieur," said the man, indicating a large oak stretched close to the other side of the cabin. "It fell when he was chopping it."

Abel looked at the swollen tongue of the man on the ground and listened to his breathing. In a few minutes he
would be dead. Abel felt the perspiration from his own head running into his eyes as he shook his head in silent bewilderment. The man with him went into the cabin; Abel stared at the man on the ground the way a man stares at a difficult passage in a book.

"Monsieur Docteur?" The man had returned and was holding a tin cup of water toward Abel.

Abel sipped the cool water absently before he said, "Thank you." His thoughts were on the sick man and a diagnosis. He had not seen this kind of sickness before... The heat of the man... The black, swollen tongue... Suddenly Abel took the cup from his lips and spat water, paralyzed with the thought that scorched his tongue and throat. Seconds passed and he did not move, then he leapt from the ground and was staring into the startled eyes of the man with him.

"Stay with him," Abel commanded, stepping away. "Do not touch the water you have in the cabin! Do not drink at all until I come back!" Abel was running now, toward the store.

"Monsieur!" squealed the man. Abel Gonnough could not hear him. He was moving like the wind across the clearing...

When Abel reached the office he was wet with running through the heat, but his bowels were cold with fear. A small group of men gathered about the porch of the office building watched in amazement as the doctor came running
toward them. They saw his lips move, knew he was calling to them, but heard nothing. At last two of them ran out to meet him.

"Do not drink a drop of water unless it has been boiled," panted Abel when he was within hearing distance of the men. "Tell everyone to boil the water he has now. . . ." Amazement left the men inanimate; Abel fought for breath. "Go!" he screamed. "Go to each house and tell the men they must not drink the water. . . . Not a drop."

"Monsieur Docteur. . . . ?" said one of the men.

"Fever. . . ." Abel gasped to the curious group.

"Swamp fever."

For a moment there was no movement from the men. Stunned, they watched the doctor, then finally one of them jumped from the porch and ran in the direction of the nearest cabin. Now one of them went in the opposite direction, then another. Like mystified children they waited to hear more, heard no more, and sped away on uncertain journeys. The group had disappeared. Abel Gonnough stood, panted, tried to spit the taste of water from his dry mouth, but the taste burned deep in his throat. He knew it was the same water he had in his cabin. . . . The community lived on the water from a deep pool in Oliver Creek, and the dry summer had slowed the flow, slowed the flow. The fever bred in the thick green pool. . . . Fever bred in the thick green pool. . . .
CHAPTER IV

Two days after Leonard Baptiste was buried thirty men lay vomiting, sweating, dying on the banks of Oliver Creek. Processions of sick men carried sicker men to the banks of the creek, laid them gently on the hard gravel, and returned for more sick. Abel Gonnough and Annette Mercier wandered among the groaning men, wetting cloths for their burning heads and soothing them with their presence. They could do nothing to cure the tortured bodies. Annette Mercier walked beside Abel, behind Abel, watching him closely for a sign, a sign that he had discovered a miraculous remedy for the shattered, agonized men, but she saw no sign; he gave no sign. After a while her eyes no longer followed—they sought, but still he would not look into her eyes with enlightenment. When Annette's accusing eyes found his he turned away from her, pretended to be absorbed in one of the men, an idea. The water in the creek moved slowly south, and with it moved Abel's hopes. He did not know, he did not know, and he hated himself; he felt his helplessness and frustration as surely as he felt the hot and cold sweat that seeped from his body, gluing his clothes to him. Annette boiled kettles of creek water and used it to soak cloths, prepared food the men could not eat, walked among them, talked with them, holding their hands and soothing them
while they died. And they died. With the regularity of the white sun rising across the sterile cloudlessness of the sky they died, and Annette could only hold a hand while the body attached to it burned away. . . .

She slept near them on the creek bank, tending them during the night when they called to her, begged for her, in pain or fear. Abel watched her, saw the creases of strain and sleeplessness cross her pale face. The damp putrid smell of vomit lay thick on the September ground and air, on the trees, in the brown shine of the water as it crept toward a cleaner pool. Abel cursed the nauseating air, marveled at the uncomplaining Annette.

"It will do not good if you kill yourself, Mademoiselle," he told her. "They will die. . . . There is nothing we can do." His words made Annette's green eyes flash in defiance.

"Then I shall not leave until all are dead! At least they will not die lonely." Condemnation shone in her eyes. Abel felt ashamed, weak. Annette lifted her chin. "Monsieur, you know what causes the fever. . . . Why do you not know what to do for it?"

Abel closed his eyes tiredly before he answered, as if telling something he did not like to explain.

"I do not know that it is the water, Mademoiselle Mercier," he said patiently, tiredly. "It is merely an idea, a theory." He was angry now, impatient now. This woman had no right to condemn him because he did not know
how to treat his patients. He looked away from her before he continued:

"Perhaps it is an insect in the leaves of the beds... Perhaps it is caused from eating poisoned meat..."

He sank to the ground and rubbed his fingers across his eyes. "In any event it will do no harm to boil the water."

"Then it is true..." she said softly. "They may all die."

Abel shook his head. "Not all... Some will recover." Silence. He felt her anger turn to pity. "Most of them will die." At his last words she dropped to the ground beside him and put her face close to his.

"Then listen to me," she commanded. "You must make the men think you know how to cope with the fever!" Her hand found his arm. "They are easily fooled... It is better if they think you know what to do." Abel raised his eyes and stared into the face of the woman; anxiety and fatigue marked her face, deeping lines about her mouth and forehead. He laughed.

"I could take your beads and say thirty prayers, Mademoiselle!"

"Then that is better than this!" she cried, pointing to the men scattered on the creek bank. "What kind of treatment is it to carry a man to the stream and bathe his face? Give him a tablet... Bleed him! Do anything!"

Her voice was pitched high with emotion. "You must make
them think you are helping them. . . ." And her last word dropped and fell almost to a whisper. Abel looked at her with surprise.

"Or what?" he spat fiercely. "Do you think they will hang me from a tree because I am not a competent doctor, Mademoiselle?"

"They are frightened." Her voice had lost some of its intensity. "They do not stop to reason."

"Then I will not be too frightened to reason!" shouted Abel. "I will not fool them into thinking I can save them. I will not!" Without looking at him Annette withdrew her hand from his arm and let it drop to her lap. She turned suddenly and walked away from him toward her patients, while Abel stared furiously at the back of her erect head. His eyes followed the movement of her hips as she stooped to speak to a man on the ground, saw the man relax at her touch. While he watched she touched the man's forehead with the backs of her fingers, then pulled the rolled quilt from under his head and spread it across his face. Another dead. The second day of September was losing itself in the twilight; a narrow band of chill wind rippled down the slender canyon of the creek. . . .The day had been hot, the night would be cold. September is a strange, unpredictable month in Texas, thought Abel. He went to gather wood for a fire.

Through the long night Abel and Annette answered the cries of the men, wrapping them against the cold, saying
words of comfort which they did not believe. Sick nights are long nights, and Abel sighed with relief as the sun’s pointed rays pushed through the thick bluishness of the September morning. Every where he looked he saw bodies with covered faces. Fourteen had died during the night, and before the sun climbed to the middle of the sky more would go... More would go, and after that more. And he saw the growing distrust in the eyes of the men he tended. They did not understand why they had been given no medicine, why stabbing, cold nights followed burning days. The paradise they sought was hidden in fire and pain and cold; they would never find it, for they were without help...

Men able to stand gathered in small groups to nod quietly to one another. Abel saw the distrust in their shifting eyes, knew they were censuring him for his incompetence. When one of the group approached him timidly he was ready. Speak, fool.

"Monsieur le Docteur," stammered the spokesman, a greasy, plump peasant from Marsailles whom Abel had included in the venture at the last moment, "the men feel that you should do more for those who are ill..." Abel's growl stopped the man's words.

"God damn what the men think!" The man stared at him with open eyes and mouth. Abel brought his face closer to the flushed face of the man. "Are you a doctor, Monsieur? Is there one among you who is more capable than I?" he spat.
"Monsieur Docteur..."

"I do what I can," continued Abel, his eyes black with fury and his voice low with anger. "Only fools believe in magic remedies. I am not a carnival magician, Monsieur."

He spun about and left the spokesman searching the ground with his eyes. Abel passed Annette Mercier; her cool, level gaze told him she had been watching, but she did not speak until he was past.

"Monsieur Abel..." But Abel did not stop; his pace quickened, and he walked until he came to his hut. "God forgive their ignorance," he said to himself, but it was not for their forgiveness he asked. He was guilty. . . . guilty of more ignorance than theirs, for he was a doctor, a saviour. . . . a fraud.

He sought the shade of a tree and sat down, and tears and perspiration dropped on his clenched fists. His fists opened and closed many times, and many tears rose in his eyes and fell on his restless hands. The sun moved the shelter of the tree, but he did not notice. When at last he heard a rustle near him he straightened his stiff, bent back, felt as he did so the pull of the wet clothes clinging to his body. He glanced up to see Annette Mercier then looked away.

"More are sick," Annette told him.

"And more will be sick," muttered Abel. "And more after that." Silence. The scrape of the fall wind across dry
leaves. "They do not need me, Mademoiselle. . . Listen to their prayers and let them die."

Annette knelt beside him, found his hand. "They are cruel because they do not understand. Their ignorance is cruel. . . They do not understand." Her fingers squeezed his hand. "They will be ashamed."

"They need not be ashamed," said Abel quietly. "It is my ignorance that lets them die. I am the one who does not understand. . . ."

"You must do what I suggested, Abel. There is medicine in the store. Tell the men you have discovered something which will help them. . . ."

"I can not do that."

Annette's fingers dug into his arm. "It is what you must do! A spoonful of medicine will encourage them if it does nothing else. . . That encouragement may mean the difference between life and death for some of them." She rose. "Go to my cabin," she commanded. "Mix some salt water in a pail and I will gather herbs to make the medicine. Go!"

"No," Abel replied softly, "I will not practice such a deception on the men. Salt water and courage will not cure them."

"Then they will die."

But Abel did not hear her words. His eyes focused on the earth beneath his feet, but his mind was far away. "I

"Jefferson!" Annette repeated. "But you do not know the trail. . . . You could never get to Jefferson!" Her fingers bit hard into his arm. "Send one of the men." Abel shook his head.

"I am not needed here. . . . Medicine is needed."

"You must not go!" Her words embarrassed her; she did not want him to hear the despair in her voice and he had heard. He meant to go. She saw it in his face. And there was more in his face, surprise. She looked away. "If you are not here the men may leave."

"And if I stay here they may die." Annette opened her mouth to speak before she looked into his eyes.

"Let me go to Stewartsville and tell Mister Cannon."
A weary smile found Abel's lips for a moment and lingered there.

"Brave woman, foolish woman," he said gently. His hand touched a smudge on her forehead. Her eyes closed at his touch.

"I pray to God you will come back, Abel," she said, her eyes closed tight, a slight tremor in her small voice. "It is such a long distance to Jefferson. . . . Such a long
distance." A curled brown leaf drifted unsteadily to curled brown earth.

"Annette?" he began. Her eyes opened slowly, moist and green, and in them he saw terror. An indescribable feeling flowed through him, the warm sweetness that flowed across his heart when he thought of Charlotte. His palms touched the flesh of her shoulders. "Annette, are you in love with me?" he whispered. But Annette Mercier closed her eyes tightly against his question and shook her head from side to side.

"Annette...?"

No answer. Abel lifted her face, pulled her body against his, and she stood in his arms, close, trembling. Part of her he held, but part of her was remote, unyielding. His mouth touched the lobe of her ear.

"Yes, yes, yes!" she sobbed, pushing herself out of his arms, turning away from him again.

"Annette..."

"No," she said, her voice husky, choked. "It is wrong. God will punish me."

"For loving me?"

"Yes," she cried, facing him now, "for loving you." Her eyes—greener, wetter. "We are not of the same world, Abel Gonnough! I have lived too long in the shadows of Pigalle." Her last word fell, barely audible.

"And I am an exile from my own country," he answered
slowly, softly. He came to her, touched her. "There are no shadows here, chère."

Annette looked away, began to cry, and Abel let her. At last he touched the back of her neck with his lips and she turned to him, her face wet with tears, her eyes the clean green of an April meadow. Her cheek was against Abel's cheek, her tears wetting his face.

"Oh, Abel..."

"It is right, chère," he whispered. "It is right."

And they stood in the diminishing sunshine of the September day, the only two people in the world. Annette felt herself lifted, heard the soft thud of the heavy door as it fell into place, as the world fell into place. The September day paused briefly to glance eastward, then hurried away from the cabin and the people. An uncertain Autumn wind knocked timidly at the door.

Annette held the reins of the horse as Abel mounted, and when he was on the horse he reached for her and lifted her face to the level of his.

"Keep your promise to me, ma chère," he scolded. "Keep yourself warm and do not touch your mouth to anything the men have touched." His lips stopped the answer forming on her lips. He lowered her gently to the ground.

"Come back to me, my Abel," Annette murmured. "I have no heart until you return." He kissed her lightly
on her upturned forehead. Even through the darkness he saw her smile.

"Of course I will be back, little goose. If the trail from here to Jefferson winds through the devil's own hell I will be back."

"I will pray. . . . every hour."

A touch of his hand on the neck of the horse started him on his way; he felt Annette's fingers against the calf of his leg give release, and the night was thicker between them.

"Abel. . . .!" But the only reply she got was the sound of his hand as it slapped against the horse. Blackness now, stretched across the prairie, stretched across the world, only blackness. She ran to the men. . . .
Sleep little seed, sleep. And one day waken and grow
in the warm limestone belly of your mother... Sap from
her ripe flowing breasts the moisture to feed you until the
fire in your cells burns strongly enough to crack the cover
protecting your slumber, for Charlotte is slumber and Annette
is a limestone belly. And Annette is slumber, too. Your
minuscule radicles peep timidly, whitely, shyly, embarrassedly
through your seed coat, wander through the perplexing laby-
rinths of humus, evading as best you can the Minotaur.

You must explore the unexplored, but do not open every
door.

Annette! Annette, Annette... Push unrelentingly!
Strain until your strong back pushes cotyledon and plumule
into the sunshine, and His strong but ever gentle fingers
will grasp and lift them higher and higher and closer and
closer to Him. Now breathe deeply, for you have taken your
second step in germination; a drowsy, inanimate seed has
spread into a young plant, whose clumsy feet are rooted se-
curely in the safety of darkness, and whose uncompleted infant
head peers uncertainly at the strength of the sun. A breeze
touching this head bends it awkwardly, bows it shyly in its
immaturity. Sleep no more, for the fever which raged in you
has been released. Munch greedily at the starch and protein
and oils of your patient, now soluble endosperm. Annette is
the osmosis which will carry food to your ravenous radicle
and your fattening plumule... Feed and grow! For food is
life, and life to you is now no more than food. And you are life. . . Let there be life! There is no death without life, and death—unlike life—is inevitable. Die not, Annette! Nor ever sleep again, for you have slept. . . . Seed! Drowse no more until you die, and too soon you shall die, for death is eternal drowsiness and sleep. And you have slept. . . .

Carefully, laboriously, the soil is prepared to receive the seed. Each clod that obstacles the way is crushed to protect the tender embryo, clutching life. Man crushes the clods with his hands and feet and begs moisture from the clouds with his heart. Strong hands crush; strong hearts beg. . . . Beg not for stronger hands to crush the clods, but beg for stronger hearts to bleed the clouds! If we are strong the clouds pump life into our veins. If we are wrong, Annette, then God is wrong. . . .

I hear a million voices crying in the wilderness, yet heed not; I see a thousand pages waving Truth, yet read not.

For you are my scripture and can not be untrue, and the seed of wheat is feeble and dry until it breathes moisture and begins to bloom. . . . "Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite" and acres of black soil waving grain. Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite. . . . Sparkling winter streams of Fontainebleau and Paris and the sloven brown creeks of Texas. . . . Swamp fever! Charlotte Gonnough lies buried and Herman LeBron lies buried and over their graves wave the resistant weeds
of a Texas summer, waiting. **Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite**, and if you are dead, Annette Mercier, then all the world is a molding corpse, and the world is not a corpse, for somewhere a spark of life grows feebly in the dark red passages of a heart. . . .

I, Abel Gonnough, do take thee, a deep summer day in the moist woods of Fontainebleau, to be a part of me for eternity. Time eternal measured by a slender black ribbon stretched across the immeasurable distance of the sky. Unrequited love unbegun, without end. Green and blue smell the forests of my childhood! The sounds of sunset are mauve and pink streaked with the whiteness of fire. Stand with me, Annette Mercier. Stand with me before our omnipotent God who has given me more than three tasks to do. . . And wail with me because I have not done them well. Look across the ages over the fields of clay and loam and see the tall wheat beckoning us! The tall wheat is my task. . . . The Lord is my shepherd. . . . Although I walk through the valley of wheat Thy rod and Thy staff touch the stalks and release the odor of sunshine. He maketh me lie down in green pastures, and anointeth my head with creek water. . . . I will fear no evil, for the creek water is cool and wet on my boiling forehead. Where He leads me I will follow, and be followed. Where are those who followed, Annette? Where is the Promised Land we held in our hands a moment, before the sky swept it away? Charlotte's frightened face cries
to me through a film of dust, but my fists are helpless against the powder that covers her, stifles her, and she becomes part of the dust. Ashes to ashes and dust. . . . Our Promised Land has become part of the dust. In memory of something I loved more than life itself I push a white cross into black mud. . . . And He will comfort her, all the days of her death, while my cup overflows and drowns what I most love. . . . Goodness and mercy have followed me all the days of my life, but they are graved and follow me no more. A Texas prairie is dusty even after the rain, but I shall sleep dry in the house of the Lord forever and ever. Annette Mercier is my Amen. Earth is a great bell. . . . I hear its peal through heavy waves which pin me to the bottom of the sea. . . . You have waited a long time for me, Charlotte. You have waited and I have come to you at last to run with you barefoot upon the wet sand. Take my hand, and I will find a rock where we can love, safe from the cold tide that washes our feet. A house built on sand washes away, dips into the hungry ocean and is gone, so let us build upon a high rock whose granite roots circle the bowels of the earth. Why do you shiver, Charlotte?

I shiver because the son I meant to bear you is cold in my belly. I shiver because the tide is cold upon my feet, and you can not carry me for I am large with child and heavy as the rock you would build our love on. I shiver, Abel Gonnough, because the heart in me is chilled
by the black cloud of uncertainty that peeps at us with tongue as black as the bottom of the noisy ocean. Shiver with me, Abel, for the cloud watches as we love. Run, mon Abel! Run!

I have conceived on Annette Mercier, Charlotte. Annette will bear me the son you wanted. Annette grows larger now with knowledge of what only you have known. . . . She is part of you because you are part of me, and our son is part of you. Why do you laugh, Charlotte?

I laugh because the twigs from the autumn trees caress and tickle my feet as I walk on them. I laugh because you laugh beside me in the bed of twigs woven of our love. I laugh because you are close to me and smell of autumn and your thigh touches me with the thrill of the first frost of the season. I laugh because autumn is a short season and I see springtime in your sky-colored eyes. I laugh, Abel Gonnough, because I am afraid to weep! I laugh because I dare not weep! I laugh.

Seed are planted in the black wax of our Texas prairie, Charlotte.

I am planted in the black wax of our Texas prairie, Abel.

The seed will grow and bear fruit, Charlotte.

I have grown but I have borne no fruit. Why did you bury me, Abel?

Dead, Charlotte, You are dead.
You have conceived on Annette Mercier?

You are dead.

Will you soon be dead, Abel?

Soon, Charlotte. You have waited a long time for me.

You have waited and I have come barefoot to run with you
upon the sand, wet sand.

Hold me, Abel! I fear the tide!

Hurry, Charlotte! We will hide! But where is Annette
Mercier? You are dead. Nothing can spring to life from
you, but three of us can make life, and she must hide with
us if we have life... You shiver, Charlotte. Why again?

Bend close to me and you will know I do not shiver. My
love is shivering because it is too powerful to express. My
love is too soon gone, Abel, and you must take it now.

Your love is beautiful, too beautiful to touch.

Touch it! It is too soon gone...

Your love is a wild flower peeking through snow,
Charlotte.

Touch it, for the snow will cover it soon.

Your love is the first green shoot on our chestnut tree,
Charlotte.

Touch it... Your love is soft, thick gold of sunset, Charlotte.

You can not touch it, Abel! I shiver now... I
must hide in the black earth of Texas.

Where will I find you? Why do you laugh?
Because I can not hide from you! Your thoughts are my hiding places.

Summer weeds grow on my thoughts. Why do you laugh? You have pulled away the weeds to plant your fruit. Who will help me plant?

I will help you plant. But who will give me seed?

Annette Mercier will give you seed. And you will call the seed Abel.

I will call the seed Abel.

And you shall build an altar, and on the altar... fire.

Fire on Abel's altar.

And when the fire burns brightly you shall say: God. I who do not know God shall say: God.

You will know Him by that time.

When is this time?

Before you come to me, barefoot, to run upon wet sand. Where are you, Charlotte?

God and I hide from you, Abel.

Where will I find you? Why do you still laugh? Because we can not hide from you! Your thoughts are our hiding places. Plant fruit on your thoughts, mon Abel.

When shall I reap, ma Charlotte?

Before you come to me on the sand.

Will you know me then? Now why do you laugh?
Because you will be barefoot and I will know you.

The tide touches my feet with ice!

Yes, the icy tide. I feel its chilly fingers through my shroud.

Why are you buried, Charlotte?

Abel, I am dead. Dead in the black Texas prairie.

But you will bloom when Spring comes to the prairie. . . .

Yes. . . . In the interval between Spring and Summer, and perhaps again just before Autumn becomes Winter. I will bloom.

My son and I will come to see you bloom!

He will not recognize me, Abel. I will be hiding.

Why do you hide from him?

Because death always hides from life, and I am dead before he is alive. . . .

I shall call the seed Abel. I shall build an altar.

I shall build a fire!

A small fire. . . .

A great fire!

A candle lighted for Him is a great fire.

A greater fire!

A small fire will be seen. It will be seen. . . .

A great fire! I feel again the chill. I feel the tide.

Where is the ocean on your prairie, Abel?

It is no ocean. A serpentine stream feeds the prairie.

It is green and brown with fever now.
I thought I heard a silver bell summoning the tide.

I heard no bell. I hear a black funnel whirling out of the sky. . . . Why do you laugh?

Because the bell rings and you do not hear it.

Listen. . . .

Now, I hear the tide.

The bell has summoned it. I cannot wait for the tide, Abel.

I hear the bell now. . . . Why are you running, Charlotte?

Because the bell is life and I am death, and life must not see me. The bell is louder now. . . .

Wait! The tide has washed away your tracks!

The bell, Abel.

I hear it ringing clearly in my ears. . . . Am I life, Charlotte?

You are life, Abel. I am planted in our prairie. . . .
CHAPTER V

"Doctor...? Doctor...?"

Green waves washed the words about Abel’s ears, but still the bell shook him and he could not reply. Waves... . . Bell... . . Suddenly he was released, the waves moving from over him carried him upward with their movement, and before him stretched the thin crust of a shore. Distance, distance, as much distance as he could imagine lay between him and the shore, but there was a shore. There was a shore. His body whirled in the waves as they sped upward, shoreward. Distance. But the shore was closer... . . closer.

Now his fingers dug into the cool permanency of earth, dug into cool, wet sand. The distance was gone. Abel held to the shore, held tight.

The bell bad not been a part of the dream; sunlight carried its sound into the room where he lay, and in the shadows, in the sound of the bell, stood a man, a smiling man.

"We thought several times you had left us," said the man, still smiling. Somewhere Abel had heard the deep, pleasant sound of the voice but he could not remember where. Perhaps it was part of the sound of the water and sand of his dream. "You’re all right now," the man before him said,
"but we sure thought you were a goner a few times there."
The man came closer. "You just need a little rest now."
Abel tried to speak, felt his body shake with the effort.
When the shaking stopped he did speak, and the tired sound
of his voice was strange, surprising.

"I am unable to remember much, Monsieur," Abel said
slowly.

"You've been too sick to remember, Doc," laughed the
man with him. "I haven't seen a fight like yours since I
left the cock fights in Aberdeen." Abel could not listen
long to the man. A drowsiness covered him, pushed him back
into the comfort of the bed. He was remotely annoyed with
himself because he wanted to sleep. . . .Sleep. He felt
suspended, immobile. He closed his eyes. He forced his
eyes open, determined to wake fully now, determined to find
out why. . . .Now he saw the man more clearly. . . .At last
his eyes focused on the man's face. A spade of brown hair
covered the man's chin, ending in a blunt point just above
a black string tie peeping from a white collar. The man
smiled still. Abel had not seen such a costume since New
Orleans, and vaguely he wondered about his own coarse
cotton shirt he had worn since Shreveport. What is the
feel of fine cloth against skin, he wondered idly. The
man started to speak again. . . .

"You've been talking French," the man said, almost
as if his words amused him. "I don't understand the
language too well, but I think I know a lot about you." Still smiling.

Abel wanted to raise his head, but there was too much comfort in the pillow. He let his body sink into the mattress and closed his eyes before he spoke. His words tumbled out, falling, splashing.

"I am from the French settlement in Benton County. . . . I came to get medicine for my people, Monsieur. . . . The whole settlement has. . . . swamp fever!" The words exhausted him and he fell weakly. His head perspired against the pillow. "I must get to Jefferson and get back with medicine. . . ." His eyes closed, tighter. Sleep.

"Well, now," said the man kindly, "that's just about what you've done. I've sent two of my best men to Benton with medicine."

Words. . . . words that washed about his ears but could not be organized into meaning. Abel struggled with the words, afraid he had not heard them, afraid to hear them again. He opened his eyes slowly, stared at the man through his burning eyes.

"To Benton?" This was all Abel could say.

"We found your papers and your money. . . . They're both safe. . . . And you kept telling me over and over why you had come to Jefferson while you were delirious." Words again, more words, but these words whirled more slowly, stopped in the correct places.
"Medicine to Benton?" Abel asked, a child repeating words.

"I'm a doctor... I sent the medicine." The man smiled at Abel again and shook his head from side to side. "Not that medicine will do any good. We haven't discovered what to do for swamp fever."

Abel relaxed against the warm mattress hugging his back. Medicine! Perhaps whatever it was would give the men at the settlement the incentive they needed. Perhaps it would soothe their hearts and let their bodies heal. Perhaps he had not failed them, not completely. Confused and weak he tried to speak. Annette Mercier! Annette was waiting for him. Annette!

"... grateful to you, Monsieur. I am grateful."

"Drink this and get some rest, Doctor Gonrough."

Abel looked blankly at the bottle the man held toward him. "Brandy. It will make you sleep." Sleep! Not again! I must not sleep again, thought Abel. Annette Mercier waited....

"I must get back to Benton, Monsieur," moaned Abel....

Silence, while the man looked at Abel a long time, studying him carefully, his attitude stern yet kind. At last he spoke.

"Listen to me and do as I tell you, Doctor," he said quietly, still kindly. "You wouldn't be of any use to anyone in your present condition even if we managed to get you
back to Denton. You couldn't help a cat have kittens."
Abel felt the trickle of hot liquid against his lips, drank. The warmth of the brandy put him to sleep even as it slid downward...downward...And he was at the warm bottom of dark sleep.

The long night was over, and the sun of the morning came searching through the damp corners of the room. Abel was awake, completely awake. October air in Jefferson was unlike the crisp coolness of a Paris October; it was heavier, wetter, and less fragrant. And now the room was strange, the bed was strange; even Abel was strange to Abel. Why was it October? Was it October? He sat up in the bed, sent his hands to explore his body.

A grayish, coarse cotton garment made like a gown covered him. Its clean smell and worn touch made him think the garment must have been worn many times, laundered many times. It was smooth, clean. His hand touching his face startled him, for his fingers slid deep into masses of hair, the brown curls of a beard. He had been in the room for a long time he knew, for his hair hung to his shoulders, curved over the neck of his gown, and the beard was stiff against his chest when he bent his face. A small mirror hung on the wall by the bed, but the effort involved in seeing himself was too great, and he dismissed the idea of getting out of the bed. His head still throbbled with the effort of thinking; he lay on his side and absently studied
the planks of the floor. Flooring! Also the room had windows with glass panes, doors that swung on hinges. Civilization had reached Jefferson at least. ... In a few years it would move west... west to Denton County and his settlement. Abel could not resist the impulse to look through the window, for he felt isolated in the room with its bed and closed door. He rose, slowly, shaking his head from side to side to clear it, and at last he was sitting on the edge of the bed, his breath coming in spasms, reaching farther into his lungs, but still reaching. Someone knocked softly on the door of his room. His head throbbed steadily.

"Yes?" Abel asked. The door opened and his friend appeared, smiling. Without speaking he came to the side of the bed and felt Abel's pulse.

"Pulsing like a newborn colt," he said to Abel. "A couple more days and you'll be as good as new."

"I felt extremely well this morning, my friend," said Abel. But his head swayed from side to side while the throbbing continued, steadily, deafeningly. Annette Mercier. Annette! "I must arrange for a horse and get to Denton," he told the man.

"Whoa now!" laughed his companion. "You won't be able to sit a horse for a few days more." He stood a few feet from Abel, studying him with twinkling gray eyes, while his fingers moved up and down over his chin. "Jessie,
my wife, will be much offended if you don't stay long enough to recuperate on her good cooking. And we couldn't think of letting you go through Indian territory with all that hair." He laughed, but Abel did not enjoy the humor of the words. Abel tried to rise. The bed shook as he fell back heavily.

"I feel extremely well, my friend," repeated Abel.

"Your lie is as weak as you are," scolded the man. "A person doesn't get up from a month of fever and dance off into the morning."

Abel's brows drew together. "A month!" His friend nodded.

"We found you on the last day of September, lying in the pine thicket just south of the house." Again he smiled. "My name is Mark Robertson. I'm Jefferson's best—and only—doctor."

"A month... here!" murmured Abel, shaken with disbelief. "A month..."

"It isn't a lifetime, my friend," Robertson said. "But it was nearly the end of yours." But Abel Gonnough only shook his head, refusing to believe that a month had passed.

"I am grateful to you, Doctor," he said at last, closing his eyes with his palms. "I can pay you for your services."

Mark Robertson laughed. "I've been paid. Doctors
are scarcer'n spotted hogs in these parts. . . . You're alive, and that's payment enough." Robertson's words struck a chord, made Abel feel ineffably guilty.

"You have saved a doctor who does not know how to doctor, Monsieur." He stretched his palms in a gesture of defeat. "I have no license to practice medicine."

"A license does not make a doctor," Robertson said lightly. "It does not mean your knowledge has been taken away."

"I was forced to leave France for treating a criminal," Abel told him.

"Yes, I know," replied Robertson. "You talked about it when you were sick." Abel stared at Robertson's smiling face.

"He was not a criminal, Doctor. He was only a man who did not believe in slavery. . . . I also do not believe in slavery. Perhaps we are both criminals."

"So you came to Texas where you can believe what you want to?"

"I came to Texas because I could not stay in France," Abel explained tiredly. "I am a political exile because I saved a man's life." Abel stopped abruptly, looked hard into the face of Mark Robertson. "Now I am an exile from my own settlement because I did not know enough to save the lives of my men." He looked from Robertson to the bed, fell exhaustedly across it. "It is curious," mumbled Abel.
"The world is a curiosity, Abel Gonnew. Perhaps that is why it has lasted as long as it has." Abel was tired, he wanted the man to leave. Mark Robertson poured a small amount of amber liquid into a glass, held the glass toward Abel. "Drink it," commanded Robertson. Abel drank, tasted bitterness.

"I have money to pay for a horse... Will you help me?" The liquid began a warm feeling in his stomach.

"I will help you, Doctor. Tomorrow we will talk about the trip, but now you need food and sleep." Abel felt the narrowed gray eyes above the brown beard looking through him. "Jessie has fried up some mighty fine chicken for you. Almost worth being sick to get some of Jessie's cooking. Without saying goodbye the man walked out of the room and Abel waited again. When Jessie Robertson brought his food she had to wake him... During the afternoon and night he waked frequently but never completely. His attempts to rise were futile; each time he sank back onto the bed trembling, hot. Mark Robertson was right, he knew. He was in no condition to travel to Denton, but the realization did not console him; he was angry, frustrated. Sleep was the only escape from his helplessness, and he slept, slept, slept. Long darkness was broken only by the sharp brightness of Mark Robertson's face as he brought food and said words which meant nothing to Abel. The darkness was soothing, warm, timeless, and suddenly it
was bright outside the window of his room. Mark Robertson, grinning at him, stood by his bed.

"Hope you won't hold it against me keeping you doped for three days. Seemed the only way to keep a man like you in bed." Abel did not reply. "You'll feel better once we get you cleaned up a little. Jessie's been after me to remove that great beard of yours, but I thought you might want to keep it as a souvenir."

Abel raised himself to a sitting position. He could sit up. His feet found the floor and he steadied himself holding to the bedpost. He could stand! In another moment the room and its furnishings lay clear and straight before him. He knew a great feeling of relief. He sat again on the bed. Mark Robertson still watched him, poised to help him if necessary.

"You couldn't have walked across the room if you'd wanted to," Robertson told him, "but I wasn't taking any chances."

Abel had to agree. He could not travel. He was thankful he had slept away three days and three nights. His conscience did not shine guiltily in the shadows of sleep.

"Thank you, Doctor."
"Do you feel like talking, Gonough?"
"Of course," Abel lied. He wanted to sleep, to escape.
"I've arranged for a wagon to take you to Denton County. . . ." Robertson waited for his words to impress Abel. "No horses. . . . just a yoke of oxen so you won't be tempted to mount one of them and ride to Denton by yourself." Abel, grateful, waited. "You'll be on a bed in the wagon most of the way," concluded Robertson.

"You are a good friend," said Abel, trying to smile at his benefactor, "a good friend indeed, but it will take more than a month to get to Denton in a wagon. I must get there sooner. . . ."

"You're a stubborn Frenchman, Abel Gonnough, but you'll do as I say. You haven't a chance riding alone. . . . There's a lot of trees between here and Denton County, and. . . ." He paused, lending emphasis to his next words, "this time you may not be so lucky." He waited; Abel nodded. "The wagon is slow but sure. You won't be worth a damn dead, and alive. . . ." Abel waited for Robertson's next words. The unfinished sentence, the strange excited look in the gray eyes, puzzled him.

". . . Alive you can do something for your people and for me."

Abel stared at his companion. Mark Robertson had been a stranger, then a friend, and now he was a stranger once more. Abel shook his head, tried to concentrate. Mark Robertson's gray eyes glowed fiercely.
"I am willing to do whatever I can, Monsieur," Abel said uncertainly.

"Then do as I tell you and we will make ourselves rich and your settlement famous!" Abel could only stare, could only wait.

"Mais je ne comprends pas!" Abel exclaimed stupidly. The two men stared at each other until Robertson continued:

"Denton County has thousands of acres of the best grass in the country. . . . I've studied Texas from the Rio Grande to the Red River. . . ." Seeing Abel's complete bewilderment he hastened to explain. "Jessie's health won't permit our living there, or I'd have been there long ago." Now he sat on the bed at Abel's feet and began to talk with his hands. Excitement glistened in his narrow, gray eyes. Occasionally they opened wide in enthusiasm. "Jefferson's no good for cattle. The market is here, but the swamps breed diseases and there isn't enough open range." Pause. Abel's brain whirled hopelessly. "I own a thousand head of cattle, Gonnough. . . . Take them with you to Denton County, fatten them, and you have a clear trail to Saint Louis or Kansas City with grass and water all the way." Pause. Whirling pause. "Take them and brand half of what they produce with your own brand. In ten years you'll be a rich man." Mark Robertson's voice rose, became treble with excitement. Abel could only look at him. "Say yes and I'll send a man with you who can teach your settlers all they need to know about
cattle. Silence. Abel heard words, words, words.

Robertson seemed a rational man, but cattle... Such a great gift of cattle could not come from a rational man... .

"I... I know nothing about cattle, my friend," Abel replied blankly. "And you know nothing about me!"

"I know I can trust you. That is all I need to know."

"But how do you know you can trust me?" asked Abel, spreading his hands. "I owe my life to you, but you know nothing about me... Nothing."

"A doctor leaves the luxury of Paris for the wilderness of Texas because he is an idealist... an idealist. Such a man is to be trusted, Abel Gonnoy."

Robertson smiled; he was the friend again. "An idealist is a poor investor, Abel, but he is a good investment." Abel smiled, and between the two men was a warm understanding, an affinity. Neither broke the comfortable silence. Mark Robertson had had his say, and he knew what Abel Gonnoy's answer would be. At last he spoke, and some of the excitement of the moment crept into his voice.

"When can I leave for Denton, my friend?"

Mark Robertson's hand found Abel's shoulder. "Then I have a partner, Monsieur Gonnoy?" Abel laughed at the mispronunciation of the French words and nodded in assent.

"And I have a partner, Doctor Robertson... Un Americain incroyable!"
When Mark Robertson was gone Abel lay exhausted with the enormity and complexity of the brief conversation. His illness had not affected his mind. ... Robertson, a virtual stranger, had offered to trust him with a thousand cattle. ... One thousand cattle! Abel Cunnough could not conceive of such a number related to cattle. Surely this America was like no other place in the world, and Texas, the Texas he had led his people to, was a part of the incredible country. ... He smiled weakly, recalling the animated eyes of Mark Robertson. Mark Robertson, un Texan incroyable.

On a colorless December day the wagon and its occupants reached Elm Creek in Denton County. The first blue norther of the season lay stretched across the northwest horizon, Abel was told, but there was no sign of change in the thick damp air, and he seriously doubted the prophetic Ralph Groener who rode beside him on the wagon seat.

"You really believe we shall run into a 'norther' tomorrow, Mister Groener?"

Groener nodded. "Smell it," he admitted. "Sure as God made little green apples she'll come whistlin' out o' th' north as blue new denim, colder'n a Eskeemo's privy."

Abel laughed. A norther was possible, he had to admit, for Texas had completely unpredictable weather. ... A sunlit week through the pine thickets west of Jefferson had soaked him with humid heat that threatened to suffocate him.
Sudden, violent storms pursued them across the small, frequent prairies of the postoak timbered region. Dust and heat had followed them through the prairie region west of the postoak timber area, and even an occasional thunderstorm bogged them down on these prairies. . . . Now they were in the part of Denton County where Mesquite trees and succulent shrubs merge with the postoak and elms, and Ralph Groener expected a blue Texas norther. He could 'smell' it. To Abel the colorless sky suggested snow or sleet, but. . . . He huddled deeper into his long leather jacket, glanced at the man with him, the man Mark Robertson had sent to help with the cattle when they arrived.

Ralph Groener was of indeterminate age, his features so weathermarked it was impossible to say how old or young he was. Wise eyes, narrowed now against the cold of the December day, showed only contempt, but this look was deceiving. Groener loved the wind, blowing hot or cold, loved the furnace-like heat of the summer sun and the damp, soggy chill of winter. He had no family, his friends were in another part of the world, but he was at home with the dirt, the air. These were his friends, familiar, intimate. His narrow eyes searched ahead of them for a windbreak to make camp for the night. When he spoke he looked not at Abel but at the lead-colored sky.

"Reckon we c'n bed down in that cottonwood thicket on th' west bank," he said as the oxen pulled the wagon into
the shallow water of Elm Creek. "Better on this here side," he mused, "but cain't take no chances with a Texas stream. Might be eight foot come mornin'." Without waiting for Abel to speak he shouted an obscenity at the oxen and guided them left toward the thicket. "Norther won't hit 'til late mornin'.'"

Abel sat looking at the fire after the meal of yesterday's antelope was finished. Wagon, oxen, men were safely encamped in a dry creek bed, an intermittent east-west tributary of Elm. The wind was still, the spindly, bare arms of the cottonwood trees stiff and silent. Across the stretch of dry willows rose the wail of a wolf, deep, dismal, distant, and Abel lolled in a strange contentment, a contentment sweet, drowsy, complete. Annette Mercier waited for him.... Tomorrow would bring him home. The guilty feeling of being away when his people needed him was no longer strong, malignant; he felt a release from the tension of the past few weeks, felt younger, unafraid, even eager. Mark Robertson believed in him.... Across the prairie, another day away, waited Annette Mercier. He wanted her, wanted to press his healthy body against her body, fill his nostrils with the sweet odor of her. He stared at the fire and saw Annette Mercier's green eyes caressing him, saw her firm, full breasts in the flame tips as they danced upward, upward, and with the flames soared his eager heart, his young heart. Home! The norther, the prairie, the home, and in his dream
waited Annette Mercier. Abel smiled as his fingers slid across his chin, felt the dirt and wind caked in his beard and hair. His rough thumb scratched across cracked swollen lips, explored the leathery skin between his eyes and the beginning of his beard. What monster did he look like? He laughed. Mister Groener would think him crazy, but he would wash. Annette would want him clean.

Ralph Groener watched Abel take a pail to the creek and bring water to the fire. When the chill was off the water Abel took off his shirt and started to wash himself with part of it. Groener stared incredulously. Abel suspected that his friend had had few baths in his lifetime.

"Expectin' company, Doc?" mumbled Groener. "Reckon your woman'll want you nice and tidy, eh?" His use of the word "woman" meant that Groener thought Abel had a wife at Icaria. Mark Robertson called Jessie his "woman."

"Last bath until spring," joked Abel, scrubbing hard at his beard and hair. He wanted to have his hair cut and his beard shaved off in Jefferson, but there had been no time, and he was glad there had not been time, for the beard served warmly against the cold. His damp hair curled luxuriously to his shoulders, and he thought of the elegant young Doctor Gonnough of Paris; the memory amused him, even comforted him. Ralph Groener would not understand why he laughed, but he laughed, and his laughter bounced far into the cool, still night. Washed, he wrapped himself in a leather skin from
the wagon and came to sit by the glowing fire. Ralph Groener was whetting a long, thin knife on a small stone he carried in his pocket. He looked at Abel huddled on the other side of the fire.

"If you think you c'n trust my barberin', Doc, I'll trim you up a little." Abel chuckled, for he never suspected Ralph Groener was remotely romantic, and clearly Ralph Groener was thinking of Abel's "woman."

The knife was razor sharp, and in the skillful fingers of Groener it shaved and shaped Abel's sprawling beard into a neat brown square, hung to his face by close-cut side whiskers. Finished with the beard, Groener pulled Abel's long hair into a tail and tied it tightly with leather string. He docked the hair at the knot and moved back to examine his handiwork.

"Y'look purty as a Paris dandy," he drawled. "Real purty."

Abel ran his fingers over the short hairs of his beard, enjoying the close cleanness. He felt triumphant. He had been very sick, and now he was very well. A long journey was over. I am coming to you, Annette Mercier. . . . .To-morrow will bring me to you. He tossed the severed hair of his beard into the fire and smiled as it blazed and disappeared.

Slowly, too slowly, the wagon pulled up the east ridge overlooking the village of Icaria; the day had grown colder,
grayer. Abel's spirits climbed as the wagon climbed, for now the surroundings were familiar; the settlement was little more than half a mile beyond. A flock of wild turkeys screamed noisily, fleeing from the sounds of the wagon, but to the north a small herd of antelope grazed, curious and defiant, on the slope of a hill. Gusts of wind cut through the prairie like sharp, cold blades; Groener was right. The norther was late, but it was here. Suddenly Abel Gonnough jumped from the seat of the wagon and began to run up the ridge, his heart pounding wildly in the cold air. At the top of the ridge he stopped to breathe, to look, and what he saw sent small explosions bouncing through his heart. In the triangular area between the two creeks stood the cabins. He was home! North wind harder, smarted his eyes, blurred his vision. Home! Buildings rose and fell as he gazed at them through a film of tears. Turning, he waved to Ralph Groener, then whirled again to face the village. Down the slope he ran, down, down, down, and he was a few feet from the office building... Abel stopped still in his tracks, looked wonderingly at the large lock on the door of the building, then he was running again. Faster and faster he hurried, sped past the cabin of Leonard Baptiste... Leonard Baptiste was dead of the fever, his cabin cold and empty... Run, Abel, call Abel... There is the cabin of the fat Maxim Renoir... "Allo! Maxim Renoir!" Why is everyone inside? There should be smoke
curling from the chimneys today... "Allo! Allo!"... If life is here it is hiding... Past four cabins... No sign of life, I have not seen a soul! "Allo! Allo! Allo!" Abel jumped at the door of the next cabin and pounded.

"Allo!" Echo of his fists on the hewn logs was the only answer. Fear squeezed his bowels into a tight knot.

"Allo!" he screamed louder. "Annette! Annette Mercier!" Now his fear made him shake. The village was deserted, the voices gone... Abel hesitated, his fist frozen against the boards of the door. Uttering a cry which meant nothing but a sound he turned from the door and raced toward the cabin of Annette Mercier. Hers was the last cabin in the clearing, and here there must be life! There had to be life! He reached the door, fell against it, his heart and fists beating against heavy puncheon. Beating, shouting... . . Silence.

"Annette Mercier! Annette Mercier! Annette... . ." He could no longer see. No sound came to him, and he dared not open the door into emptiness. Panic made his knees unsteady, he sank to the ground. Silence. Silence! He cried out, a howl, not a word. Annette... . Annette was dead, the cabins painted against a colorless sky... . No life, no smoke... . Even the birds had stopped sighing in the clearing. She was dead... . The village was dead. Fall on the ground and die with your village.
"Annette... Annette," moaned Abel. He beat his fist slowly, monotonously against the hard earth, not feeling the pain. "Annette, Annette, Annette..." A chant, a chant.

He thought he heard his name... Listen! No, a sound on the wind, gone with the wind before it formed. Again the sound! Abel! A hot knife split his heart. Curse the wind! Abel! Abel? Louder now... the sound. No, Annette Mercier is dead and the settlement deserted. There is no sound... Abel? Wind... I will die now. It is time for me to die.

"Abel...?" He sat up, stared through his tears. "Abel...!" Across the clearing, running, calling... He rubbed hard at his eyes to erase the vision. Running, running closer, closer... closer.

"Annette... Annette! She was real, in his arms, sobbing, pushing her face against him. The sound of her sobs was the only sound as he held her against him. Wind, then even the wind stopped as they stood, close. No sound.

"Oh dearest God," groaned Abel. "I thought you were dead." Annette could not speak. She clung to him, trembling. "Thank God you are here, my darling," he gasped. Kisses covered her wet face and she pushed harder against him.

"You have come back to me, mon Abel... I knew you would come back."

"I have come back." Cling to me! I must know that this is real. "I have come back to you."
"I have been so afraid. . . . Never leave me again. Never leave me. . . ." Against her trembling back his fingers opened and closed.

"I shall never leave you again," he whispered. "I shall never again leave you." My fingers are close against your back and I will never let you go, for I was afraid when you were gone. . . . Afraid! Abel picked her up tenderly and held her against his chest. He felt her tears against his neck as he carried her to the cabin, and the warm, wet drops against his skin drove the chill from his body, filled his veins with fire. . . .

A slit of light, narrow as a knife edge, cut through a chink of the south wall. In the fireplace glowed the remnants of a fire, and inside and out there was no sound except the soft breathing of Annette. Abel closed his eyes and saw her, the green slightly tilted eyes in the ivory oval of her face, the disarranged bronze of her hair against the sack of the pillow. Against him he felt her, stretched like a warm cat along the lines of his body, touching him where she was swollen with his child. The mattress of straw held them suspended above the rest of the world, gently cradling them against light and darkness, day and night, sound and silence. Annette stirred, and while he looked at her her eyes opened. She came closer to him with her lips opened, put them against his neck.
"It has long been daylight, ma petite," Abel whispered. "It cannot be," groaned Annette sleepily. "Last night was such a little while ago."

"It was long enough to burn away the logs and make the cabin cold."

"Is it really cold?" she asked, eyes closed, lips turned upward in a smile. "I feel nothing..."

"Perhaps you would not feel it if I pushed you out of bed," he teased.

"Only a devil of the devil would do a thing like that," giggled Annette, "and you are my snow-bright angel."

"And your bright angel must flap his wings and fly away."

"Not yet, Abel. Not yet." Annette scraped her nails gently through the sides of Abel's beard. "I am afraid this is a dream. I might find you gone when I wake."

"It is no dream, my own Annette," he told her, holding her hand against his face with his own. "I am completely awake...and it is no dream." He pulled her fingertips to his lips. "But I must make a fire to keep you well and warm." He made a loud noise with his lips and her fingers and they both laughed at the absurdity. "You must stay healthy and bear us a healthy child," he told her after the laugh.

"Are you happy about the child, Abel?"

"Very happy," he said, still holding her hand against his face. "I want children, Annette."
"Promise me you will not love the child more than you love me."

"I promise, my little goose. I love nothing more than I love you..."

"You do not need to love me that much, Abel. I am afraid to be loved that much."

"Then I will love you just as much as you care to be loved." he laughed. "But I will not love you any more this morning. I must build a fire." They lay together in the long, warm luxury of a kiss before Abel jumped out of the bed. He made an exaggerated howl of protest against the sudden cold. Annette laughed, snuggled against the pillow where he had lain. With heavy, contented eyes she watched his movements as he piled kindling on the coals...When the wood blazed he came back to her...

The cabin was warm and snug against the shallow snow that had fallen during the night as Annette and Abel sat down to their breakfast of hot bread and fried venison. From the door of their cabin they could see smoke from the cabin Ralph Groener had moved into. Around them, as far as they could see in any direction, lay the soft snow that would be gone before the day was half over. Annette brought a small jar from a box in the corner of the cabin.

"It is a jar of berries," she told Abel. "The man at the store...showed me how to keep them." She paused because a frown crossed Abel's face as she told him.
"When did the men leave, Annette?"

She hesitated a few seconds before she answered, as if afraid that her answer might hurt him. "A month after you left." Her words had hurt him; she saw it in his averted eyes. She hastened to explain. "The men from Stewartsville came to close the office. . . . They left after that."

"But that would not give me enough time to get to Jefferson and back," he cried. "They did not believe I would come back!"

"They were sick. . . . They were like frightened children."

"When did the men from Jefferson get here with medicine?"

"Men from Jefferson?"

"Mark Robertson sent men with medicine. . . ."

"Quinine came from McKinney with a trader's wagon," she explained, trying to understand his questions. "Perhaps the men from Jefferson sent it on from McKinney. . . ."

"Yes," said Abel absently. "Perhaps. . . . But why did the men leave? Where did they go?"

"Most of them went to Dallas County, to the city there."

"The fools!" spat Abel. "They will find no city there!" His voice changed; the hurt was gone. "Thank you for waiting for me, Annette."

"I knew you would come back, Abel. Every day I prayed."

"The men I brought to America had no faith."
Annette came to Abel and put her hands on his face, turned his face until it looked into hers. "They were sick, mon Abel. It is not that they lacked faith in you. Half were dead!"

"I love you, Annette," he told her quietly. The tense moment was over. Abel smiled. "Mark Robertson is sending cattle to raise here. He says we will be rich." Annette kissed him on the back of his neck.

"I am already rich, Abel Gonnough. I have you..."

"I would like to be rich, Annette," he said to nothing in particular. "Would you like to be rich?"

"If you want riches..." Her tone was jocular.

Abel stared at the corner of the bare cabin, past the bed built into the corner with one post. His voice was far away. "I want it, Annette. I want riches very much."

Across the table from him Annette held her coffee in both hands, looked over the rim of the cup at her lover. Abel was staring into the distance.

"When will the cattle arrive, Abel?"

"Not until spring, Charlotte...Not until spring."

"You called me Charlotte, Abel. Do you think of her?"

Abel saw the pain in Annette's eyes. "Of course I think of her," he said softly. "I loved her. He went to Annette and stood by her. "And I love you, Annette Mercier. I do love you."

"Please do, my Abel," she said, letting her head rest against him. "Please do." She could not see Abel's eyes,
but they were focused on something distant again, someth-
ing he could not quite see. She had to listen carefully to hear his next words:

"They had no faith in me. . . . no faith. . . . I only wanted to give them. . . . freedom."

"It is over, mon Abel." Annette rose and pressed her fingertips to his lips. "We have lost much, but we have found each other."

"When I was with fever I dreamed you had given me a son, Annette. A beautiful son with green fire in his eyes and a spirit as tall as the pines of Texas." His rough finger slid gently down a strand of her hair.

"A beautiful child is born of love, Abel." Annette pressed her face into his shoulder, touched his arm with her teeth. "I will give you such a son," she whispered. "I will give you such a son."
CHAPTER VI

Abel wandered through the empty cabins, walked the disappearing paths around the settlement, wondered if there would be life and activity again. The most deserted building was the land office, for it was here when the settlers arrived, had seen more, heard more than the rest of the hastily constructed buildings. A few of the settlers had begun to build huts far from the land office before the fever drove them out, and now they stood, sterile, cold, staring across cold, sterile fields. Roaming game sometimes stopped to stare at the evidence of invasion by men, stood in a pose of mute indignation, then hurried along, satisfied. Abel Gonnough saw his tiny village in the first stages of decay, and he was confused and angry; the empty cabins, the ill-defined trails, reminded him that he had brought life here only to lose it. He began to search, far from the sight of the empty cabins, for a place to build his house. Since he could not plant crops until spring he could spend the time of winter clearing land and readying lumber for his home. It was staggering to realize that he and Annette owned more than a thousand acres in this new land! A thousand acres! Only a very rich Frenchman could own a thousand acres in France. . . .This Texas prairie was hostile he knew, but he also knew it grew tall grasses, and
the dirt sifting through his fingers was rich, like black, thick blood. He must acquire as much land as he could, raise crops, sell the crops to the Land Colony according to the agreement made in France. Would the Land Colony keep its promise, he wondered, to break and fence the land, buy what the settlers raised? Abel was the only settler now... Would they keep their promise? Could Abel raise crops with his bare hands, his willing heart? No... He must have machinery with which to work; he must have machinery. With what could he buy machinery? Land he owned, but he was poor... He was... He was not poor! He had collected more than a hundred dollars from the settlers before he went to Jefferson, and he still had the money! But the money belonged to the men he had brought to America... The money belonged to... To the dead? To the runaways? The money belonged to the settlement, to those who dared stay, to Abel and Annette. The money was a gift, a fraction of his reward, a partial payment for his services... He told Annette his plan.

"But the money belongs to the men, Abel?" Annette argued. "You can not buy machinery with money they have suffered to save!"

"Am I to search through all of Texas to return each pitiful sum?" he asked her. "Had they waited for me they would have their money."

"You must keep it for them... One day they will come to ask for it. They are wretchedly poor, Abel."
"And we are not rich, Annette," Abel reminded her.
"I can not plant crops with an ax and a shotgun!"
"The cattle will be here in the spring, you said."
But Abel was not listening. His eyes saw tall corn and oats growing.

"Mister Cannon told me of a blacksmith at McKinney who makes a plow with an iron mould board..." His blue eyes shone. "With such a plow, Annette...

"It is wrong to use the money for ourselves," contended Annette. But Abel did not hear her. Corn, oats, life in a settlement given up for dead! He had to plow, to plant, to grow. It is justice when the strong take from the weak to save the weak. Abel would go to McKinney for his plow...

But he did not find it necessary to make a trip to McKinney. An ox wagon, loaded with strong-smelling pine lumber, pulled into the settlement three days before Christmas, stopped at the land office building to announce that the Land Colony at Stewartsville planned to open its Icaria store in January, and that a hundred or more recruits were en route from France, arriving sometime in the summer. Abel listened, fascinated by the news and the bearer of the news, but more by the latter. The man introduced himself as Mister Badger Ferris, representative of Judge Oakhurst's Land Colony, but Ferris was unlike any of the men Abel had seen in Texas. His clothes were dark, clean, expensive, very different from the leather materials worn by frontier
men. Ferris wore a hat that almost went to a point at the top, and the brim was wide enough to shade his small dark eyes and pointed chin, the thin wing of mustache above the white line of his mouth. Whatever Mister Badger Ferris was representative of he was not representa-
tive of the men in Texas, Abel concluded. But the voice was like the wilderness—loud, rasping, like December wind through an oak windbreak. Badger Ferris was surprised to find a man and woman living at Icaria and said so.

"I jist a'posed you'n yore wife'd be movin' on now't yore friends is gone," Ferris said.

"We plan to stay," Abel told him firmly, annoyed with the tone of the stranger and angry with himself for re-
senting what he heard. There was no offense in the man's words.

"Hmmm. . . .right purty spot at that," agreed Ferris, narrowing his already narrowed eyes at the land. He bit from a black plug of tobacco, wiped the plug on his breeches and dropped it in the pocket of his jacket. "Aim t' settle here m'self soon's I c'n pick out jist th' spot t' build onto."

"I have begun to clear some land by the west curve of the stream," Abel told him eagerly. "Perhaps we could work out an agreement to help each other. . . .Some of the logs.." But Badger Ferris shook his head and spat black juice at the small porch of the land office.
"I ain't no carpenter, friend. Gotta' load o' lumber'n niggers comin' down t' do th' buildin!" Abel could not hide his astonishment. Ferris spat again. "You got money? They'll build fer you."

"I am afraid I have not that much money," Abel replied, trying to smile. "I could not think of having a house built." Badger Ferris did not reply, and his smirk clearly dismissed any sympathy he might have for a man who could not afford to hire laborers. With the long mouthed crooked with smirking he tapped his head with his finger.

"I use this. . . .Them that don't uses this. . . ." And he cocked an eyebrow while he turned his hands up and ran his fingers across the palms." Abel left from his talk with Ferris feeling slightly uneasy, but he could not say exactly why he felt that way. Annette was wide-eyed when Abel told her of this man's plans.

"But he must be very rich," she exclaimed. "And he must believe in Icaria," she added happily. "Does he own the niggers, Abel?"

"I talked with the man only ten minutes, ma chere! I did not learn the story of his life!"

"I am so happy he has come here to build a house, Abel." His look stopped her words, sent a frown creasing across her brow. "You do not seem happy about it. . . ."

"Hah!" he scoffed, smiling. "Of course I am happy. We must have settlers." Abel managed to laugh. "Perhaps
I am jealous of such a splendidly dressed gentleman, no?"
Annette laughed with him.

"But leather is ever so much warmer, n’est-ce pas, mon béte?" They laughed again, fell into each other’s arms.

That night Abel lay sleepless beside Annette, thinking of the house he would build... The house he must build before too many settlers arrived...

Abel went to the site he had chosen early the next morning, before the winter sun had been up long enough to warm the winter trees. Faster and faster swung his ax in the chilly weather, but each time he stopped to wipe his brow, fill his lungs, he gazed at more trees, larger trees. But he was undismayed by the enormity of his undertaking; a new eagerness burned in him, drove the ax harder, faster against the forest. Abel longed to see the spot cleared, wanted to stand and picture the house he dreamed of. He kept swinging after he heard the sound of an approaching horse, and as Badger Ferris guided the horse to a stop just inside the partially cleared area the tree cracked to a groan on the ground. Abel stopped a moment to breathe and nod to Ferris. The new arrival took out his tobacco and bit into it before he spoke.

"Reckon you’n me is about t’ have a misunderstandin’, pardner," he said through the side of his tobacco-filled mouth. "This here land yer workin’ s’ hard on b’longs t’
th' land office." Abel could only stare at him; the man's words left him dumb as the felled tree. Finally Abel managed to smile.

"There is a mistake, Monsieur. Mister Cannon and I went over all the land when we came here."

"Seems Mister Cannon made more'n one mistake, friend," drawled Badger Ferris. "I was one o' them that surveyed this here land. . . ." Spittle splattered. "It's all in yore contract."

"I saw no contract," Abel said, angry with the man. "I only know what Mister Cannon told me. I...we own over a thousand acres..."

Badger Ferris nodded in agreement. "Yep. . . ." And when he showed his teeth Abel saw that they had absorbed some of the color of the tobacco. "You own a thousand acres 'n more, but it don't include this here spot. Yore land's all west o' here."

"But why would Mister Cannon show me this place and tell me it is mine?" argued Abel. "It makes no sense!"

Badger Ferris prepared to ride away. "Maybe it don't t' you, Frenchman, but law's law in this here country'n you furriners'll learn that." Ferris prepared to ride away. "Better stop by the office and check yer rights 'fore you waste more time here." He rode. Abel's hands clinched white on the ax handle as the man disappeared. Finally he put his ax over his shoulder and started in the
direction of the office. An hour later he left the office
and walked, trance-like to his cabin.

"What is it, Abel?" asked Annette, seeing the black
look on his face. "What has happened?"

"I can not believe they could make such a mistake,"
Abel groaned after telling Annette the story of Badger
Ferris and the contract. He held up his hands in despair.
"What can a man like me do against the government of Texas?"

"What did the paper say?"

Abel shrugged. "Say? I can tell you I do not know
what it said." He doubled his fists and hit them together
slowly, deliberately. "It was written in script I could
barely read. . . . The landmarks mean something, perhaps,
to the people who plotted the land. . . . Nothing to me!"
His fist drove, smacking into his palm. "Is it no longer
possible to trust others, Annette?" he cried. "I do not
understand people who promise and do not keep the promise."

"I know how you must feel, mon Abel," soothed Annette,
coming to him. "You loved that spot." Her arms went
around him, felt him stiffen. "But there are other places!
We will find another."

"By the great God I will not have another place!" he
shouted. "I have always tried to think of others. . . . I
will begin now to think of myself. . . ." He added softly,
"I begin now to think of Abel Gonnough."

"What can you do, my darling? You must do nothing
you will later regret." When he answered her he did not
look into her eyes, and the hand she held did not respond. For a terribly long moment he was not with her. "My darling. . . ."

"I have never schemed, Annette," he said at last. "I am not a scheming man, but there is a line between pacifism and cowardice. And Mister Badger Ferris is my line." His teeth were close together, the corners of his mouth pulled down in a scowl. His jaws moved in and out slowly, like the beating of an exposed heart.

"My poor Abel," whispered Annette, cradling his head on her swollen stomach, "God has indeed been trying you." Abel did not answer. He wondered what God had to do with the coming of Badger Ferris.

Two wagon loads of lumber, two Negroes, and a thin man with red hair and red eyes arrived to build a house for Badger Ferris. Ralph Groener and Abel were busy adding a room to the cabin when the wagons found their destination and they did not quit working. Badger Ferris came riding to them.

"Wagon brought a keg o' good whiskey. . . . Come on up'n git a drank," he invited.

Abel and Ralph followed him to the office building. Near the wagon stood two silent Negroes, looking with round, white eyes at the deserted cabins. Badger Ferris pointed to the darkies and laughed.
"They're scared o' Indians," he laughed, spilling whiskey from a barrel into tin cups. "Told 'em Indians don't hanker fer black skins, but it don't do no good. Damn good workers though... No brains, but strong 's mad oxes." He handed Abel and Ralph cups of whiskey.

"Here's to th' fanciest house 'n Denton County." Abel noticed that the small red haired man did not wait for the toast but downed his drink in one gulp. Badger Ferris pointed to the two staring Negroes.

"Won that un — he indicated the larger of the two men "-in a poker game at Galveston." Pride was in his voice as he spoke. "Feller I won 'im from couldn't git it straight about full houses. Ha! Ha!" Abel did not understand the joke, could not look amused. Ferris laughed again. "He said Jumbo here was too dumb even t' be a nigger." Laughter from Ferris. Still smiling, Ferris looked at the listening black man. "Him and me understands one another, don't we Jumbo? Give 'im a good dose o' raw-hide tonic t' begin with, an' we ain't had no trouble with 'dumbness' since." He winked at Abel. "Other'n I won from Jess Turner in th' damndest poker game McKinney ever seen."

The words of Badger Ferris burned hotter in Abel than the raw, cold whiskey. He could see that Ralph Groener was also anxious to be gone.

"Thank you for the whiskey, Mister Ferris," Abel said with mock politeness. "I would ask you to drink with me,
but I have no whiskey and no prizes." He could see that his subtlety was lost on a man like Ferris. In confusion Ferris turned to the barrel for more whiskey.

"Poor black devils," grumbled Abel as he and Ralph walked toward their work. "The larger one is in pain. I saw pain in his eyes."

Groener shook his head. "Don't seem right," he said, "a man like him ownin' another man, black or white."

"He does not know the darkies have a soul because he has none himself. . . . Does Mark Robertson own many blacks, Mister Groener?"

"Ten or twelve," Groener told him, "but there ain't any of 'em wouldn't die for him. He gives respect, gets it."

"How does a man like Ferris become connected with the government of Texas?" Abel asked.

"Reckon there ain't anythin' a man cain't buy providin' he's got enough money, Doc. . . . 'Captin' maybe a pass through th' pearly gates, an' I don't reckon they'd have th' money if they was worried about that part of it."

Abel told Annette about the incident of the whiskey while they ate stew of buffalo meat and onions. The afternoon had cleared, the night lay blue and starlit across the prairie. The wind was still, and Abel took away the skin over the window that held the night outside.
"I have never known you to dislike a person so much, Abel." Annette told him. "Is it because he took the land you wanted?"

Abel looked out into the blue night, across the prairie to the Paris of his past. In Paris he had been young and strong, crusading with the fearlessness of the young, the strong. "Yours was a puny effort, Abel Gonnough," he told himself. "You would right the world with a few well aimed blows, but you were afraid to swing your blade." In the beginning there was Chaos, thought Abel, and there will always be chaos as long as men are afraid. . . .

"It is not only that he took the land," he told Annette, "although I feel certain he had no right to it, but it is because he is. . . . evil." His voice grew thin, quiet. "I do not know him well, this Mister Badger Ferris, but I would not be reluctant to kill him."

"Abel! It frightens me to hear you talk like that!"

He turned to her, frowning, his heavy brows drawn together in concern over his thoughts. As Annette watched, his chin dropped a little, his lids closed partly over his eyes as if focusing to see a dim picture. When he spoke his voice was caressing, but it was without the huskiness which crept into it when he made love to Annette.

"I know," he said slowly. "Two years ago. . . . one year ago. . . . perhaps even yesterday it would have
frightened me. . . . It does not frighten me today." A cricket, lost in the winter, chirped to the whole world; the sound was loud in the stillness of the cabin. "I will never be frightened again, Charlotte," he said haltingly, "for I have discovered that I have it in my heart to hurt. . . ." She heard the name, straightened visibly.

Annette went to him, pulled the hide back over the window. "You are cold, my Abel. . . . Come back to me and I will warm you." The cricket found what he sought and stopped chirping. Annette led Abel to the fire, stood close to him. But the blaze did not penetrate his damp, dark spirit. Lost again, the cricket began his sound.

Winter is the lonely season. . . .

Abel walked out into the morning eager to fill his lungs with the crisp, sparkling air and feel it against his face and arms. December had begun, cloudy, frigid, but now it spread bright, cool air across the prairie, leaving its chill only along the dense creek bottoms. He would look for a new site to clear for his house, and for a moment he thought of the many hours and days he had spent clearing the place where Badger Ferris was now building, but he thought briefly on this, for the morning did not encourage such thoughts. Abel inhaled, felt the air expand his lungs until his ribs were tight against the leather of his jacket. Inside the sleeves of his jacket the muscles
in his arms flexed in long ripples as he playfully swung his ax from one hand to the other. He laughed quietly to himself, then aloud. So much of his life had been spent in serious thought! How many ages ago had the boy Abel walked whistling down the gray cobblestones of Paris, coins jingling richly in his pocket? How long it has been since I have laughed the way the boy Abel laughed! The music in him had not played for a long time.

I have become an old man with a winter beard and winter in his eyes, he thought. But he was not old. . . . He was not yet half past his thirtieth year. . . . Perhaps he would get old after his son was born.

"Papa," his son would say to him, "how long have you been old?"

"Since the day you came screaming into the world, mon fils," Abel would tell him. "Before that I was a wild, restless youth raging across the oak forests of Texas." But he could not let his son believe such an untruth; perhaps he would say:

"I was a dreamer, my son. . . . only a dreamer."

"And did you dream happy dreams?" And Abel could not tell his son that his dreams had been happy dreams; he could tell him that he wanted to dream happy dreams.

"I dreamed of you, and those were happy dreams." Abel laughed aloud in the solitude of the forest. How long it had been since he had let himself climb into the realm of
fantasy! How absurd he would feel if anyone could read his thoughts, yet his thoughts were common to all young men. . . . He would work fast today and spend the part of the afternoon just before dark with Annette. This was his favorite time, when the harsh lines of the earth were obscured by a film of twilight, when animals made small, lonely sounds as they sought shelter and company for the night, when everything with a home sought the home. . . . He would find a spot where he and Annette could watch countless twilights sift softly over the prairie. . . .

Abel whirled in the direction of the scream. It came again, the high, terrified sound no animal could make. Again! Abel shuddered. Again, this time a howl, shrill and primitive as a tortured wolf. Abel threw his ax across his shoulder and ran in the direction of the sound. . . . It came again, and he knew it came from the land office building. He ran faster now, faster up the shallow hill, faster down the other side. The screams came oftener as he came closer, and then he could see the three, fifty yards ahead of him, by the south side of the office building.

Badger Ferris was whipping his black; he swung wildly at the broad black back, a long leather strap doubled, held in both his hands, and with each swing of the whip Ferris screamed at the helpless slave like a snarling animal, showing his large yellow teeth in a face contorted and wet with slobber. His blows came rapidly, rhythmically, like
the blows a man uses to pound to death a poisonous snake.
Slobbering screams. The black's head lolled senselessly
on a bloody shoulder.

Abel grabbed Badger Ferris' arms so quickly the man
with the gun did not look away from the black. Badger
Ferris jerked out of Abel's grasp with unbelievable force
and swung the strap at his head, and Abel did not have time
to turn completely away. The lash bit into his right cheek
and eye. Ferris prepared to strike again. The red haired
man with the gun whirled around in surprise just as Abel
drove his head and body into Badger's stomach. Ferris
made a noise like splitting canvas, fell on his back. He
opened his mouth to yell at the man with the gun but no
sound came from his windless lungs. Abel threw himself
against the body of Ferris.

"Git away!" hissed the man with the gun.

Abel pulled the leather strap from Ferris' grasp and
felt the hot, jagged pain of a boot heel jabbed into his
groin. He was blinded by the pain; boiling vomit filled
his mouth and nose. Darkness and pain. He felt the rip
of Ferris' fingernails as they scraped against the skin
covering his eyes.

"Git away!" the man yelled again. Abel struggled to
pull away the nails clawing at his eyes. Blood ran from
the track made by the nails, washed across Abel's lips.
Badger Ferris drove his boot heel into Abel's stomach...
Blackness... Badger Ferris spun, swung, and he was leaning over Abel. Leaning, leering, lunging. Now Abel struggled to pull Badger's body on top of him, and as he did he felt his head ripped open by a jagged rock as Badger fell across him. Pain as hot and wet as boiling water washed a deep channel in his temple. A red, foaming pain spurted through his head... A second time the rock started for his head. Abel grabbed. Ferris stood in his grasp, stood as hard as the stone he wielded. Pulled, escaped... Again the red splashing fury of the rock. Abel grabbed, wrenched the rock from the vice of the furious hand... Paff! Badger Ferris fell across him, jarring his body farther into the earth. Abel's teeth shattered together. Grit between his teeth, bloody grit. Abel groaned for air, grabbed for Ferris with his other hand, felt the arm he was holding pulled away. Air! And all the while the blood dripped from Abel's mouth, soaked across his chin, his jacket. Now he jabbed his thumb hard into Badger Ferris' larynx, jabbed, pressed... pressed harder... harder. Felt the arm he held bend backward, backward... drop. Gristle and bone moved inward under Abel's thumb. Harder, Abel! Press harder! And Badger Ferris tried to scream, only groaned, fell slightly forward. Abel pressed. Harder! The eyes in the tortured face of Ferris rolled madly. Rock again. The crash... In the darkness that followed Abel wound his hands around his opponent's throat.
Closed, and pressed hard with every muscle he could summon. Muscle circled muscle. Press, Abel. Squeeze, Abel! Tighter. . . .Tighter. . . . Muscle on muscle on muscle, and the neck inside the fingers gradually relaxed, the body against Abel went limp. Abel opened his eyes. Light and air! And Ralph Groener stood above him, stared at him. With him stood the man who held the gun, open-mouthed and stiff, without his weapon. Abel pushed; the body of Badger Ferris spilled onto the ground. Ralph Groener held a rag at Abel’s head and drew it away soaked with blood.

"You got a nasty crack on the head, Doc." Groener speaking. Abel got unsteadily to his feet and walked to the man who had held the gun. Abel speaking. His voice surprised him, for his body was empty of feeling or sound. He knew Badger Ferris was dead. On the ground at his feet lay Badger Ferris, dead, dead where he had spilled him.

"We will go into the office and you will sign a statement that I killed Badger Ferris in self-defense," Abel told the man with red hair. His voice was weak, lacking force. He hated Badger Ferris.

"Yessir. . . ." blurted the man. "I seen it was self-defense. The man was a frightened animal with red eyes and red hair, part of Abel’s hate.

"Then you will dig a grave for your friend and bury him."
"Yes sir," gasped the man, "I seen it and it was self-defense."

"It's all right, Doc," Ralph Groener told Abel. "Me and th' darkey saw it, too." Thank you, Ralph Groener. Thank you for being here, seeing here. Abel went to the tree and untied the trembling black man. Badger Ferris had burned off the hide with his strap; once more Abel felt the raw, red pain sweep through his head. The darkey looked at Abel with round white eyes that did not understand what they saw.

"Come to my cabin and I will dress your back," Abel told the black man. The black man nodded dumbly, never taking his round eyes off Abel. Abel touched the shivering body, shuddered.

"Reckon you could stand a little attendin' to yourself, Doc," said Groener. The man who had watched the fight and death of his friend Ferris stood by the body and stared as if he had never seen it before. When Abel and Ralph Groener went into the office—he followed them. Abel Gonnough found a piece of paper with figures scratched on it and started to write.

"Why was he beating the man?" Abel asked while he wrote.

"Jumbo fell tryin' t' unload th' lumber," drawled the man, "an' Badger thought he wuz possumin'. Badger always wuz a mean 'un when he wuz drinkin' . . . ." Abel stopped writing.
"He was drunk?"

"Drunk as gawd almighty," droned the man. "Been drinkin' all night off'n on. . . . He nodded his head at the barrel of whiskey standing a few feet from the corner of the cabin. "After that there barrel like a baby after a tit. . . . Reckon he won't drink no more. . . ."

"Pour it out," said Abel, indicating the barrel. The man stared at him.

"Pour it out?" he asked. "That's a powerful lot o' white mule t' waste."

"All of it," snapped Abel, continuing to write. The man shook his head several times in misunderstanding and looked at Ralph Groener for confirmation. Finally he went to the barrel and dragged it to the door. He hesitated at the door, still uncertain; after another look at Abel and Ralph Groener he turned the barrel on its side and watched the contents bubble out erratically. When it was empty he shoved the barrel onto the ground.

"That's fer shore a dead Indin," he muttered to himself.

"Come here and sign the paper," commanded Abel. The man walked quickly to where Abel sat, looked uncertainly at the pen offered and finally scrawled his name across the paper.

"It shore wuz self-defense," he said as he wrote. "I seen it all and that's what it wuz."
Abel examined the signature, blew on the paper. "And now you had better go bury your friend," he told the man, "unless you want the buzzards to take him." He rose. "And I will keep the key to the office until the Rangers come," he said to Groener. "I suspect that our Mister Badger Ferris does not have the title to the land he claimed. . . ." And even as he spoke he wondered why he had said this.

"Papers are kept in that box, ain't they?" Groener asked. But Abel did not answer immediately. The papers were kept in the box; yesterday he had watched Ferris put them there and drop the key to the iron lock in his pocket.

"Stay here," Abel told Groener. He went outside to the body of Badger Ferris. The key was in the pocket; he put it in his own. . . .A plan had come to him while he watched the whiskey being poured on the ground. . . .A plan.

Abel and Ralph waited until the man threw the body of Ferris across his horse and rode away; the man took no spade with him to dig a grave, and Abel knew that the man did not intend to bury his friend. Ferris would be covered with leaves and branches, and in time the scent would attract scavengers. It did not worry Abel that Badger Ferris would not be buried. He locked the door of the office building and went to the waiting black.

"Come with me," he ordered. The black man rose and followed without even a question in his eyes.
At the cabin Abel explained the incident to Annette. She ran for water to wash the wounds, but Abel knew that she dared not stay; she did not want the men to see fear in her eyes, and she was afraid. Abel's head wounds were red and dirty, but not deep except for a long slit above and behind his ear where the rock had sliced open the scalp. He told Groener to shave away the hair around the wound, and while Groener whetted a razor Abel washed and salved the black's back.

Whelps as thick as two of Abel's fingers rose above the ridges of raw, pink flesh. As he spread ointment on the battered flesh he felt his fingers around the throat of the man who had accomplished this, and he felt no remorse for the life he had strangled. The black man stared at the ground without flinching as Abel's fingers worked tenderly over his throbbing back. His own head had begun to hurt; the raw lips of his wound were chafed by the slightest breeze.

"What is your name?" Abel asked the beaten man. In response the black man shook his head slowly from side to side, but he made no effort to answer the question. "Am I hurting you?" Abel asked him. This time the man shook his head faster and more emphatically. Fear had made him mute. Abel slapped gently at the man's ribs when he had finished, and felt the great sigh of relief or encouragement that shook the great body. Without a word the giant
darkey reached for Abel's hand, and when he held it between his own large black ones he bent to kiss it. Abel was too surprised to make any move.

An hour later Abel walked in the direction of the land office building, the pain in his head rising and subsiding like waves against a rocky shore. He felt the sharpness of the winter wind where it blew around his bandaged head. As a sanitary precaution, Ralph Groener had cut away most of his long hair, and the cold teeth of the winter bit painfully into his naked scalp. Groener was an enigma. His fingers had chopped off the hair with rough abandon, yet the same fingers had carefully, painstakingly made a neat, professional suture with a darning needle and silk thread from Annette's sewing basket, and Abel was again in awe of the frontiersman who spoke the devil's own language but ministered like an angel. Ralph Groener was the kind of man Texas needed.

In this man was the strength and tenderness a great nation is built of. The Badger Ferrises would always be, but Ferris was temporary, the stubborn weeds of spring that could not outlast the brutal heat of summer because the roots are shallow. The Ralph Groeners of the world bloomed unnoticed, but his roots tapped healthy soil, his flowers left healthy seed. Yes, thought Abel, Texas needs men like Groener—powerful men with blasphemy on their lips and God in their hearts.
Abel took out the key and let himself into the building; his plan began. He went first to the log safe that held the papers and unlocked it, reached for the metal box he knew was inside. The box was not locked. He took out the papers, and without reading them placed them about the safe; this done he locked the safe and went to the fireplace. By the fireplace lay neatly stacked logs, by the logs a miniature pyre of bark strips. He pushed the bark into the center of the fireplace and selected three moderately large logs. In five minutes his fire blazed brightly; he stretched his legs contentedly and put his boots near the flame. This is my plan in this snug cabin. . . . When the three logs began to burn evenly he took the rest of the wood and stacked it along the hearth, close to the flame. Then he dragged the table and the two chairs across the cabin to touch the logs, and now he had built a chain of lumber from the opening in the fireplace to the log safe. This done he went to the windows to pull away the cowhide shutters, noticing as he did so the effect of the draft upon the fire. It licked at the logs on the hearth from north to south. . . . In half an hour the cabin would be blazing, and Abel Gonnough would be in another part of the forest. . . . The cool part of the forest Badger Ferris had taken from him, and had ultimately lost to him. . . . Abel locked the door of the cabin when he left.
The friend of Badger Ferris was the first person to see the fire, and his excited shouts brought the others from their cabins, but there was nothing to do. Somewhere inside the cabin the fire had got a good start, and in a matter of minutes after the fire was visible the shell of the cabin crumbled to expose the charred interior. The wind was gusty but inconstant, and it did not leap the flame across the clearing; the beautiful fire burned itself out on the thick logs of the building. ... This is my plan. ... Smoke and possibly flame could be seen from the Ranger Station six miles away, and an investigating Ranger would come from the station—tomorrow perhaps—but there is nothing unusual about a burning cabin; many of the chimneys were made of mud mixed with sticks and grass, and made so imperfectly that fire often found its way through the chinks. Such a fire could be dangerous in the late summer, for a prairie fire, unchecked, could burn its destructive way across the length of the county—Mister Cannon told of a fire that started in Dallas County and made a clean, black path all the way to the Red River, traveling faster than a horse can run—but winter furnished no such kindling. Only a few scorched trees felt the effects of this winter fire. ... The plan was very successful.

The two Rangers listened to the story of Badger Ferris' death and were satisfied; they were sorry about the burned cabin. ...
"S'far as I'm concerned th' state o' Texas is well
rid of a no good sonofabitch," one of the Rangers told
Abel. "He was too mean t' die or he would have been scalped
'r kicked t' death by white mule a long time ago."

"What will happen to the slave?" Abel asked them.
"The other one ran away. . . ."

The Ranger shook his head. "Reckon he's yours, Doctor,
'til we learn otherwise." The question of the slaves was
obviously not important to either of the Rangers. The
Ranger looked around at the burned office, the deserted
cabins. "Ole Man Pratt and his land company seem t' have
forgot about this place here. . . . Reckon they have their
hands full tryin' t' locate a seat for the county an'
keepin' the settlers down in Tarrant County off their necks."
He chuckled. "I'know, it's real funny. . . Th' settlers in
Tarrant County burned out th' Land Office there an' rode
ole Judge 'Poison' Oakhurst out o' th' county. Settlers
say he tricked 'em." He looked around him and laughed. He
was serious again with Abel. "Any Indian trouble around
here?"

"No," Abel told him. "I thought all the Indians had
gone to the Indian Territory across the Red River."

"Most of 'em have," answered the Ranger, "but now an'
then a band comes down tryin' t' steal horses." He looked
about him again. "Reckon there ain't nothin' here for 'em
t' steal," he commented not unkindly. And after two days
the Rangers rode away, and as Abel watched them ride north
he thought about a strange country where a man could be
killed with such little concern. The Rangers had been neither
surprised nor sad about the man Ferris. Strange country
it is! thought Abel, and I have learned much about it in the
last few days. And tomorrow I will learn more. And
after that more. and when I have learned all there is to
learn I will begin to teach. and others will learn.

And what will you teach them, Abel Gonnough?

Teach them? What I want them to know!
Summer leaves gaping black wounds in the dry crust of the prairie; the parched earth waits impatiently for the rains of Autumn to lave its summer sores. After the sterilization of Winter, Spring nurses to verdant life the gray skeletons of Winter. . . .August forte is followed by October's piano. . . .Flebile January is lost in the cantabile of April. . . .Forte, piano, flebile, cantabile. . . .Symphony of wind, and stars. God lifts His hand in a triangle, plays a harmony composed before God became God became God. Male and female, wind and stars. Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. The world whirls rhythmically on an eccentric axis. . . .

A decade passes and is forgotten in the following decade.

Grass grows tall on a damp summer prairie. The black earth, the brown cattle, brown and black men, build a house, an empire. Curious travel extra miles, curse reluctant horses across muddy streams, perspire, and envy the long, rambling house crowning the throne of the prairie, see in its cool shadows the sweat of black men, count in its myriad of windows the hides of brown cattle, praise it, curse it. Abel Gonnough is a legend in Texas; South Carolina is a formal tea party on the Atlantic Seaboard.

"Madame Gonnough has gowns sent to her from Paris," a settler from Indiana tells her invalid daughter. "I wonder how many people in Paris sit on the cold, thin rim of a galvanized slop jar?"
Abel Gonnough, black as the slaves he works beside, studies the country with underlined blue eyes, builds his own cotton gin and deepens a furrow in his cheek because he is laughed at, laughs at himself, runs his gin. Men chase sows, put them in pens with their young and hunt more. Salted hunks of pork hang in a log smokehouse. Time, patience, and glistening sweat build a rail fence for nursing calves and a dairy is born. Corn grows year after year in the same place, and with it is ground away the fertility of the soil. A black baritone as rich as the earth sings about crossing a river in far away Asia. And is joined by the coloratura of a woman in the bars of childbirth. They sing a duet neither understands, but sing with incredible beauty, fragile as a moon ray. Annette Gonnough walks with powdered feet across a new pine floor, wonders about the thin ankles of a cafe-au-lait girl floating a bedspread for her to lie on. The girl is waiting for the solitude of night when she will stand in the cool mud of the creek bank, naked, and laugh with her naked laughing lover. Abel Gonnough and his son Abel Gonnough sit side by side in the afternoon shade and have their hair cut.

"Not too shoth fo lill Mahse... His pappy wanna' keep him young a little longah..."

The world whirls rhythmically on an eccentric axis.
PART TWO: THE SPARK

Chapter VII

When I ask my mother if Ralph Groener is coming to see me before he starts for Kansas City with the cattle she smiles at me the way she smiled at me a long time ago and pulls me to her. She smells like the trees Jumbo pulled up from the woods and put in rows near the house so we can have peaches and plums in the summer. Aunt Mattie doesn’t smell like peaches or plums; she is fat and black and hot from cooking most of the time, and I love Aunt Mattie, I believe, more than anybody in the world except my mother. My father says he got Aunt Mattie for Jumbo, and I guess he did, because not long after my father brought Aunt Mattie from Jefferson she gave Jumbo a little black baby and his name was Jumbo. Little Jumbo. Ralph Groener worried about the watermelon Aunt Mattie swallowed just before Little Jumbo came, but Aunt Mattie was never worried, because she laughed big and white when I asked her about her watermelon. Little Jumbo was big enough to work in the fields with his papa, and I was big enough to work in the fields, but one day I was helping Jumbo and his papa and my father came to the fields to say something to Jumbo and they tell me I can not work with them any more. I don’t like to work in the
fields. It is hot. I don't know why Jumbo and his father work in the fields when it is so hot. My father tells Jumbo he is to come to the house this afternoon and cut our hair because it is my birthday. My father and I sit side by side in the shade while the darkies cut our hair. I have had ten birthdays, my mother says.

"Not too short," my father tells Jumbo. Jumbo shakes his big black head from side to side and tells my father that long hair is too hot in the summer, but my father tells Jumbo to do as he says, then my father tells the darky cutting his hair to cut it close for the summer. Later my mother says:

"He has to grow up, Abel." And my father feels my head and says he knows that. My father has big hands. My mother says he was a doctor before he came to America. America doesn't need doctors. When one of the darkies is sick my father takes care of him. His hands are big enough to take care of everybody.

"Will Ralph Groener come to see me before he leaves for Kansas City?"

My father smiles and makes a sound as if he were sneezing but he doesn't sneeze. There is much talk about my father being handsome; the darkies say I am handsome just like my father. What does handsome mean, I ask? Big white teeth in a brown face? My father has big, white teeth and long brown curly hair except during the summer, and he has
eyes the same color as the bird eggs Ralph Groener and I find in the slender tree at the edge of the house. Robin eggs, Ralph Groener says, and I have never seen such blue on any eggs before. My eyes are green, like my mother's eyes, and I never hear anyone say that my mother is handsome, but I think she is. I had rather look at my mother than anything in the whole world, except Aunt Mattie. She has big, white teeth in a brown face, too.

"Ralph Groener is your hero, isn't he?" smiles papa, feeling my head. I don't know what a hero is, but I want to be just like Ralph Groener when I'm grown. He talks like the darkies but he doesn't say the same things, and my mother says he never bathes, but I know that Ralph Groener knows how to pull a calf out of a cow—I saw him do this one day when we were riding across the field and heard a cow moaning. When Ralph finishes pulling the calf out, the cow looks at him with round, sleepy eyes and quits moaning. The cow goes to sleep after that and we bring the calf to the barn, Ralph holding it with one arm all the way. With one arm all the way! He is clean even if he never bathes, and I would lie down right beside Ralph Groener and sleep any time. I'm just a sucking calf, he says, and he knows all about calves I say. Ralph says in a few years I can go with him to drive the cattle to Kansas, but I hear my father tell my mother that I am never going on a cattle drive. The last time Ralph takes the cattle to Kansas he
comes back and tells my father that Jackie Morris drowned crossing a stream and they sang a song over him and buried him.

"What did you put on his headstone?" my father asks.

"Now cracks a noble heart," Ralph tells him.

"A quotation from Hamlet?" asks my father, looking at Ralph Groener with his eyebrows together. "Do cowboys quote Shakespeare?"

"I don't know nothin' else t' quote," he says. And with his eyebrows still together my father almost starts to laugh, but just shakes his head. I hear Ralph Groener reading from a little book all the time, and it is poetry he says, but it is not like the rhymes the niggers sing. He puts the book away when anyone comes near him, anyone except me. Keeps it in the pocket of his jacket. He tells my father how Jackie Morris pulled too hard at the reins of his horse trying to keep his horse from drifting downstream with the current and pulled his head under water. The horse and Jackie both drowned. I wonder where they buried the horse and what they wrote on his headstone. Maybe they wrote: "Now cracks a noble horse." It sounds as good as the other writing.

My father has more cattle than any man in Texas, Ralph says. My father just laughs when I tell him Ralph said that.

"Are you rich, Papa?"
"I will be one of these days, Petit," he answers. My father often calls me "Petit" and the darkies call me "Pee Tee" all the time. My mother says the word means "little" in French and since the darkies don't understand French they say "Pee Tee." And my father must be very rich, I believe, because he owns all the longhorned cattle grazing on the prairie on the other side of the hill, and he owns black men and black women, and I know that my father would not sell me for just a little money, and if he buys people he must be very rich. Ralph Groener told me how father and a man in Jefferson, Texas bring the cattle here to let them eat before they go north to market. All the time they eat prairie grass and are very fat. Jefferson is a long way from here because my father and Ralph go there just after the cattle drives and sometimes they are gone for more than a month! It must be dangerous to go to Jefferson; my mother is not the same when my father and Ralph are gone there. Last year after the cattle drive my father went to Jefferson by himself and was gone two months. My mother is not happy while he is gone, but he brings her presents from Jefferson and squeezes me so hard when he gets back I lose my breath! And he brought Susina from Jefferson. ... But that was another time. My mother cries sometimes when she is happy, and this time she cries for two or three days after my father gets home. She doesn't cry with him; I hear her in her room when I go to tell her good night, and
Aunt Mattie tells me she is just happy "because you Pappy home." He came to sleep with me after that and he tells me long stories about Jefferson. It is a big city now, he says. The man he visits in Jefferson is a doctor. I can tell when my mother is happy because her eyes are red. But my father doesn't even notice; they are not very red.

The house has no long hall when my mother and father and I first live in it and Jumbo lives in a little cabin where the meat is salted now. At first Jumbo and my father are gone all day and when the sun comes down my father comes home. My mother makes him put me down from where he holds me up in the air and we go behind the house to wash. My father dips cold water over my head and hands and laughs, then he does the same thing to himself and we go back in to eat. He laughs all the time, my father, and my mother laughs with him. I would laugh then, and he would stop eating, put his big hands on each side of my face and kiss me between the eyes.

"Abel, mon fils. . . Mon petit Abel!" My father would say, and I would laugh, because I knew he wanted me to laugh. That is a long time before the long hall came to our house.

Tornadoes come in the spring when the leaves have had time to come out of the branches of the trees, and when a cloud comes looking like a tornado my father makes me and my mother go down into a little cave he had one of the darkies build. A tornado came the first year my mother
and father came to Denton County but it was so long ago they don't remember much about it. People lived here then in the houses where the slaves live now and they got sick from drinking too much creek water and went back to France where they came from. I don't know where I heard this but it is true. I don't know why anybody would come here all the way from France, across the ocean, further than Jefferson, but my mother and father came here from France and my father says he would not live in any other place. My mother would live in France, I believe, because sometimes she looks at the presents my father brings her from Jefferson and says:

"They have crossed an ocean but they still smell of Paris!" She holds them close to her and sniffs at them. She wears the dresses when we eat at night, when my father asks Aunt Mattie to serve the food and Jumbo to light a candle at each plate. I believe my mother would like to live in Paris, but I wonder why she stayed here when the others got sick and went back there? We have some nights two or three kinds of meat and bread and four or five vegetables when vegetables are growing in the fields. My mother tells Aunt Mattie what to have each night and how to make the onion soup my father likes, but she never stays in the kitchen very long. She likes the kitchen, I know, but once I heard my father tell her that the kitchen belonged to Aunt Mattie. It is not where it once was. I remember when my mother cooked in the fireplace before the long hall
was put in the house, and in the summer she was too hot to eat until my father and I had almost finished. Then we had salty meat hanging in the cabin where we slept and my mother and I would go into the woods to hunt berries in the summer. She would not let me look into a bush for berries until she hit the bush several times with a long stick.

"There may be a snake," she tells me. My father kills many snakes in the field where he works with Jumbo. Jumbo is more afraid of snakes than anything else, and once when I am watching him plow in the field a snake rattled on the ground and Jumbo runs like a frightened calf. My father comes with a stick and kills the snake and cuts off the rattlers for Jumbo, but Jumbo backs away from the rattlers as if they could bite him, too. They kill two snakes that day in the same field.

"Wicked sonofabitchin' copperhead," Ralph Groener says when my father shows one of the snakes to him. He makes me look a long time at the snake and makes me promise to tell somebody if I see one near the house. I know to be frightened when I hear a snake rattle, but the sonofabitchins make no noise; they just wait curled up until somebody walks by to bite. One did bite me one time and my father split open my leg and sucked out the blood, spitting it out as if it tasted bad and mumbling words I could not understand. After a little while in bed I got all right, but I look carefully when I walk any distance from the house after that for snakes and Indians.
People pass our house going north and south. Ralph tells me, when I ask him why people don't go in other directions, that there are no people to come from the west because the west is still uncivilized. One day he comes riding from the creek—west—with a great black bundle across his horse. When I go to meet him he tells me it is a black panther, very rare, and he killed it west of the creek. Panthers are dangerous he tells me, and I know what uncivilized means. . . . But I wonder why the sun sets in the west.

"Man-paint and God-paint is two different things, ain't they, Abel?" Ralph Groener asks me. He likes sunsets. He would take me to the rise behind the house, away from everything but the tall grass on the prairie, and look at the sunset the same way he looks at the little book he carries. When the wind is high there are long strips of silver and red and purples and yellow across the sun, and he reads the sunsets like a book.

I like Ralph Groener best when he holds me on his knee and tells me stories. His voice is warm and deep, and it's just like crawling between covers on a cold night. My father likes Ralph Groener. He says people like Ralph will make Texas a great state, and I believe him, because Ralph Groener knows more about calves than the mamas of the calves. I saw him helping little calves get out of their mamas when the mamas had quit helping them! My mother says Ralph
Groener is a good friend, a true friend. I like that.
He is the best friend I have in the whole world.

When I am ten years old I have a birthday party.
Children in France, my mother tells me, have friends to
come on birthdays and play games and eat. I have no friends
except Ralph and Jumbo and Aunt Mattie since Little Jumbo
is gone, but I have my birthday party with a candle at each
plate and Ralph Groener brings me a jacket made of soft
buckskin sewed by an Indian he knows and he puts me across
his knee and hits me ten times, not hard at all, and we all
laugh that night. My mother has on a shiny dress the same
color as her eyes; she looks prettier than a sunflower be-
hind the candle. My father brought her the dress from
Jefferson. I don't laugh long, because that night I learn
that Ralph Groener is going away.

"Got t' go t' Benton and open up another store, Abel,"
he tells me. I have heard my mother and father talking
about the county seat being moved from Alton to Benton and
my father seems happy about this, but all it means is that
Ralph will be going away. I ask him why he wants to go to
Benton to open a store.

"Your papa thinks we can make lots o' money there."
I am crying and I don't care if he sees me.

"Do you want lots o' money?" I ask him. He shakes his
head and smiles at me and I know before he answers that he
likes sunsets better than money. He always told me the gold
in the sunsets was the only real gold.
"I don't need much, little feller, but your papa thinks it's mighty important."

"Can't you make money here?"

"Sure... lots o' money... But I reckon it ain't enough." We shake hands one day and Ralph Groener pulls me to him before he rides away with my father. I cry, and it is not because I am happy, and my mother cries too.

Before my father leaves with Ralph Groener for Denton he calls the darkies together. They stand in a line by the side of the smokehouse and my father comes in front of them carrying his gun.

"I know I can depend on you to look after my wife and son," he tells the darkies. "One of you can ride to Denton for me if you need me. I'll be back in two days." So he is gone. I wave to him and Ralph Groener until they are out of sight around the bend of the hill.

In the middle of the night Jumbo comes into my room telling me to be quiet. He pushes me under the bed.

"Don' yoh wohhy, Mahse Fee Tee," he whispers. "Ain' nothin' noh nobody gwine touch yoh through dis black body." We stay there, quiet, and somebody shoots guns outside the window. Jumbo pushes me deeper under the bed. I can see his white eyes shining in the dark. Somebody rides a horse close to the window and I feel Jumbo go stiff as a stick, then a face looks through the window. A face with black and white marks all over it! Jumbo fires at the face and
it falls apart. He keeps his big black hand over my face all the time, pushing me so far behind him I can't see...

In a moment my mother comes into the room carrying a gun.

"Thank God!" says my mother. Jumbo takes his hand off my face and my mother gives him her gun. My mother's eyes are not as white as Jumbo's but just as frightened. She holds me to her for a long time but I am too sleepy to stay awake. She is still sitting on my bed when I go to sleep.
The next morning Jumbo is sitting between the door and the window and my mother is still sitting on my bed. She is still looking at me the way she was looking at me when I went to sleep. My father comes home that morning with his eyebrows close together and talks a long time to my mother and Jumbo. Then he leaves and comes again, this time with his gun, his eyebrows still together and his mouth so thin it looks like a line scratched across his face.

"Get everybody out here," he says. My mother goes to him and puts her hand on his arm and looks at him with tears in her eyes, but his mouth is still thin.

"Not Abel," says my mother.

"He is old enough to learn," says my father. But she is shaking her head and talking to him; one time she even put her hand on the gun, but my father jerked the gun away. I have never seen him look at my mother this way. Finally he pushes by her.

We all go out into the sunshine. Jumbo and Aunt Mattie are there with Susina, and Susina is looking at the sun with
her eyes closed, sliding her hands up and down on her sides. I see two blacks called J. K. White and Rhinestone and speak to them. They nod and look at the ground. Then my father and Mose Lambert walk out in front of us and Mose Lambert's hands are tied behind him. I look at my mother but she does not see me look because her eyes are shut against the sun. It is all very quiet until my father stands before us and starts to speak:

"When I brought you out here I did not bring you out to be killed. There is not one among you who has been mistreated. . . . You work hard, yes, but I have worked beside you in the fields and I have made your lives as pleasant as I know how. Each of you was chosen carefully. . . . And now I discover that I made a wrong choice. . . . A choice that nearly cost our lives." He points to the black with the tied hands. The black's head is bowed and water soaks through his shirt. My father starts to talk again:

"Moses Lambert here conspired with a band of savages to steal my horses. . . . He told them when to come and was supposed to help them get the horses." My father is speaking low because it is quiet out here in the sunshine. "His 'friends' came last night but they were too drunk to know what they were doing. They did not even remember who had helped them! The two Indians left are evidence enough that they were drunk, because they never leave their dead behind." He points to Moses Lambert whose head is still
bowed and whose shirt is wetter. "I condemn you, Moses Lambert, for theft and intent to murder. You have three minutes to pray and then I am going to put a bullet through your head." He looks at us. "I brought you here to see...to learn what happens to a traitor...to see justice done." The tied black falls on his knees and starts to shake even though it is warm and he is wet from water on his shirt. I have to take my hand out of my mother's hand. She is hurting my fingers. It is so still since my father stopped talking.

Aunt Mattie starts to pray, then Jumbo, then the other darkies. I wonder why my mother does not pray, but she still has her eyes closed, looking at the sun. She says prayers every morning with a string of beads, but not prayers like the darkies are saying now. Soon the praying is as loud as the praying on Sunday afternoon when the darkies go to the creek to sing and have church. My father raises the gun a little and the girl Susina who has been looking with closed eyes at the sun runs to Moses Lambert and puts her arms around his neck just as the gun explodes. They both fall to the ground. Moses Lambert did not make a sound when he fell, and while I looked at him he stopped his shaking. The next morning there is a small brown stain on the grass where Moses Lambert and the girl Susina fell. I was looking at it but Aunt Mattie tells me to come away from that spot.
That night while we ate, my mother was very quiet, but my father talked more than he usually did. He told us he had bought a place in Denton to build a hotel. He tells my mother that Denton has stores, a courthouse, a summer school, even a church. I believe that is why we finally moved to Denton, because my mother said prayers and sang songs with Aunt Mattie and the darkies but she could not go to church, and she talked about wanting to go to church. She wanted me to go to school.

"There will never be a big settlement here," my father says. He did not want to kill the black today; his mouth is still thin. I can not tell if moving to Denton pleases my mother or makes her sad; she just sits looking at my father while she stirs her food. She says nothing during the whole meal. When we finish eating my father comes to me and touches me on the head.

"Come and walk with me, Petit?" I go with him to walk.

Out the back of the house we go, away from the place where the darkey was shot, and walk without looking back until we come to a little hill as high as the top of our house. When we look back we can see the sunset. We have walked a long way; it is almost dark. When we get to the top of the hill I see that crossed sticks have been pushed into the ground. Some of the sticks have been there such a long time they are bending over. The weeds are almost as tall as the sticks.
"Come and sit with me, mon fils."

I go to him and he pulls me close to him and touches the top of my head with his chin.

"This is a cemetery, Abel," he begins. "The people who came to Texas from France are buried here on this hill."

I look at him; he smiles. "Of course they did not come such a long way just to be buried... They came to Denton County to live, to live the way they believed people should live." I look at him now and he does not look the way he looked this morning. He has stopped smiling, but I know he will begin to smile again. The thin line across his face is gone. I listen to him. I do not understand everything he says, but I listen to him.

"You see, Abel, these people could not live in France as they wanted to live, and so they came to a new country—a wilderness—in order to say what they wanted to say, and to worship God as they wished." Now he smiles! "Those things are not important until they are taken away... It is not until they are taken away that one realizes there is really no life without them... just existing—like the cattle you see every day in the fields."

"Is that why you and Mama came to Texas, Papa?" He does not answer my question until he has had a long time to think. When he does answer he looks at the rows of crossed sticks and says to them:
"Yes, that is why we came." The smile has gone from his mouth but part of it stays in his eyes. "I wanted my sons to grow up in a country where they are free. . . ." Why does he say "sons" I wonder? He has one son, and the blacks are not free because I have heard them say they are not free. More than one time I have heard them say this. Papa is still looking at the sticks sticking in the ground. The blacks are not free, I say to him, but he does not hear me. I tell him this again and he hears me now.

"No, they are not free, Petit, but they are building a nation and someday they will share what they have built." I think that I would like to share what I have with Aunt Mattie and Jumbo, but I think too that if they had as much as I have then they would go away and I would miss them, so I am glad they are not free to go. My father is talking again:

"The first day we came to this place we had a storm. . . . such a storm as I hope you will never see, mon cher, and it killed two of us. . . ." He is talking to the sticks again. 

". . . Two of us. Before we could get seed in the ground many of the men died with fever." Now to me he talks. 

"They are all here," he says, raising his hand and his eyes, "part of the land and not a part of it at all."

"But you would not leave, Papa. Ralph Groener told me that you came back to stay after the others had gone."
"Because I had a reason to stay, mon cher. The others did not." He laughs a little, then stops. "Or perhaps your papa was too stubborn to leave." He smiles. I smile. "Are you glad you did not leave, Papa?"

"Very glad. It is not easy to start life in a new country, Petit. It takes strong shoulders and a stronger heart... but a man needs to look out and see his own land, and then he knows he is alive."

"Do you miss being a doctor, Papa?" I am a little afraid to ask this because my mother says I am not to talk about it, but my father still smiles after the question and I know it is all right.

"I am still a doctor, my son, but I have no one to doctor!" We both laugh. There is no one to doctor here. "Perhaps I will again be a doctor when we move to Denton."

"When will we go?" I ask him.

"Soon," he tells me. "There you will go to school, to learn, and when the town is an important place you will be an important part of it." I have to think about this because it is not why my mother says I must go to school; she says it is most important to learn. Now my father tells me I must learn to be important... I do not know what a school is like and I have never seen a town. I wonder if a town has green hills in the spring and deep pools to swim in, because since my father will be there with me perhaps he will let me swim now. Do antelope come to the edge of
a town and watch people as they work? There are many people in a town I am told. I wonder if I will like people? It will be dark before we get back to the house. My father stands.

"I wanted you to see this place before you left here. In a way I can not explain to you it has had a great effect on our life..." We look at the hill and start down the side of it. "We will go now," he says. "Your mother will worry." Hand in hand we walk down the hill without speaking for a few steps but I know my father is thinking of something to say to me.

"Do you know why I brought you here today, Abel?" This is not a hard question, not as hard as my father's voice. I answer:

"To see the cemetery where the people who came from France to Texas are buried." He says nothing, and as we walk without speaking again, I am afraid I have not given him the right answer. I ask him if that is the reason he brought me here. We walk on again, and I wonder if I have given him the wrong question. At last he speaks:

"I brought you there to show you the graves of people who were brave enough to leave their homeland for the wilderness." He speaks of "wilderness" and I do not know exactly what it means.

"That is it, Papa." I say this.
"You must always be brave enough to risk death for what you believe in, my son." His voice is not hard any more but soft as the grass we walk on.

"I will try, Papa. I will try to be brave." We are walking across the prairie now and I can see the lamps in the windows of the house. Then my father stops still and looks at me. He looks at me such a long time I think there must be something wrong; then he kneels to me and puts his cheek against mine for a long time. He holds me so close I feel his big heart beating through his jacket. Then he touches me twice so hard I have to catch one of his legs to keep from falling. He laughs and touches me again. This time barely on top of my head.

"Mon petit," he says laughing.

"Mon papa," I say and laugh. I wonder about the Indians of last night. I ask my father if he thinks they will come again tonight.

"They will not come again. They came last night because they were drunk and brave with liquor. Now they have had time to think and they will not come again." I believe this. It is very dark when we get to the house. My mother is waiting for us at the door. My father tells her:

"We have had quite a walk and quite a talk, n'est 'ce pas, Abel?"

"Oui," I reply. When my father speaks French to me I reply in French, but he does not do this often. I hear
him talking to my mother in French and I do not always understand what he is saying. He says we must speak English in America. I wonder why we do not speak American?

"And so to bed, my little traveler," my mother says. And the three of us walk into the room where my father and I sleep. My mother holds the lamp. Both of them wait until my clothes are off and I am in the bed. My mother comes to me and bends close.

"Will you sleep, Abel?" she asks. She kisses me.

"I will sleep." My father comes from the shadows and stands close to me.

"Do you know why I took you to the hill, Petit?"

I tell him that I know. I tell him that I will remember to fight for what I believe is right. He bends and kisses me on the forehead. It is warm. I close my eyes and try to see the hill we sat on just before the sun went down behind the other hills. I can not see it clearly, and I get warmer and sleepier trying to remember... I do not remember before I am asleep.
CHAPTER VIII

You hear part of truth, my son, only part of the truth. You do not hear at all because it is not clear and beautiful as I would have you believe. It is not the sparkling waterfall splashing across washed rock; it is a dark whirlpool spinning into the opaque greenness of a murky sea. But your eyes must see the rainbow of the waterfall, so do not search for the whirlpool, mon fils.

See it from here, Petit! Look across the drying grass of the prairie, through the trees, past the weathered cabins, and you will see a tall pole rising out of the earth, and on the pole...nothing...but it was not always so. Once a brave flag fluttered proudly from the pole, high above the hearts and heads of the men who raised it.... But fear shrinks the heart, bows the head, and the brave flag rots unnoticed, falls to pieces in the wind.

Rain! The fields are submerged, dark restless pools fed by darker, more restless clouds out of the west, hovering, splitting, gathering again to unloose torrents that put to wet death the striving green shoots seeking sunshine. Soaking water! Rain! The earth's open sores exude chocolate blood, and when they are through bleeding the wounds are covered over with impenetrable brown scabs. I am
ashamed to be afraid, but sometimes I am afraid. Beautiful
and violent, this Texas prairie! Deceitful... Rich
earth and thick sunshine, seductive breezes and repelling
winds! Harsh, cruel mother of my crops. Murderess! You
have murdered your children! But my child you will not
murder... My child you must not touch, malevolent mother.
Wound your own...

You have a son, Abel Gonnough, and you have cattle,
and through the damp July the bluish-green grass pushes
higher and higher.

We gather calves to be branded, roping and dragging
them to the fire burning on the open range. They are
frightened, and they bawl with a terror greater than any
pain. Ralph Groener ropes the calf and holds it securely...
. I walk to the side of the calf, reach over its back,
take hold of its flank. I pull up with my hands and push
on the opposite side with my knees, lifting the calf and
throwing it to the ground, helpless, waiting... branded.

I have roped the calf around the neck, and Ralph
Groener takes it by one ear and reaches over its head with
his other hand and catches the calf's jaw, putting his
thumb in the calf's mouth just behind its teeth; then he
twists the calf's neck until it is thrown. It lies waiting
for us... Branded.

We learn to rope a calf by its heels, hold it taut,
then one of us catches the calf up by the tail. We pull in
opposite directions until the calf is thrown. . . . We brand, mark, mark, brand as the sun rises, the sun sets, rises, sets. . . . We are branded! Marked by a greater fire than our own. . . .

Abel Gonough, student of the Sorbonne, doctor of medicine, leader without followers, spends long, dusty hours on the classrooms of the prairie. I learn—never as much as I need to know, but I learn. . . . The prairie grass grows faster than the cattle can eat it.

The house must be long, Jumbo, with openings on the north and south and a porch with three sides, built on rocks we have pushed out of the fields. Make clapboard shutters and hang them with leather hinges; shutters will keep out the February freeze and let in the southeast breeze of the summer. Mosquito nets on the windows. . . . Someday we will have glass. Sing, Jumbo. Nail, Jumbo.

"Nails is fastah! Nails is cheap.
Hammah, dahkey! Drive 'm deep. . . ."

Four rooms, Jumbo. We will yet be civilized, even if we must walk on dirt floors until the pine boards come. . . . Leave a place to fasten the joists. Sing, Jumbo. Nail, Jumbo.

"Nahd de rain, steep de roof,
Inside dry en' dat's de troof. . . ."
A crude sled made of crossed postoak trunks hitched to two mustang ponies hauls rock from the fields and stacks them for the chimney. Haul, Jumbo! Stack, Jumbo!

"San' from de creekbed, clay from d' hill
Gwine t' make a fahplace keep away d' chill..."

And now it is finished, Jumbo. Rude, imperfect, not plumb, a mixture of dovetailed logs from the forest and boards from the lumber mills of Jefferson. Bright nails and rawhide hinges. Civilization is reaching her fingers in our direction... Reaching... Haul, Jumbo. Stack, Jumbo.

"Dah she is a'stanin' in d' noontime sun.
Git along, ole Jumbo, yo' wunh all done..."

It stands, braced and tight against the winter, within sound of the creek splashing southeastward in the spring, surrounded by postoak and water elm.

"We will spend Christmas in the house, Jumbo."

Oh ye of little faith, come see what I have brought to life on the prairie you were afraid of. Look at my cornland! This field is plowed in the fall, that one in the winter, another in the early spring, all bedded, re-bedded, harrowed down, bedded because corn follows corn follows corn. June will be damp and warm, each dark brown acre will yield sixty bushels. We flat-break the land in the summer and harrow it through the fall and winter to keep moisture in the earth. We have learned, and now the
cornstalks wave, healthy and clean, in rows. Wheat is growing, and more will grow. And more to come. Cotton blooming.

"Seen a little green grass t'day, Doc," Ralph Groener tells me, "an' a few heel flies raisin' hell. Reckon we c'n git started soon."

Ralph Groener and I lay our course with the aid of maps and the Rangers from Hickory Station. The Rangers tell us that the course to Kansas leads through many miles of trackless wilderness, and through miles where Indians wait to steal our horses. We plot our course. A remnant of the wagon survived the storm of long ago; from this we make a chuck wagon. It is simple: We build a large cupboard on the back of the wagon, load our meager cooking equipment, hold our heads high and laugh at what we have improvised.

Groener is gone four days. He comes back with four men and a negro cook, young men in buckskin jackets and denim pants, distant sunshine in their eyes. We all laugh at the chuck wagon, the shattered wagon we have unshattered.

"Give Keever and young Gentle the job o' pointin'," Ralph tells me. "Seein' as there ain't none of 'em dry 'hind th' ears I reckon we ain't got much choice. Them two knows cattle, though. They won't be changed 'cept t' ride on different sides o' the herd if we run into dust." Groener talks; I listen, wonder intrigued. Groener goes on talking:
"We'll need three steady men fer th' rear. . . . Reckon you an' Tom Copley an' Jackie Morris can drag hand an' look after th' weak 'uns that fall b'hind. Speed o' th' herd is figured by th' rear. . . . Stronger cattle is gotta be kep' forward, out o' th' way. Won't do fer th' rear o' th' herd t' be wider'n th' swing." Master Ralph Groener, planning tactics, issuing orders. Here is a man who dreams through the long winter, who awakes with the first sprigs of grass, excited by the activities of heel flies. Here is your dream, Ralph Groener.

"Th' swing is th' part o' th' herd 'tween th' front an' th' rear, an' if th' rear gits wider'n th' swing them pore cattle 'll jes' natcherly get hot enough t' cook on th' hoof. Th' brimstones in hell cain't be much hotter'n a thousand movin' cattle."

We move out with the first splash of rust across the eastern sky, seven men and nine hundred cattle, moving. . . .

"Keep it sixty feet across," Ralph tells the side men. "We got water all along 'sfar as I c'n tell, an' there ain't no need t' squeeze 'em down 'til we hafta." It is necessary, I learn, to move faster when the distance between watering places is too great, and to move faster the side men ride closer to the herd, making it narrower, longer. . . .

"Won't do t' squeeze 'em down too much," Ralph says. "They're a little sceered now an' they try t' trot if th' line's too narrow. Time we git 'em t' Kansas them steers 'll be gentle as pups."
North we travel through unsettled prairie country, and the days and nights are much alike. Brightness, darkness, dust... An hour before the sun is in the center of the sky Ralph Groener gives a signal for the drive to stop. Men and cattle eat.

"Best t' stop where th' groun' straddles th' trail," says Groener. "This way th' cattle c'n be thrown t' each side... After a few days them cattle 'll spring back into line in half th' time it takes if'n they're all on one side." And they do! Well planned, Master Groener.

After their morning meal the cattle do not graze any more until we reach water, and we try to reach water before sundown each day. When cattle reach a stream they swim across, drink from the other side. After the cattle are filled they are bedded in a circle and guarded, half the men watching half the night and the other half watching until morning. Two guards ride in circles about the cattle, passing each other twice as they go around. We travel north, north through the unsettled prairie, and the days and nights are much alike.

"Blacker'n a cave t'nigh," Ralph says, looking at the heavy wall of darkness around us, above us. "Hate t' see them clouds slidin' 'cross th' moon... Moon seems t' soothe cattle... More likely t' run on dark nights." We pause as we circle the cattle. We have been on the trail twenty-two days, all much alike... white, black,
always dusty. The spring sun shines a little hotter each day on the budding prairie, and dust sifts across the cropped trail to settle on the slow-moving streams where we drink. At night we lie beneath clear, glittering skies of the cool prairies and listen to the sounds of the cattle. They are strangely quiet. . . . The men are strangely quiet, quiet with the alertness of an animal stalking food, ears open for a sound that does not belong in the night. . . . Everything must belong now. . . . I guide my horse past Ralph Groener's horse.

"Rattler 'bout thirty feet your way," he says softly. "It'll still be there long as it's dark. . . ." And before he has quite finished his sentence we hear its sound: sizzling fat. A steer bawls to the night, victim of the sound, and while his cry is still in his throat the prairie is jarred as if by an earthquake.

"Jesus!" cries Ralph Groener. Under our horses the earth rocks; we listen to the thunder as the earth quakes.

"They ain't comin' this way. . . . headin' south! Let's see can we head 'em off." Groener kicks his horse into action, jumps into the darkness. I follow. The cattle are running fast. . . . Thunder, but diminishing as we head toward them.

"They'll mill right!" Groener shouts to me as he rides close to the side of the leading steers. They are frantic now, running because they are followed, following because
they are led. Groener fires a pistol into the air and the

cattle speed away from the sound, but they do not turn.

"Shoot!" he yells at me. The thunder of hooves is

ripped with the sound of bullets fired at the air. .

"They're millin'! Keep in front 'n outside!" The

horse watches the bowed heads of the lead steers, veers

sharply, faster than the steers can turn, and we are out-

side the circle.

"Stay close!" cries Groener.

Now they run blindly in the direction from which they
came, bearing obliquely past the tail of the herd, heads

and horns lower than their humped shoulders, pounding three

thousand feet into the hammered prairie. Faster and faster,
always bearing right, always bearing right, faster. .

always right. It is too dark to see the dust, thick in the
air, nose, eyes, mouth; then the moon breaks from behind a
cloud, breaks white and round, and the horns of the cattle

gleam through the swirling dust.

"Keep it closed up!" screams Groener.

They have followed the leaders into a circle and run,
run, run, run. . . . always bearing right with their bent
heads. . . . Moonlight, dust, gleaming horns, and the noise

shakes the prairie in every direction. Roaring towards me

now is a lead steer, low, furious, frightened. . . . straight

. . . And he does not turn until we feel the wind of him

as he passes; then he flings his great head to the right
and plunges back into the herd, lessening his speed now, raising his head a bit, still running. Back into the whirl. A wall of dust rises between us and the moon; circling hooves beat into the earth.

"Keep 'em runnin' 'til they're tired!"

Horses and men make a circle outside the circle. Around and around we go, faster, faster, fast...slow...slower...Horses, men, cattle settling. . . . A slow shower after a cloudburst; we are walking the horses; the cattle have calmed as if from an unseen, unheard signal. Quiet now, the wall of dust rising between us and the moon. Cattle, lost, moan in the distance.

"We won't take 'em back to th' same bed ground,"

Groener says. "They'll run agin if we do. Best thing's t' drive 'em all night." He looks at the sky; the clouds are going west faster than the moon. We drive...North into the night, men and horses, cattle, men and horses. I look back at the dust we leave; the breeze is scattering the wall.

"It'll be clear th' rest of th' night. You stay b'hind an' watch th' corners. Morris'n me'll stay up front."

North. . . . . .The cattle will net seven thousand dollars after the men are paid.

Poison has not had time to reach the bloodstream. I squeeze the leg just above the knee and cut the flesh across
the black points the fangs have made. The knife comes clean out of a red wound. I would have my body drain dry of blood. Scream, protest, gasp, but hold tight to me and I will save you. Your blood is my blood and it flows over my lips and over my chin and spills on my hands, and you do not feel the pain I feel. My pain is not pain unless it is your pain. I would bathe you in my blood. I would sever my leg. Give me your life and I promise to suffer until I can no longer suffer. Breathe that I may breathe. Cling tight to me, and I will take a vow before God that I will do penance all the days of my life, crawling upon my hands and knees before Him. Bleed, Petit! Breathe. Petit! Live, Petit!

"Thank God," your mother says.

"Yes," I say, and I lie in the bed between you and the world, afraid for you to be touched by anything. . . .

We have ridden into the sun since daylight, across the hills thick with postoak and blackjack, on our way to Alton. We cross the timbered section slowly, stopping to look at the view from the tops of many hills, cross a small stream winding lazily through a thicket of hickory trees, and stop in their shade to eat cornbread and dried beef. The horses nibble at the leaves and drink.

"It is a natural spring, Abel!" Annette cries. And water, clear and winter-cold, bubbles in a shallow pond
where the stream begins. Here it is cool, for there are many miles of dense forest and we are high in the path of the summer wind.

"It is beautiful here," I tell her, "but not for a home. The trees would grow faster than they could be cut down!"

"A spring on the top of such a high hill!" she exclaims. "It is an unpredictable land, your Denton County!" Her eyes follow a natural clearing that is the path we will take to the next hill. "I love it here, Abel," sighs Annette. "It is prettier than our prairie."

"Yes, it is prettier," I agree, "but it is sand and rock and clay, and nothing will grow here except trees."

"See!" she cries, pulling me to my feet. "What a beautiful little valley."

We are perhaps a hundred feet higher than the land she looks at. Below is spread a flat meadow, tall with grass, crossed by a slender stream winding to a large square pool of shaded water. Steep hills covered with glossy leaves rise abruptly on the far side of the meadow and become lost in the blue and gray of the distance. Low hills, softly blue, hung with summer haze, stretch to the horizon east... horizon west. Annette touches me; some of the soft summer haze is in her eyes, but nothing obscures the love I see there. ... We are alone with the rocks and the humped hills. ... Afterwards we watch a long time from our hill. ... Watch and wonder.
A platform with a puncheon floor has been built in front of the log courthouse at Alton. Lamps, tin sides shielding fat candles from the wind, are on each corner of the platform. Annette and I have cleaned ourselves at the creek; the village is full of people who have cleaned themselves at the creek. The men wear denim trousers and hand-stitched cotton shirts; they wear moccasins or boots. Women are bright in colored calico and pieces of narrow ribbon knotted in their hair. Annette's face is shining from her wash in the creek and the sound of the fiddles. A darkey beats on a clevis with a pin, in time with the rhythm of the fiddles.

"Dance with me, Abel!" Annette begs; her wide eyes reflecting the flame of the candles are green fire.

"Ma Chere, I have no idea what they are doing," I tell her.

"Shuffle'n double shuffle," calls a man at one corner of the platform, the high heel of his boot hitting the puncheon floor in time with the music.

"Make them splinters fly!" he calls. Four couples on the platform float and stomp, in and out, weaving and bowing to the command of the fiddles and clevis.

"Wire!" the man hollers. The heels of the boots jar the platform.

"Pigeon wing!" People dancing and people watching hear nothing but the primitive beat of the music. When
the music stops the men who have been dancing take off their boots; in a moment as rhythmical as the fiddle score they exchange them for the moccasins of the men who have been watching.

"Moscin's just ain't fit fer stompin'," a stranger tells me. In a moment the fiddles, clevis, boots, shoes begin a new dance.

"Make them splinters fly! Set on it!" Whirling, gliding, stomping, bowing, crossing, backing, bowing, whirling, gliding...and the noise of the boots thudding happily against the hewed log floor. Annette's foot taps in the dirt as she watches.

A woman, plump, smiling, polite, comes to shake hands with us.

"I know who you are," she says. "I'm Miz McCord and my husband rode with you from Kansas City."

"Ah! He is the man with the hotel." I remember him, a quiet man always writing figures in a book.

"We come from Kansas here," she says to Annette. "Millard, that's Mister McCord, thinks Alton'll be a big town someday," she confides. "Just got tired o' workin' day and night and decided to come to Texas...Denton."

She studies Annette with curiosity and friendliness. Annette looks from the woman to the dance and back at the woman; her foot still keeps time in the dust. The woman bends close to Annette.
"Hear tell y'all got a real purty place over at Oliver Creek," she says, becoming confidential again. "Would you like to dance?" she asks Annette.

"But it is a strange dance. . . ." Annette says without conviction.

"Come with me—" she looks at me for permission and I nod—"and I'll show you all you need to know in half a shake." She laughs at her little joke and takes Annette by the hand.

"My husband is at the hotel, Mister Gonnough. I know he'll be proud to see you. Real proud." She walks away with Annette, clinging to her arm and whispering in her ear. A strange woman, I think. Brazen, kind, courageous. Strange people! I think, but I also have come to the wilderness. I also am strange.

The hotel is a log structure as large as the courthouse, with a lean-to for horses on one side, the door a double thickness of clapboard hung with large metal hinges. Behind a log counter scrubbed white I find the man who rode from Kansas. The floor has been scrubbed many times and is worn smooth in places. Mister McCord is busy with his book. We shake hands and he pours whiskey from a crock jar into tin cups.

"Proud to see you out for the Fourth, Doc."

"Proud to be out, Mister McCord." We drink to each other and the whiskey is white hot.
"Tastes like it come right out o' the panther, don't it?" he laughs. "But I reckon it come out o' the same ole white mule." He laughs again, pours more whiskey. We burn our throats again. . . . And Mister McCord talks and talks about his village:

". . . temple of justice. Mayberry Haun accused o' stealin' hogs. Tried by a jury in the mornin' and convicted he was. Well, ole Judge Winters says Mayberry was t' get fifteen lashes on his bare back. Yessir. . . . fifteen lashes on the back. Well sir, while the court was eatin' dinner — judge 'n attorneys'n all — Sheriff Jackson took Mayberry down to th' creek an' whipped 'im like th' judge said. . . . Ha! Well, after they eat, th' court was opened an' Mayberry's attorney he made application for a new trial an' went on with his arguin' of th' case. Well, ole Mayberry he set a' listenin' to his lawyer an' commenced a'squirmin' like he was sett'n in a ant bed. Kept motionin' his attorney to quit, but he couldn' make 'im understand. Finally he couldn' take no more. He stood up'n fronta' that court 'n hollered:

"Don't git no new trial, Mister Sellers! They done whipped me once't, an' if'n you git a new trial they'll whup me agin!" We laugh again, drink again, burn again.

"Reckon that's speedy enough justice for anybody, eh Doc?" I agree. "Yep," says Mister McCord, "we ain't got too much in Alton as yet, but we don't take a backseat to none where justice is concerned."
When I find Annette she is tired and excited from dancing.

"How I love Alton," she sighs.

"And how Alton loves you, cherie," I tease, for all eyes are on Annette. I know why they look at her; she is strangely beautiful when she is happy. "Mister McCord has invited us to stay at his hotel tonight. He says we are to be his guests."

"But the crowd..."

"They will dance most of the night and sleep under the trees," I tell her, for Mister McCord has told me. "A little more white mule and your friends will sleep in the creek without getting wet!"

She laughs. We watch the men drink from a jug that is passed among them.

"Strange people, Abel... Even the drunk ones are polite."

"Yes... Yes... Denton County is full of Ralph Groeners." Annette waves to people as we leave; she has made friends of the strangers.

When we are in bed the sound of the music and the tapping of the boots is still heard, undiminished, although the July moon has traveled over three quarters of the sky. Annette drowses sleepily beside me.

"I would like to have a hotel, Annette. I would like to build a hotel finer than this one."
Sow wheat in the cool October. . . cool November.
Break the ground in June, July. Break it flat, make it friable, make it crumble. Work it—not too deep. Harrow. Work it to a shallow depth. Break the crust. No clods, no weeds, no grass. Plow it early, plow it deep. Plow shallow later. . . Oats make better on the rolling areas. . . Plant where the soil is eroded. Cotton? Cotton is different. Cotton is tender. Cotton must have warmth and dryness. Seed bed must be well drained. . . We plant late, it is June; we plant in the water furrow. Sow and reap. Tall wheat, tall oats, tall cotton. . . Corn will soon be tall.

We stand together on the south side of the wooded knoll, huddled together against the freezing moist wind, listening to the voice of the auctioneer:

"Lot number six, block number six. . . Going, going. . . Twenty-seven dollars. . . Gone. Sold to Henry Bates Tate for twenty-seven dollars."

Twenty families have gathered in today's cold to buy lots in the town. They camp in porous tents and drafty covered wagons and listen to the sheriff sell lots. They shift their sack-wrapped feet in the frozen mud and bravely, generously offer the auctioneering sheriff as much as thirty dollars for a single building lot. Most of them do not own more than a hundred dollars.
"Lot number nine, block number six," says the sheriff. "What am I bid for the last lot on the west side?"

"Fifteen dollars," offers Judge Winters. He has bought three lots, one on each side of the proposed square. He stands, warmer than most, richer than any, a confident smile playing above the gray-streaked red of his beard. His eyes are narrowed against the cold, calculating the income his purchases will someday bring, building businesses behind his broad, sloping forehead.

"Twenty dollars," I say.

"Twenty dollars bid," says the sheriff. "Do I hear more?"

"Twenty-five," Judge Winters says without looking in my direction.

"Thirty."

"Thirty-five." He turns now to look at me, the smile turning down into his beard, a deep horizontal furrow on the slope of his brow.

"Forty-five," Sheriff." Now the people turn to look at me, sensing conflict between us.

"Sixty," Judge Winters says flatly, turning back to the sheriff.

"Seventy." I have offered more than twice the value of the lot. The people begin to murmur. No lot has sold for more than thirty dollars.

"Seventy-five," growls Judge Winters.
"Eighty!"

The sheriff rubs his hands against the cold and waits to hear from Judge Winters. He waits, but the judge does not offer more.

"Sold then for eighty dollars," says the sheriff, and his clerk makes a mark on paper. Half an hour ago a man named Justice bought three lots for eighty dollars. The people steal looks at the man who is willing to pay such a price for a building lot. I see their curious faces and I see the Gonnough General Store standing on the lot I have bought. It is a store larger than any in town, with a doctor's office in the rear. It is two blocks south of the land where I will build the saloon. . . . Look at me, people of Denton County! You will soon know my name, all of you. Icaria is my home, Denton my settlement.

You will soon be familiar with the name of Abel Gonnough.

"The whole of Denton square ain't worth that much," a woman with a feed sack tight about her shoulders grumbles. Her confidant nods and looks quickly at me out of the corner of her eyes. When I smile at her she pulls her canvas wrapper higher about her blue face. The tenth day of January, 1857, is the coldest day in the brief history of the county. The feed sacks tied over the shoes do not keep out the numbing pain of the winter day. . . .
What do you think, Annette? Do you think I could forgive you if something happened to my son? I can live without an arm, without arms, without legs, without you, but I could not live without my brownhaired, greeneyed son. No! You are careless, Annette. You are many times careless, and you will lose what you love most. You will lose me... I am what you love most.

Plan with me, Annette! Build riches, see them burn, sink, blown away, but build! Stand with me and raise gabled houses on the night curtain of the prairie. Come to me with a dream in your eyes and I will show you another dream, and another... But I must search for you the dream, and the dream fades. Why must I search for you, Annette? Examine, explore, inquire, seek, probe, pierce, penetrate, scrutinize, search, search, search... Why? You do not search for me with dreams, and I... I am waiting.

"Why did the men leave, Annette?"

They did not believe I would come back? But I am back. I am a house, a field, an owner, and they did not believe I would come back! But you waited for me, Annette. You had faith in my son. I wanted only to give them freedom, but they would not wait. This is worth the waiting, Annette! To own and grow, to grow more... and own more. To grow, to know that we are growing! Even you have stopped growing, Annette. You should have been large by now with
another son in your womb. Where is that son? You have hidden a segment of the circle, Annette. Why did you hide it? It is not complete without that segment. The earth is round, the sun, the moon, the wheel of the wagon, round and complete, but our love is no longer round. A circle has three-hundred and sixty degrees, radius, diameter, circumference. . . . Why is the circumference of our love broken? Sigh like Burus when I am Aquilo? It is hard for me to breathe gently, to woo when I have won. . . .

I comfort myself with the thought of my conquests, and this is not comfort enough. . . . Yea, like Hercules I have ripped the horn from the river god and filled the horn with plenty. My knees were on the earth and my mouth in the dust of the prairie, still I seized his throat and squeezed the life from him. . . . Terrified, he changed into a serpent, coiled, hissing, biting into the flesh of my child with his forked tongue! Then he, failing to drown, failing to poison, charged at me as a bull, but I have thrown his head in the dirt and torn away his horn. My child is safe. You, Annette, do not know Hercules or his foe Achelous. . . . You, daughter of Icarius, when will the robe be finished. You, Penelope, spin a web between our love! Who is Penelope? you ask. . . . You have not built an imperishable attraction in your heart; your braids are gray, your ornaments are brass. If Sara is your mother then call me "lord" and yield! Love as strong as ours will hide our sin. . . .
It is to spare you that I visit you no more; I will not mock your steadfast, barring faith. My visits pain you; I will pay no more, and elsewhere will my future pleasures lie as we have lain. I relied on you, hoping my great joy would be your greater joy, but when I came to you, distressed, with misery in my heart, tears in my eyes, you turned away. . . . I came not to pain you, but to convince you of the special love I hold. You should forgive and comfort me, for I am overwhelmed with remorse, yet I am a man and proud and I will not beg. I will not beg.

If I have caused you pain it is less than I have caused myself. If you do not forgive, I will not forgive, and our green love will dry like summer grass, and rot like unpicked grapes in the sun. Our love is dying, Annette, rotting, Annette.

Does our love need written document, spoken word? You yourself are my document, read and recognized, across my heart. Recognized and read by you, by me; written not in ink but writ in blood! Inscribed on the parchment that wraps my soul! Does not spirit bring to life what written law has killed? If what has faded have glory, then that which lasts will have greater glory. . . . Nothing lasts of our love, and what was glorious has no glory; it sinks beneath the waiting, stagnant pool.

I do not hang a veil over my face that none may see the eyes where glory fades. Moses veiled his face that none
might see the last rays of fading Israel, but my child sees, and I refuse to hang the veil.

I do not disown those practices which shame conceals from view; I am not crafty; I do not falsify. I reveal the truth and commend myself in the consciences of men. If my adultery is veiled it is veiled only to you. Other minds are blinded to prevent them seeing the truth, to prevent them seeing the light thrown by the sin of Abel Gonnough, who is to them the likeness of God.

But I possess this treasure in a fragile vessel of earth, to show that the transcending power belongs to you, not to me; on every side I am harried, perplexed, but not hemmed in, not despairing. I am persecuted, but not abandoned. Struck down but not destroyed. Every day of my life I am given over to death so that the life of my son may come out within my mortal flesh. In me is death; in you is life, yet you refuse to act. Give me sons, Annette. If I refuse your faith, will you refuse my sons?

Never lose heart, though part of me decays, for I know the trouble of the passing hours results in glory past compare for those of us whose eyes are on the unseen, not on the seen; for the seen, today, is transient, the unseen more glorious than Israel at high noon. Then come what may, I am confident. You are not eager to satisfy me, Annette, body or soul, but we have all to
appear without disguise before the high tribunal of your Christ, each to be requited for what he has done with his body, good or ill.

What I am is plain to God without disguise, plain also, I trust, to you. I will not come to you again. I estimate no one by what is internal, even though I once estimated your Christ by what is internal, but I no longer estimate him thus. If in Christ God reconciled the world to Himself instead of counting men's trespasses against them, He has entrusted me with no message of His reconciliation. I am no envoy of Christ.

Oh, Annette, I am keeping nothing back; my heart is open wide, and restraint lies in you, not in me. Open wide your heart to me, Annette. You ask how light can associate with darkness; you ask what business have the children of Belial with Christ. Your Lord has said to you: "Touch not what is unclean; then I will receive you." I do not mock your belief, but beg for your touch. . . . Make a place for me in your heart. I have wronged no one.

I do not condemn you, Annette. You are much in my heart and will always be there; death and life are both in my heart, and you are life.

I found no relief, even in Icaria. I found troubles at every turn, fears surrounding me, fears of my own kind. But your God comforted me with the arrival of my son and the knowledge that you had given him to me; for I knew then
how you longed for me and loved me, how happy you were, how eagerly you accepted me when I came to you; you were my delight. Did I pain you by that love, I do not regret it. I am glad now—not glad that you were pained, but glad that your pain induced you to repent. God meant you to be pained as you were pained, and so you were not harmed from what I did. God-guided pains end in saving repentance, but the pains of the world end in death.

My personal comfort is not important; I am grateful for the gratefulness of my son. You have set his mind at rest. Often I have told him of my pride in you, and I am not disappointed... What I have said about you is true. What I have said to my son, my faith in your faith, it has all proved true. His heart goes out to you when I tell him of how you received me, him, reverent and trembling. I am glad to have had your love, Annette. But now... Adieu, Annette, adieu.

Little Jumbo is dead, sleeping in the arms of Jesus, his mother says, his bright eyes sewed tight together by long, curling lashes, the harmony of his round, wooly skull rent white and red. Little Jumbo is dead, and around him the darkies mourn and shout, sending him more rapidly to heaven with their shouting, but the soft and quiet shouting as befits a child. Your mammy is Niobe in ebony, fixed and immobile in her grief. She takes no step, makes no gesture.
Stone without and stone within, yet her tears flow from a sad, unending stream. . . . Nothing moves except her tears. My son lives. Cling, little black Phryxus, to your golden-fleeced ram, and be there received in the kingdom of heaven.

"...comin' foh t' carry me hooooome," sing the darkies. They address their incantations to the listening gods of their native land, gods who send for them to writhe and wail in their sorrow, gods who dwell in the deep shadows of a deep, dark land.

"...coming foh t' carreeeeeee mee home," sing the darkies.

Thank God the darkies do not moan for my dead son! Let me be an intermittent memory when my son is mourned. God! Omnipotent, omniscient, could you not deliver from death this child whom Fate doomed? The darkies see God's will revealed in the rustling of the oak leaves. . . . Where is God's will in winter when the leaves mold on cold ground? Omnipotence, Omniscience. . . .why do you obey the voice of Fate?

"You depend upon God if you wish, Annette. I will depend upon myself to watch my son!" She has been too careless this time and I can not forgive her. She does not realize that I — Abel Gonnough — have but one possession on the earth. . . . She has her God. I? I have my son. . . . Careful, Annette!
You are silent all the way from Jefferson...

Does the memory of your glistening black lover hide behind your hazel eyes, Susina? You, hybrid, unfortunate, neither black nor white, shining skin, color of tobacco-stained ivory. Susina, Susina... What animal are you? Cerebrum, cerebellum, twelve cranial nerves? Susina, class mammalia, vertebrate with coils of blue-black hair on smooth neck. Incisors, canines, premolars, molars—flawless, white as corneas of narrow, tilted eyes, shadowed heavily by oily lashes. Pinnas—velvet brown flowers against the lightness of your hair... Susina...

Muscular, flat, slender diaphragm below firm, bulging breasts. Susina! Does your four-chambered heart pound sadly for your lost lover? Your blood is warm, a tropical sea washing hot, golden sand... The warm blood color of your mouth entices me, wanes into petulance and whiteness, drained of desire. Your eyes tell me your lips are not for me. Fertilization is internal, an intromittent organ, Susina. Viviparous, Susina... Embryo developing in the uterus, metabolic exchange between embryo and mother through placenta. Beautiful hybrid, product of bodies washed with scalding sweat, a tender bird hatched in a deserted nest, a barefoot child in winter snow. Susina, brown and beautiful as a village angelus in Autumn. Beautiful! A warm dark cave on the frozen fringes of a mountain peak. Susina, Susina... only your lips have
not thawed for me. How long I hesitate before I dare to love! And you forever hesitate. I am unloved by you, by her... but I do not seek love. Hide your calcium white soul, Susina. Keep it safe for one you really love, but give me your brown body when I come for it. Laugh with me! And cry when I have gone... I am unloved, aware, ashamed. Anesthetize my feverish, aching wound. Cauterize where Pride's dull knife has cut. If you will cry, then cry when I am gone, Susina. Laugh with me a moment, for the moment is soon gone, and when it is gone...

"Where have you sent her, Abel?" you ask. You have watched me, Annette, since I carried her here; I have looked for malice and anger in your eyes but found none. Be angry, Annette! Shout at me! Curse...! But you do nothing; you watch me until Susina is gone.

"Jumbo has taken her to Jefferson."

"And her wound?"

"It is nothing," I say. "It will heal soon." It will heal sooner than my wound.

"How long have you loved her, Abel?"

"I do not love her."

"You killed Moses Lambert because you love her."

"It was not love, Annette... I was lonely." I came to you, Annette, when I was lonely.
"You make yourself lonely, Abel," she says. "You mistake loneliness for love."

"I have been wrong," I tell her. "I should have married you." There is no response. "I will marry you now, Annette." And I know your answer before you speak.

"No."

"I do not deserve your love. . . ."

"No."

"But you will live with me as my wife? Take care of my son and my house?"

"He is my son also. . . ."

"Understand me, Annette! I went to Susina because you did not understand me! You sent me to Susina."

"Did Susina understand?"

"No! Susina was a woman to lie with."

". . . Woman of another man, a man who could not fight you."

"Tell me what you expect of a man, Annette. . . . If a man can not go to his own wife. . . ."

"Mistress, Abel. I was never your wife. A mistress is not a wife."

"You have destroyed our love, Annette."

"No, Abel Gonnough, no. . . . Charlotte Gonnough has destroyed our love. . . . Charlotte Gonnough who is dead and buried on the side of a hill!"

"Annette!"
"It is true! You are in love with Charlotte Gonnough."

". . . .No."

"Yes! Yes! Yes! Charlotte Gonnough sleeps between us. . . . and my son sleeps between us, my living son and your dead wife."

"You are cruel, Annette."

"Truth is cruel, Abel. Not I, but the truth hurts you."

"I need you, Annette."

"No."

"Come to me, Annette." And again I know her answer before she speaks.

"No."

Silence is an icy wind on my naked back. You have won, Annette Mercier. I am stronger but you have won. Silence. Adieu... Lock tight the door that has closed between us. Bury the key.

"No," she says again.
CHAPTER IX

I watch him coming to me from his drenched fields and my heart is as heavy as his mud-caked feet, but I can do nothing. I tell him that we will not starve even if the crops are washed away. Deer and turkeys and berries still grow in the woods.

"First the frost until May, then the rains boiling out of hell's own heaven! It is as if God does not want people to live on this land!" Wretchedness in his soul looks out at me through his rain-streaked eyes and I would run to him and make him put his head in my lap and cry like a child, but I say instead:

"The rains will make tall grass for the cattle, Abel."

This is no consolation. He has worked in his fields from daylight until dark every day, bronzed by burning suns and calloused from digging in frost-hardened earth, and his earth does not yield.

"The cattle need the tall grass the rains are making." This does not console him. Rivulets from his hair have carved channels in his brow and face and I want to smooth them away, but only crops waving in the wind can brush away what is carved on his face.
"How long does a man try, Annette?" he asks me. I go to him now, feel his heart reaching for me as his hands hang listlessly at his sides. I pull a calloused finger across my cheek and kiss it.

"He tries as long as he has something to try for." I stand before him, showing him the child in me and my faith in him. He is close to me now and I push my nose against the break in his shirt that lets his shoulder through. His odor is the cool yellow-green odor of the Texas prairie in early spring. I love him too much and I think perhaps that God is punishing us with rain.

"The men from Stewartsville say this is the wettest spring they have seen. . . . Holford Prairie is a swamp, they say." And your words are wet with grief.

"The next spring may be perfect for crops, Abel." "There will be no next spring!" he says quietly. "Not here where we are whipped with storms and beaten with fevers. This is a deceptive place, seductive and poisonous!"

"No. . . . It is a strong place with no room for the weak. We are growing stronger. . . ."

"Look at my fingers!" he cries. "Look at nails that are worn away with pushing at the earth. Feel my knees where they are bruised and swollen with kneeling!" He holds out his hands to me; I see the crust on his palms and the nakedness of his fingertips. "Is it strength you
see there?" he cries. "I see them being eaten away by a fruitless earth..." I cover his hands with my own, black and swollen from the bubbling pot hanging in the fire.

"I see such strength as I have never seen before," I tell him. "Someday you will make the prairie bloom." It is too much, I think, too much for one man to lose as much as he has lost. I ask the God I believe in why it must be so, but my question is never answered. I can save him in another month; my child pushes inside me, and I know that when I give him his child he will have his reward.

"Did you drink the milk I brought you?" he asks me. "You must drink much milk." Even now I taste the animal-ness of the warm milk he brings me to drink, heavy with fat, fresh and white in a bucket he has scrubbed with his calloused fingers.

"I drank all of it." This pleases him and he holds me close for a moment. "Soon I will be as fat as the cow that gives you the milk," I tell him. And he smiles. His smile is like milk — warm, fresh, white. This is when I love him more than I should. This is when I am afraid for us.

"Do you suppose Mark Robertson has started the cattle from Jefferson?" he asks.

"With the first green of the grass," I tell him. "Perhaps the cattle and the child will arrive at the same time."
"Perhaps," he says, and there is less sadness in his voice.

"The turkey you shot two days ago has boiled through four pots of water and is not as tender as an oak branch!" We laugh. For a long time he looks into my eyes, his smile still warm and white.

"Oh, Annette," he says, so quietly I lean toward him to hear, "I am ashamed, but sometimes... I am so afraid. . . ."

"It is foolish to be unafraid," I tell him. And I lean closer to him, for I see in his half-closed eyes what he is about to say:

"I love you, Annette."

I listen carefully to each word, memorizing the soft sounds of the words and the way they look on his lips. I am loved. I hear the words again, never quite the same. I have lived a lifetime in their sound. It is enough that I am loved and love. And this is the time when I love him more than I should, when I am afraid for us, and I cry with happiness. He lets me cry until I am finished, then he lifts my face with his hand and smiles at me. Still smiling he says:

"Your face is as wet as our fields." We laugh again, close to each other... close through the rains of the spring.
I am on my way to the cabin, my apron full of berries, when suddenly I know I must find Abel. For some reason I am careful with the berries and spill them gently on the ground, thinking I will come back for them. Ralph Groener comes from somewhere, carries me to the cabin, and goes to the field for Abel. I lie on the bed, feeling my body yawning from the heat inside me, while Abel and Ralph Groener work frantically to boil water. Abel sends Groener to his cabin to fetch pots and to Jumbo's cabin to fetch pots. I remember laughing at Ralph Groener.

"Good God Almighty, Doc!" he says, "if she has triplets you'll still have water left." But Abel is too busy to laugh. My body is boiling before the water is ready, the scalding pain splashes over me and in me and I cry out... But Abel is there when I look, and I am not afraid, not pained too much.

He and Groener stand by my bed, Abel holding the baby wrapped in a sheet I have boiled and hung to bleach in the sunshine. There is sunshine in their faces; it tells me everything is all right. They just stand there without speaking. Finally Ralph Groener says:

"If he'd been an hour later he'd o' had t' swim outa' th' cabin! Boiled enough damned water t' bathe a regiment o' soljers!" I am tired, too tired to laugh, and sleepy. And while they stand there Jumbo comes running into the cabin.
"Cattle is heah, Mahse Abel!" Abel tells Jumbo to go tell the men who have driven the cattle to come to Groener's cabin.

"We have a son, Annette," he tells me. Ralph Groener is embarrassed, I believe.

"Congratulations, Misses Gronnough." And he shakes my hand because he does not know what else to do. Abel lays the white bundle beside me in the bed. Ralph Groener is still holding my hand, still embarrassed.

"I will be back as soon as possible," Abel tells me.

"Are you happy, Abel?"

"More than I can tell you, ma cher. Dors alors," he says kissing me gently, and I do sleep...for a long, long time.

July is wet. The rain comes straight down without wind, and the cattle have more grass than they can eat. Abel and Ralph are on the prairie from early morning until dark. Abel tells me that many of the cattle need medical attention, and all of them have to be branded. They have to be branded with our brand he tells me happily.

"Do you know how I am going to brand them, Annette? I will brand them this way." He shows me a drawing, an oddly shaped M with a line drawn through the center. "This is the brand of the Triple A...Abel, Annette, and Abel." How excited he is! "Ralph Groener says that
next spring we will have six hundred more cattle at least. and half of them will be. . . ours." There is sunshine in the sky-blue eyes of Abel Gonnough. "Jumbo and J. K. White can get our house ready to move into before winter." He has not forgot about his drowned crops, but the cattle are a challenge, and Abel needs that challenge. I feel a little angry with myself, for already I think about the drives north, about being without Abel for the long months he will be gone on the drives.

"Ralph and I will go to Kansas with the cattle," he tells me. "After that I will let Ralph and some of the men go. I do not like to be away from you for such a long time." But he will always go, I know, and he does go. But the change in him when he returns from Kansas after the first drive! There is about him a new confidence as he tosses little Abel into the air and speaks to him in the mysterious language a father uses to a child, words that are not meant to be understood but only to be said.

"Ah, Petit!" he coos, "your papa is going to be a rich man and you will never know what it is to sweat in the fields and hunt for food in the forest. . . . Before you are grown we will be civilized and secure. . . . I am growing security on the plains for you, mon fils." And he comes to the small basket where the child sleeps and gazes at him for long periods of time, touching him timidly with his large fingers, watching. And he sits by the
candle until his eyes grow red in the yellow tallow of light, studying his cattle, drawing pictures of their insides. ... I am waiting for him, but only part of him has come home to me. ... 

"I see it all now, cher," he says to me often, looking into the corner of the cabin or through the window. "It is all clear. ..."

And he tells me that swamp fever sent him to Jefferson for medicine and to meet Mark Robertson, and he laughs and pulls himself to his great height, looking as if he could never be beaten by anything on earth, but I still see the tears that were in his eyes when the settlers were dying and he did not know what to do for them; I still hear the angry sobs in his voice. I am afraid that someday he will no longer need me and I tell him of this fear, but he laughs, kisses me many times.

"You are the deep sleep of night I need after a long day, cher. I will always need you." June has long days, I remember; sometimes it is light on the prairie for almost half the night, and the moon shines unnoticed. ...

He still carries the scar where his father cut him, just behind his knee. I carry a scar from the same day but it is in my heart and only I can see it. Summer! Ralph Groener says it must have come through the door. ... I am making thread out of wool when I hear him begin to cry,
and when I get to him it is against the wall, moving from side to side like a pendulum. I scream, run with the child to Abel, where he is working on the new house. He takes the child from me, and when I look at him I see a deeper pain than the child's in his eyes. He stares at me with disbelief, and his stare is as suffocating as the oppressive summer heat. He slashes deep into the little leg and puts his mouth over the wound. His shirt is soaked. He holds the child in his arms and sucks the blood, letting some of it run down his chin, standing between me and the child. Later he puts him on the bed and looks closely at him while he sleeps, bending his head to the child's heart when he makes a noise in his sleep. All that night he sits, and does not notice when I light the candle. The next morning I look at my child and say:

"Thank God!"

"Yes," he says, and he lies down beside him in the bed and sleeps, between the child and me.

Alton has four stores and a hotel; the mail route has been changed to go by there and the post office is called Alton. Mail is received once every week. The town has a courthouse of hewed logs, twenty by twenty feet square and thirteen logs high, and across from the courthouse is a raised platform of smooth boards for
dancing. From all over the county people come to Alton on the Fourth day of July to go to church and to dance. We ride all day through the summer heat and arrive at sundown. ... The hilly timbered region north and east of Icaria is beautiful, so beautiful it pains me to remember. Nor do I want to remember it really, for it belongs in a special place, neither to Icaria nor Alton, neither to Winter nor Summer. ... It is an interlude high in the path of the summer wind, a moment of summer blown away, a leaf drifting on the wind. ... It is the last time I am loved. No, I do not want to remember, but I remember this when I remember Alton. Lamps are placed at each corner of the platform. I wash my face in the cool waters of Hickory Creek and Abel takes a razor from his sack and shaves without a mirror. I hear the violins playing furiously at the platform; Abel says they are fiddles playing square dance tunes. A darkey keeps time on a clevis, and the fiddles play most of the night while the boards echo with sounds of boot heels and the softer sounds made by the women's buttoned shoes.

"Oh, Abel!" I cry, tired and excited with dancing and music. A kind woman from Alton has shown me the steps of this strange dance and I have whirled until the world around me spins dizzily. The music is like the German music played in the Paris parks on Saturdays. "How I love Alton!" On the platform the people whirl and glide under a moon bright enough to cast shadows. ...
"And how Alton loves you, cherie," teases Abel, pretending to be annoyed. I dance with many men in homespun shirts as wet as the streams and smelling of whiskey, but these men hear every sound the fiddles make and obey their rhythm, and the rhythm whirls in my head long after we are in bed at the hotel where we have been invited to stay.

"I would like to have a hotel, Annette," Abel tells me just before I fall asleep. "I would like to build a hotel finer than this one."

How I long to dance again, to be whirled about under a silver and black July sky! But it is the last time, and I try not to remember. . . . I try not to remember. . . .

Little Abel is six years old, a miniature of his father, but with my own eyes. He is a large little boy for his age, brown from sunshine and with healthy lungs filled with prairie air. His hair curls as Abel's does, and it is just beginning to turn from gold to pale brown. Abel and Ralph Groener find an evergreen tree in the forest and Aunt Mattie and I find colored bits of string to tie shapeless paper flowers to the branches. Little Abel watches with round eyes, muttering exclamations of delight at our strange creation. Aunt Mattie makes taffy candy from molasses and we hang it on the tree, and her kitchen is hot with odors of flour bread baking. We
have a mill five days away on the Colbert Ferry road just south of Red River where the darkies take grain to be ground. They are gone about ten days each time and the flour they bring back is a relief from the coarse cornbread we eat most of the days. For the darkies there is corn meal mush and deer meat, and they contend there is no better breakfast!

"Will you let Ralph Groener eat with us at Christmas?" my son asks me.

"Of course," I tell him. He wants to ask me another question; I have learned that when he holds his fist to his chin and frowns at me for a long time he has a question. "Have you asked him already?" I ask.

"No...but I saw Jim Ned and another Delaware bringing blankets to his cabin."

"And you think perhaps Ralph Groener will give you one of the blankets for your Christmas. Is that it?"

"That is it," he says frankly. "It is an Indian blanket for the mustang pony my father has for me."

"Abel!" I cry, "a Christmas present is supposed to be a surprise! You must not let your father and Ralph Groener know that you have seen these presents!" And he did not let them know. On Christmas Eve Ralph Groener comes wading through the cold night to bring his presents; the sudden frozen rain surprises us, for the past few days have been summer-warm with a damp breeze from the southeast.
The presents are wrapped crudely in brown paper, tied with calico strings; one of the presents is a bearskin rug for our house. That night we sit at the long oak table with candles on each side and eat Aunt Mattie's flour bread with turkey and dressing and gravy. A fire blazes against the wet night, and Little Abel waits patiently for the morning when he can put the blanket on his pony and ride with his father.

"You don't think of getting married, Ralph Groener?" I ask, seeing the contentment shining in his eyes from the fire and the food. He stares into the fire and the flame illuminates a grotesque but somehow sweet smile on his weathered face.

"No'm," he answers after a while. "Times like this here, sett'n b'fore th' fire'n all, makes me hanker a little fer home life, but th' hankerin' sorta' goes out when th' fire dies away."

Strange man, Ralph Groener, coming to us when we needed him most. . . . So agreeably competent he is often forgotten, but my son worships him openly, and perhaps that is payment enough. Little Abel never has another present which pleases him as much as the Indian blanket, and we never have another Christmas with such warmth and plenty. We are growing, and before I go to sleep that night I thank God many times. . . .

"The prairie has been good to us," I tell Him.
"Why can't Ralph take the cattle north?" I ask Abel, knowing what he will answer before I ask.

"Cowboys are not cheap, Annette. I need to go with them to take care of them if they get sick... and to take care of the cattle. We lost too many cattle on the last drive." But this is not the reason. I see the restlessness in his hands and in his eyes now that the cattle no longer take so much of his time; this spring has been warm and moist; if the corn is kept clear of weeds it will fill the bins. Cotton is high, and the sheep have been sheared and the wool is waiting to be woven into cloth...

Abel and Jumbo have added a new room to the house, a room with a fireplace made of rocks dug from the fields. Abel Gonnough is as restless as his cattle picking their way across the range... He needs to go to Kansas...

"When I get back from Kansas I will need to go to Jefferson."

I shall not ask you why you need to go to Jefferson, my husband. I know your need. Once I was the deep sleep you needed after your long day, but you no longer need that sleep. I feel you leave my side to stare out into the blue night, hear you as you quietly light a candle in the corner of the room, see you take from your pocket your carefully guarded little book, see you put into the little book your carefully guarded thoughts... I can not guard
my thoughts, and I can not guard our love. No. . . .
Water drips onto our fire, drop by drop by drop. . . .

"Marry me, Abel," I ask you. You touch me gently before you speak, and look for many moments into my eyes.

"We are married. . . . God has seen our marriage," you tell me. I want you now as you stand before me; if you but touch my lips lightly with yours I will feel myself lifted high above the hewed beams and puncheon floors of reality, and I want that, want that, but it is weakness. . . . weakness. Our child sleeps a few feet from us and we are not married.

"Do you think of me as your wife?"

My question bewilders you. It is a long time before you can speak.

"I am not a religious man, Annette. I love you. I think of you and I know I love you, and that is all."

"It is not all," I say, trying to make you understand what it is like to be a lover, not a wife. I have had many lovers, Abel Gommough. . . . I can not even remember their names. . . . But I have never been more than a mistress. Make me your wife. And I say to you:

"Make me the mother of our son."

"You are the mother."


"It is enough that we love each other, Annette." You stare at me, for I have surprised you, and myself. Your eyes are blue, very blue.
"No, my darling," I tell you, "it is not enough."
You do not know exactly what to say now, so you laugh,
a shy little laugh that tells me this is uncomfortable
for you. But I do not want to make you uncomfortable,
my dearest. You laugh again.

"Perhaps you can pray our sin away." I come to you,
a little afraid. You hold me, a little impatient.

"I did not know what real love was, Abel. I did not
know until you came to me. . . . and I thought I might
lose you."

"And I tell you that if we love each other it is
enough."

"Take me to a church and marry me, Abel."

You take me in your arms now and I am lost, a wave
breaking against a stone cliff. You hold me to you and
say:

"We will be married, Annette, if you wish, but do
not keep your love from me tonight." And I do not keep
it from you, for I am not as strong as the soil; I can
not resist you as the soil resists you. You tell me:

"We will go to the church and be married."

But the church is many sunrises and many sunsets
across the prairie; it is years before we start, and we
never get there. . . . And somewhere between the sunrises
and the sunsets my prayers lose their way. I am lover,
mistress, mother. I no longer give myself completely
to you, and you must have this completeness. You need to go to Jefferson. . . . Go, Abel. I shall not let them see my tears. Go. . . .

"I can make money hauling supplies," you tell me when you come back from Jefferson. "I can buy wagons and pay for them in one year!" Lumber is coming to Denton County from the pine forests of east Texas but it is still expensive. You say you can haul it for less. You propose to deliver salt to the people here at five dollars per hundred pounds.

"But, Abel, we have already more money than we need!"

"More than we need now, perhaps, but some day, Annette, I want to live again as a gentleman. I do not want my son to work as I have worked." And you look at me and remember something else. "And I want you to have everything you want. . . . I could have done little without you."

"I want very little," I tell you, but you tell me that you want many things for me and that I must have these things. The green silk dress from Jefferson is the most beautiful dress I have ever seen, the most beautiful dress I have ever owned, but you are all I wanted from the trip, and only part of you has come back to me. When will I wear the dress, Abel? Will you see it on me and say:

"I love you, Annette Mercier. Will you marry me?"
"No," you will say:

"You look lovely, Annette." And in your eyes I will see what you have thought and what you do not say, just as you see in my eyes the yes I do not say. You never ask me to marry you.

"Little Jumbo is dead, Papa!" Abel tells his father before he has time to dismount. He and Ralph Groener have just ridden in from Alton where they investigated the possibility of a grist mill.

"What happened, Petit?" asks his father, rubbing dust from his eyes. Little Abel is eager to tell him, terrified by the importance of what he knows.

"We were swimming in Blue Hole and Little Jumbo got stuck in the mud!" Abel can only stare at the boy, then he is on his knees beside him, pushing back his hair and looking into his eyes.

"Petit. . . .you were swimming in Blue Hole?" he asks tonelessly. The boy nods.

"And Little Jumbo drowned!" The father's narrow eyes are on the wide eyes of the son. "We are waiting on you so we can have the funeral."

His father looks at him, frowning into his face. Finally he turns to me.

"Is this true, Annette?" He wants me to say it is not true.
"Yes, Abel."

The summer silence presses on us, suffocating our thoughts for a long moment.

"My God!" he cries, splitting the silence. "My God, Annette!" I say nothing. Abel's blue eyes blaze with a hostility I have never before seen, the pupils large and black even in the bright summer day. If my life could erase the fury in his eyes I would offer it! My son stares at us with round eyes and I say nothing. Abel turns to the boy, puts his face a few inches from the face of the boy.

"Petit. . . ." he says slowly, voice raspy with restrained violence, "you must promise me you will never, never, never go near Blue Hole unless I am with you." His hands on the boy's arms shake. "Promise me! Never. . . .!" The boy pulls back.

"Mama was with me, Papa." The boy blinks. A frown crosses his face and he looks at me expectantly. Abel shakes him roughly.

"Promise me, Abel!"

"I promise, Papa," says the boy, afraid now and confused. Abel pulls his son to him and their cheeks touch. The boy puts his arms tightly about his father's neck. As Abel lifts the frightened child and carries him past me into the house I see his fingers dig deep into his father's neck.
"Abel...?" I do not know exactly why I call him. But there is no answer; the boy and his father are together. I stand and watch them, alone...

"...comin' foh to carry meeeeee home," sing the darkies.

Shy, brown, clean fingers reaching for the little cake I offer you, holding it to your shining flat nose while the odor of the cake closes your eyes in ecstasy pure and beautiful to see. Be gone, little darkey, they're comin' foh t' carry you home...

"It was a freak accident, Abel," I try to explain. "Jumbo himself had cleared the creek when it was shallow... The rock must have washed off the bank." And even now I hear the high, shrill squeal of the little darkey as he spins from a high overhanging limb into the cool green of the water, slicing into it with his thin body without making a splash. I wait to see him rise, laughing and wet, spouting the water through his white teeth... I call Jumbo and Aunt Mattie who are nearby gathering berries for next winter's jellies... Jumbo! Aunt Mattie! Little Jumbo is still under the water... Jumbo splashes into the water to save his baby, but he is too late, too late. What he drags out of the water is not his son, but a dark lifeless form with a white and red split through the top of its head.
"I told little Abel that Jumbo drowned... It seemed less frightening."

"I told you never to let him go there without me," he says coldly. "I could not forgive you if something happened to the boy, Annette."

"Abel, Abel," I plead. "Do you think I could forgive myself if I let something happen to the child? Do you forget that I love him, too?"

"Not as I do, or you would never be so careless!"

"Careless! The boy must live, Abel... He must grow!"

"Yes, he must live! I have had too much taken from me, Annette. If anything should happen to my son..."

"Our son, Abel Gonnough, our son!" He lay curled in my womb long before you held him in your hands. "You gave him a horse. Surely that is more dangerous than swimming while I watch him?"

"He is never to ride the horse unless I am with him! He knows that!"

"And will you always be beside him, Abel? Will you stay close to him, protecting him all his life?"

"Yes!"

"It is wrong! Wrong! A person can not live without scars."

"I will take his scars until he is older."

"Then he will never get older..."
"Yes, if I watch him carefully. . . . You are too careless, Annette. I can not trust you with my son."

"And God Himself is careless if He does not do what you wish!" We are strangers arguing about a stranger, straining at the golden cord that binds our love.

"You depend on God if you wish, Annette, but I will depend upon myself to watch my son." The cord is broken.

She comes back with Abel and Ralph from Jefferson, a slender girl the color of strong coffee mixed with rich cream, with hazel eyes and black hair straighter and finer than the other darkies. She is polite and silent the first day she comes to the house to help Aunt Mattie with the housework, but I see the resentment in her clear, dark eyes and in the thrust of her chin as she walks soundlessly through the house, her back straight, the lines of her breasts like the drawing of a dark goddess. Susina! She is the beauty of the woods before the axman, the prairie before the plow.

"I bought her for Moses Lambert," Abel tells me. "A healthy buck like Moses should have a wife and family. Those two can fill the fields with workmen. . . ."

"Suppose she does not love Moses Lambert?"

"Why shouldn't she? He is a handsome nigger. . . . They do not take love seriously, my dear."
Abel has never referred to his slaves as niggers before, but there are many changes in him after two months in Jefferson. I notice the fine silver streaks in the brown of his temples, the deeper lines from the corners of his mouth to his nose, the wide, square line of his chin without the beard, and I am surprised, for he has added many years and there have not been that many years. But his eyes are even bluer now; he will be handsome until he dies.

"Susina is to work in the house with Aunt Mattie," he tells me. Susina! Why must your beauty be bought and sold? I am not angry with you, Susina; in my heart is pity, pity.

"Your name is Italian," I tell her. "Susina in Italian means prune. . . ." She does not laugh, but smiles, tolerantly, and I wonder if we will ever be friends. She is a strange girl, not hostile, but aloof and cold, an unapproachable mountain peak. . . . It is autumn; we wait for another spring, and through the winter Abel plans.

"There is money to be made with the prairie schooner," he tells Ralph Groener. "To this county must come salt, lumber, implements for farmers. With trustworthy darkies I can haul cheaper than Judge Winters or the wagons at McKinney, and I will open a store in Denton to sell supplies."
"You'll only be able to make one trip a year, Doc," Ralph tells him. "Oxen's gotta have grass."

"Mustang ponies, Mister Groener," Abel says. Groener still does not understand. Abel laughs and tells us:

"Mustang ponies and a light wagon hauling food for the oxen when there is no grass... Does that make sense, Groener? We can raise the feed here and send it with the oxen! The weather is never extremely cold, and we can transport any month or every month." Thinking of this has put the silver in his brown hair; the creases from his mouth are from gathering and discarding ideas to keep supplies available at all times.

"It might work," agrees Ralph. "It might jest work."

"Of course it will work! I can sell cheaper than anybody else and have it here when they want it... Denton will be an important place one day, Groener... I want to be there before, not after."

"One thing worryin' me, Doc," says Ralph, troubled. "The more people that come here th' less land we'll have fer cattle." Abel laughs:

"That will not happen for another ten years. By that time we will be too rich to worry about it." And we sip the brandy Abel has brought from Jefferson while Susina stares at us from the shadows.

"Why does he want to go to Denton?" I ask Ralph Groener when we have finished and Abel is studying his books.
"Guess he's done told us why," Ralph mutters softly.
"He's done built all he can build here. . . . Wants t' build somethin' sommers else."

"He wanted to build a great settlement here," I tell Ralph, "but they could not wait for him to build it. . . ."

"An' of course he's thinkin' 'bout that boy. He'll need schoolin' an' things he can't git here."

"Do you think Benton will be a city someday, Ralph?"

"'Pears it might be. . . . Place's been lined off an' streets named, an' there's quite a few men doin' good business up there. . . . Talk 'bout building a big Methodist church jest north o' th' blacksmith's on Locust Street. . . . Street's'v all been named after trees, y'know." While he is talking Susina floats from the room like a shadow; she has become a shadow across my heart. Ralph Groener watches me, our eyes meet.

"Ralph. . . . Why did he bring her here?"

My question turns his newly-shaved face red, but he looks into my eyes and answers levelly:

"Reckon that there ain't none o' my business."

"You are the only person I can talk to, Ralph Groener. I have heard the darkies whispering. . . . You must have heard them too."

"Darkies like to whisper," he drawls. "Gives 'em a feelin' o' importance."
"It is not my imagination, Ralph. Aunt Mattie is contemptuous of the girl. . . . They have seen Abel coming from the direction of her cabin. You see I. . . ." But I can not explain to him. He tries to help me.

"Been thinkin' them two darkies should be married if they plan t' raise little 'uns. . . . Preacher over at Stewartsville holdin' a revival right now," he says, rubbing his chin. "If I could talk t' that preacher he might jest consider it God's will t' come here an' marry them two, or—" he looks into my eyes again and he sees they are wet, but I am not ashamed for Ralph to see me cry—"anybody else hereabouts that might need marryin' . . ."

"Oh, Ralph. . . ." The tears in my voice will not let me say more. You know! You know! You see everything with your quiet smile and your eyes narrowed against the sun. Do you think that bringing a preacher here will cause Abel to marry me? It is a beautiful thought, Ralph Groener, a truly beautiful thought. Perhaps it will be as you hope, perhaps not, but thank you for thinking of me. Thank you with all my heart. I can say nothing now; all I can do is to take your weathered hand between my hands. You know what I am trying to say. . . . You know, for your face is the color of the beautiful redbird flashing through the summer hackberry.
He comes, a sad faced man with long hair and a long black coat hiding his slender body, an inner light beaming through the close-set black eyes above the wide, black beard. He stops to hitch his horse to the rail and raises his hand with a Bible clutched in it.

"God be with me in this house," he says. The darkies cluster around him in curiosity and fear. "And thank you for a drink of water, ma'm, that will wash the devil's own dust from my throat." He drinks and wipes the water from his beard with the dipper, holding aloft the dipper when he is finished.

"When the sun seeks rest, seek ye this hallowed spot," he tells the assembled group, "and we will lift our voices in song and praise of Him that has gave so generously." He lets the upturned dipper empty on the sand and watches the drops fall, and with bowed head says:

"Amen."

"Amen," choruses the group hesitantly.

That night we meet where the drops of water spilled; a great bonfire points high into the air. The preacher stands in the light where the ground swells a few feet and shouts through his bearded lips, a closed Bible in his hand. Abel stands with me, frowning, silent since he discovered the preacher had come to marry Susina and Moses Lambert. Around us the darkies sing a hymn and beat time with their palms until the preacher holds up his Bible and starts to
speak. His sentences rise like steep hills, and his words like scattered rock on the path he climbs. Ralph and Little Abel watch from the bed of a nearby wagon.

"God is here tonight, praise be!" he cries, lifting his long head toward heaven, "and praise Him for letting us meet tonight. God is here tonight!" Now he clutches the Bible to his breast with both hands and lifts his eyes over the crowd to stare silently for a long moment. The darkies watch him with rigid eyes. He takes a noisy breath, passes his hand over his eyes. . . . His breath comes loudly, quickly, and the crowd leans toward him.

"Thank God!" he gasps, "He's with us tonight, Brethren. He's come down to be with us tonight while we worship. . . ." White eyes of the colored people glance furtively right and left for a vision. . . ."I tell you," he intones, "there won't be. . . .won't be no fire, and there won't be no brimstone, for them that are not afraid to, to see God!" He points to the fire; the eyes of the crowd follow his finger. "The devil, the devil has built a fire, for the sinful, for the sinful and the wicked, but if the word, if the word of God, is written, written in your. . . .heart! then the fire, the fire won't burn, won't burn a hair on your, won't burn a hair on your head!" He is pleading now, tearfully, gaspingly. The darkies stare at the man in wonder; a moment ago he stood before them straight and silent, but now, after a few sentences he is writhing
like a person in pain, slapping the black cover of his Bible, emphasizing the word before each pause with a shrill cry:

"The only way to, the only way to get the devil, get the devil out of your heart, and let God, let God in, is to get, get on your knees, get down on your knees, let your knees, let your knees touch the earth! let your eyes, let your eyes touch, let your eyes touch heaven!" He closes his eyes tightly and lifts his outstretched hands as far as they will reach.

"That's the only way, the only way to let sin, to let sin out, and let the gospel in, let gospel in. . . . I'm listenin', listenin' to Him now. . . . And He tells me, tells me it's time, time to recognize sin and cast it out! Out! Cast it out!" He pauses to let his hands drop until they are no higher than his head. He listens.

"I'm listenin', listenin' to Him speakin' to us. . . ." Silence, and then he begins an eerie moaning sound while his thin, long body is bent forward by an invisible instrument of torture. The body snaps backward, then from side to side, as if every move it makes is painful. He groans:

"I hear! I hear you, Lord! I know, know you're with us, with us tonight to turn out, turn out the devil and put heaven in our wicked hearts! Come down, Lord! Come on down! We're waitin' for you, waitin' for you on bended knees. . . ." He falls on his knees and sways from side
to side, making his sounds of torture. The darkies fall
with him and begin to swing from side to side in the light
of the fire, silently at first until one of them groans,
then they begin to chant in rhythm with their swaying
bodies, swinging nearer and nearer the ground. In a
soaking face the preacher's eyes are closed tightly. The
chanting grows, the sounds of torture rise higher . . .
higher than the bonfire, higher than the trees. Susina
and Moses Lambert sway silently together, their eyes closed,
their bodies touching shoulder and breast. Higher, higher.
. . . A voice rises above the chant:

"Ah wuz wounded in th' darkness an' He come to me,
An Ah's fishin' wid mah savyah in da seas uv Galilee!"

Abel's face is pale in the firelight, his bottom lip
between his teeth. In the flicker of light Susina and
Moses Lambert push closer to each other, sway faster. . . .
The singer sends his words higher than the fire, above the
chant, the trees:

"Ah will cross da rivah Johdan wid mah savya by mah sahd,
An when we gits across it theah's a golden hose t' rahd."

Abel spins angrily and walks quickly away, his brows
drawn together in a dark, contemptuous line. I reach for
him but he is gone, and I follow him. Without pausing he
lifts Little Abel from the wagon, and I follow them. The
words of the singer follow me:
"Ah wuz bahfoot on da desaht when He tuk me by mah han'.
Now Ah's weahin' golden slippahs tru da streets uv
Beuhla Lan'."

Abel and the boy are in the house before I reach it. The door is closed; inside another door is closed. Abel stays with the boy for a long time, and when he comes out he does not speak to me but goes to the cabinet to pour himself some brandy. Our eyes meet over the glass, and I see mockery, even amusement in his twisted smile.

"You should be proud of yourself, Annette," he growls, twirling the glass in his fingers. "The savage display you arranged tonight has thoroughly frightened your son."

"I am sorry, Abel. . . . I did not know. . . ." A knock at the door stops my words. Abel opens it for Ralph Groener.

"Reckon I ought to explain that I didn't know Ole Sam wuz a rollin' preacher when I asked 'im t' come here," he tells Abel.

"You arranged for him to come here?" Abel asks, looking from Ralph Groener to me. "Why?"

Ralph shrugs. "Jes' had a notion them two darkies might like t' be married, that's all. Susina's ma talked t' me about it at Jefferson. . . . Reckon she done that 'cause she never had no chance t' git married herself." Abel looks away, tastes his brandy. Ralph continues: "Seems like t' me people should git married long as they aim t' live together."
"Perhaps," Abel replies coldly, interest gone from his voice. He finishes his brandy and pours more, motioning to Ralph Groener, but Ralph shakes his head. "The Rangers say they have seen Indian signs along Hickory Creek," Abel says, changing the subject. Ralph Groener shrugs again.

"Seems t' me a smart Comanche'd think a mighty long time before he come to a place like this here. . . . Too many people and too many guns."

"Tell the darkies to keep a careful watch just the same, and report anything unusual to me." Abel stretches sleepily, indicating that the conversation should end.

"Sure, Doc," Ralph replies quietly, "an' I'll see that Ole Sam goes on his way early tomorrow mornin'."

"Yes," Abel answers indifferently, "the blind can not lead the blind, Mister Groener."

Ralph Groener nods to me, closes the door. Abel pours himself more brandy. His eyes linger on me for a long, silent time, then he goes for his book. He wants me to leave him; I go.

Jumbo and I sit through the long hours waiting for the morning. I know the Indians will not come again, but the savage screams that awakened me still ring in my ears and send chills through my stiff body.

"J. K. White done gone foh Mahse Abel," Jumbo assures me for the fourth time, and Jumbo sitting between the door
and the window looks formidable enough with the rifle across his knees, rolling his great eyes at the slightest noise, peeking at the slightest movement of Little Abel's sleep, but the sound of the screams and the sound of the gunfire hang in the dark and heavy air and I am eager for the morning. No one knows the Indian. We have never been bothered with savages, not even when we were ill-equipped strangers in a strange land, but now they have come screeching out of the west with the hearts and faces of devils.

"Why do you think they came?" I ask Jumbo. He shakes his head.

"Dey come foh hohses, ma'm. Dey watchin' Mahse Abel an' Mistah Groenah ride off an' den come foh de hohses."

"But how could they see, Jumbo? Where did they hide to watch?"

"We done seen 'em, ma'm. Moze Lambaht ride out yestiddy investigatin' smoke in de west dah. . . . When he come back he say dey's done gone."

"Did you tell my husband about this?"

"No ma'm, Moze Lambaht say dat mus' been a grass fah out dah, so we don' reckon it's Indi'ns. He say if dey wuz Indi'ns dah dey done gone."

"Who was on guard when they came, Jumbo?"

"Moze Lambaht. . . . He shoh got a bad knife slice in his sholdah!"

"And you woke when you heard Moses Lambert shoot?"
"Ah's had a real uneasy feelin' since yestiddy mohnin', ma'm. Mahse Abel goin' way lak dat an' Mistah Groenah goin' wid him. . . . Ah sleep lahk a pussy cat. . . . When Ah heah d' sound uv dat gun Ah is awake an' heah to see 'bout you an' Pee Tee."

"Thank you, Jumbo. I was afraid until I saw you. How many Indians were killed?"

"Two."

I see the first rays of morning through the window in the east wall. Abel has ridden since he got the news of the attack and he can not be much longer.

"Are you quite sure none of the darkies was hurt, Jumbo?"

"Dey's all right, ma'm. All 'cep Moze Lamhaht and Susina."

"Susina is hurt?"

"She ain' huht none, jes' cahhyin' on 'bout Moze sump'n awful."

"She loves him very much, doesn't she?"

"She shoh do, ma'm. She cryin' ovah Moze an' sayin' she gwine die if he die. . . . Ah shoh glad t' see dat ole sun. Why'n't you try sleepin' now?"

"I'm all right," I tell him. "Would you ask Aunt Mattie to make coffee?"

When Jumbo is gone I go to the window to look at the daylight. In the east the sunrise is half a rimless wheel
with crimson spokes, lighting the dawn with gold and pink shadows, and I think of the shadows that must be heavy and dark under my eyes. I bring the mirror to the light of the window and study the face reflected there. . . . There are no gold and pink shadows; it is not dawn in my face but afternoon, an autumn afternoon. . . .

"You saw smoke west of the house yesterday?" Abel asks Jumbo.

"Yahsah... Moze Lambaht and I wuhkin' yestiddy in de south fiel' an Ah see smoke risin' lahk a prairie fah an' Ah tell Moze about de fah."

"And what did he do?"

"He say he gwine look at dat fah to see it ain' no prairie fah."

"And did he go?"

"Yahsah, he go. . . ."

"And when he came back he told you what he had found?"

"He say dey ain' nothin' out dah. . . ."

"But there must have been something out there, damn it!" Abel cries impatiently. "If you saw smoke there must have been a fire!"

"Yahsah," answers Jumbo, uncertain now that he saw smoke yesterday. Abel's face is wet, hard.

"Why didn't you come to me and tell me what you saw!" screams Abel, pushing at the sweat on his forehead. Jumbo
shakes his head, a perplexed wrinkle forms on his thick brow.

"Ah din see muthin', Mahse Abel. I shoh tell yo if Ah had...An Moze say dey ain' nothin' dah..."

"Why was Moses Lambert on watch last night? It was not his night to watch."

"He trade wif J. K. White, Mahse. J. K. White set foh Moze de night him an' Susina mahied, an' Moze think dat las' night's a good time foh him t' set foh J. K."

"And he thought last night would be a good time to 'set' foh J. K. White," Abel repeats in a strange voice. "He thought last night would be a good time to 'set' for..." Abel arises, his dark brows tied together, begins to pace the room in short strides, plunging his closed fist into his palm as he walks. Suddenly he whirls to face me, and anger is hot upon his face.

"Do you see what he did, Annette?" he cries. "Moses Lambert brought the Indians here! That swine of a black brought the Indians here to murder us!" He throws his hand across his eyes; the muscles in his jaws work, work, work.

"That is not true, Abel!"

"Yes! Yes!"

"Why would he do that?" His hand is from in front of his eyes and his eyes blaze.
"So he could buy a trinket for the black wench he sleeps with!" he snarls. "He has been friendly with the Indians before, but I did not think he would do a thing like this!" His fist smacks into his palm, rests, poises, smacks into his palm.

"But that is absurd, Abel," I argue, growing fearful in a way I do not understand. "You have no proof that he was friendly with the Indians....At least he was no friendlier than the rest of the darkies...."

"Proof?" he shouts. "Proof enough! Have you seen the little turquoise locket Susina wears on a string about her neck? The Indians give them only to good 'friends'."

Between his outburst and my reply is a long silence. I can no longer look at him, but I am neither surprised nor angry. I am the afternoon, my dawn has been, I must make way for tomorrow....I shudder, frightened by my thoughts.

"Susina must show it only to her good 'friends', Abel. I have never seen the locket."

I can not see his face, but I know what my words have done. He feels tricked by his own angry admission, remembering now that Susina always wears a carefully pinned high collar when she is in my house. I have wounded him, exposed him, and now I turn the knife in the wound.

"Has she an Indian blanket on her bed, too?"

"A man gets tired of waiting, Annette," Abel says quietly. "I am afraid to wait too long....I have
already lost too much by. . . waiting." He goes. I wait, wait for nothing.

After Abel has talked to Moses Lambert and the darkies he comes to the house, walks past me to the rifle leaning in the corner. Two bullets drop into his palm from a little leather bag.

"Abel?"

But he ignores me, walks to the door with the gun. Little Abel and Jumbo are peeping around the door of the bedroom. I follow Abel to the porch.

"Abel. . . .?"

"Get everybody out here."

He speaks through the thin line of his lips, his eyes narrow and separated by a thick vertical line from his forehead to the center of his eyebrows. And now I know, and I shudder with the realization.

"No!" I tell him, putting my hand on the barrel of the gun. He tugs sharply at the gun, frees it from my grasp. "This is not the way!"

"He has been found guilty. . . ."

"By whom? You have no right to take a man's life!"

"He would have taken more than one life had his plan worked." I stand in front of him now, barring his way, hoping he will not pass me, but knowing his mind is set like his lips and his jaw.
"Get out of my way, Annette." I have never heard this voice before. I stay in front of him, thinking a miracle must come to stay the moment, but there is only the quietness of impatience on the porch with us. I grab the sleeve of his jacket as he pushes me roughly aside. I try to speak so Abel and Jumbo will not hear what I am saying.

"No, Abel! You hate him because she loves him. That is why you want to kill him!" My tears blur my vision, but I see hate shining at me through the narrow eyes.

"It is murder. . . .! Murder. . . .!"

"You fool!" he spits through white lips. "Get out of my way."

He pushes past me and I hear the door behind him.

"Murder. . . ." I sob. But there is no one to hear me.

"Get everybody out here," he calls from outside. He is gone now, from the house, from me, from anything we have been, gone as completely as the wind that sings a song for one day only then goes to another place to sing another song. Gone. And where is the man I loved more than days or nights or years? His heart is as hard as his shoulders now, as unyielding as the unwatered prairie earth. Love is a brittle thing! For once this heart, when it belonged to me, was like fallow land—mellow, void of insects and weeds, plowed and harrowed, waiting for the seed of truth to be dropped. . . . But the seed
has been dropped too near the rock; the rock is heavy upon it, pushing it back into the soil where it will rot.

"Abel. . . .?" Gone. My voice makes no noise to him.

The darkies come slowly across the field, already in mourning, their heads bent from the glare of the day, tired eyes upon the earth that has tired them. They form an audience forty feet from Moses Lambert, who stands with his back to them, head bowed, wrists tied behind him. The girl Susina stands with her eyes tightly closed, face lifted straight into the sun seeking the blind warmth there. All the while her hands move up and down her hips, up and down. The sounds of the darkies hang in the air like damp cobwebs. Abel. . . .!

He walks before them, stands close to the tied Negro, looks at the group assembled and starts to speak:

"When I brought you to Icaria I did not bring you here to be killed. . . ."

When I brought you out here I brought you out to watch me kill Moses Lambert, but before that I brought you here to plow my fields, sow my corn and wheat and oats to feed my son. This is my son in whom I am well pleased, but in no other way am I well pleased. I am not pleased with the woman who has borne me this son, only pleased that she is a woman and can bear, for she is not a woman in whom a man should be pleased. . . . No! She
is a woman who made a business of her heart and soul, and body, and what she brings to me is the part she has not been able to profit by. She has given me a beautiful son, and I tell her that I must have more sons, but she says no, there will be no more sons. She! She dares to bargain with me when she knows that I must have her if I have more sons. . . . But she is a woman and knows how to bargain, for she has made many bargains in the shadows where heart and soul, and body are peddled. She denies me. . . . And I am too much denied! She defies me even after she has seen God defy me, and it is the wrong time. I am strong enough to forgive God, for I have never felt the warmth of God lying beside me in the bed, yielding to me when I must be yielded to, but I have felt the tenderness of her against me for a complete moment when nothing was complete. Yet she has taken this moment, held it beyond my reach, and I am not strong enough to forgive her, because I—who am too proud to beg, have been made to beg, have been refused. I beg no more. . . .

"You have three minutes in which to pray and then I am going to put a bullet through your head."

I look at Susina, see her hands moving faster on her hips as her head begins to roll a little from side to side. A sound like a tuneless humming begins in her throat; her eyes and mouth are closed tightly, still lifted to the sun. Susina! Beautiful in your agony you stand swaying;
your dusky beauty you were given but can not give has betrayed you. I know your agony, Susina, for our blood drips from the same wound. . . .

"Abel!"

As Abel raises the gun Susina springs from the crowd to throw herself between the gun and the kneeling man, her outstretched hands reaching for his temples to shield him from the bullet.

Bang! The explosion and Susina’s scream come at the same time, red splashing in the air, then they both topple to the ground, her body across his neck. The darkies stand, black, gleaming statues in the sun.

"Susina. . . ."

Abel drops the gun and rushes to them, not seeing me next to him. The hands that pulled the trigger shake as they explore the hole through the limp brown hand; as he bends to pick her off the ground the sweat on his forehead drops on her chin. He holds her gently in his arms and carries her past the row of staring darkies to his house. . . . I follow him, and feel their eyes upon me, a hot and heavy coat upon my back. . . .
"Badgah Fehis undah da stones. . . .
Wohms a-gnewin' on his bones. . . ."

"Hesh sech talkin'!" Aun' Mattie say. "Lohd gwine shoh sen' down a cuhse on yo talkin' sech!"

"Lohd don' know 'bout sech as dat devil," I say. Mahse Abel sen' by de Lohd to cas' out sech devils."

Aun' Mattie shape lahk a buhned pot, but she sen' by de Lohd shoh 'nuff, an' she wohy 'bout losin' Lil Jumbo to dat ole' creek.

"Lohd done took mah Lil Jumbo widout sayin' why," she moan.

"You still has Big Jumbo," I tells huh. Aun' Mattie's face soft an' fat an' black an' puhty, 'cop when she cryin', an' she cry sump'n awful when Lil Jumbo took by dat ole creek, but she don' let Mahse Abel an' de lady see huh cryin'. Dat lady know she cryin', do', 'cause she come wid sump'n make Aun' Mattie sleep an' say Mahse Abel tell huh to. She know. I shoh happy Mahse Abel don' lose dat Lil Abel lahk we lose ouh Jumbo 'cause he jest die hisself if dat happen. I guess de Lohd know which to take an' which to leave, an' ain' no lil ole black chile impohtant as Mahse Abel's young'n, so we figuh He done chose what
he thought right... "But he sho' break Aun' Mattie's big fat heah when He chose... "He sho' done break huh heah, but ain' nuthin' lahk Mahse Abel have if he lose Lil Pee Tee 'cause we blacks don' suffah lahk de white folk. An' dat a fac', 'cause we wu'n be heah if we suffah lak de white folk. Aun' Mattie say de Lohd done give de dakhie a lot mo' heah dan He give de whites an' we is s'pose to suffah mo'.

Mahse Abel wohy me wuhkin' de way he do when Ah fuhs come heah! Me an' him wohk dis heah lan' when de ain' nuthin' heah 'cep a few feet uh lil ole fiel's wu'n grow 'nuff foh a hungy dakhie, pushin' dat ole wood plow 'til it don give up an' break apaht on de rocks, an' him tahin' it togedah wid leathah straps wu'n hol' a day ole ca'f to d' pos'. He push an' break an' tie dat plow 'til he weakah dan de strap! An' we wuhks while' de sun risin' an' while she sett'n, an' she buhn Mahse Abel 'til he black as me, but don' do no good... "De Lohd sen' us 'nuff rain from His heaven to drown Pharaoh's ahmy an' ain' nuthin' raised on dis praihie 'cep watah! Mahse Abel don break an' cry lahk a baby an' say he don finish wid dis lan' an' he gwine leave heah foh some place God lahk. But he don' leave... "He jes' push dat ole broke plow hahdah when de rain stop an' wait foh dem cattle f'm Jeffahson t'come. .. "An' he waitin' all de time foh dat chile to come! An' Ah ain' nevah seen sech a happy man as Mahse Abel
when dat lady give him dat boy chile! An' he tahed as any ole gray dahkie bin wohkin' foh a hunnad yeahs but he keep pushin' dat plow hadah an' hahdah. . . . He say he gwine fix dis heah prahie so's dat chile don' hav to wohk lahk he done wohked. An' he smile all time he pushin' dat plow an' diggin' at de eathh wid his han's, thinkin' o' dat boy waitin' in da cabin foh him.

"Hesh sech talk 'bout dat Badgah Fehis!" Aun' Mattie say. "De Lohd gwine sen' a stroke on yo foh hatin' dat man so. An' He gwine sen' anothah stroke foh lovin' Mahse Abel so much!" But she don' mean dat 'bout Mahse Abel 'cause she smile when she say dat. She know 'bout him savin' dis ole dahkie an' she know Ah'd put dis black body in de grave foh dat man.

"He tol' me he don' wan' dat Pee Tee wohkin' in de fiel wid me'n Lil Jumbo an' he cross wif dat lady 'cause she let him come in de fiel'!"

"What he doin' in de fiel anyhow?" Aun' Mattie say.

"He come deah 'cause he see me and Lil Jumbo in de fiel'. We shoh laugh when his papa come foh him an' tell him he ain' s'pose to come back, an' him tellin' his papa it too hot to wohk in de fiel' anyhow an' askin' why me an' Lil Jumbo wohkin' in de heat!"

"Fiel' wohk won' huht him none," she say, patt'n' Lil Jumbo on his roun' head. "Yo gwine be strong as yo pappy, Jumbo," she say, an' dat lil boy got eyes sof' as
any lil buck deah when he come close to Aun' Mattie an' look at huh dat way. She shoh luv dat lil boy, an' she shoh cry lahk huh heaht gwine break when de good Lohd decide He gwine take Jumbo to heaven wid Him.

"Look lahk de Lohd 'ud tell me why mah Lil Jumbo took," she moan.

Maybe de Lohd ain' got no lil boy wid sof' black eyes, an' maybe He gwine touch Lil Jumbo an' tuhn him to a white angel. But Aun' Mattie ask why de Lohd wan' tuhn Jumbo to white angel when He got all de white chullen t' make angels? Maybe He want a lil black angel. . . .

"Don' know why yoh pappy make yo weah all dat haih," I say, an' Mahse Abel sitt'n' not moh'n fouh feet away while J. K. White cutt'n' his haih. "Yo ain' no moh a lil boy an' yo pappy don' wan' dem cuhls cut away." Pee Tee got brown in his haih now an' dem gule cuhls still down to his shouldah! Mahse Abel tell J. K. cut his haih shoht 'cause summah comin' but he tell me don' cut Pee Tee's haih shoht a'tall! He ain' gwine let dat chile grow if he have his way. Sometime Ah b'lieve he luv dat lil boy too much, an' dat ain' good.

"Not too short, Jumbo," Mahse Abel say to me ag'in, an' he feelin' his own haih an' tellin' J. K. get it closah to da haid! Ah tol' Aun' Mattie 'bout dis an' she say:

"He dat boy's pappy an' not yo!"
"Dat's shoh de trufe," I say. "Dat ole rattlah neah kill Mahse when he bite Pee Tee! He shoh look hahd dat lady when she come screamin' dat a snake done bit his baby. He look jes' lahk he gwine bite huh!"

"She silly 'bout dat boy, too," Aun' Mattie say. "She jes' know moh' 'bout him an' don' look lahk she do. Women knows moh' dan men knows 'bout chullun, an' dey don' cahy on so. Chullun knows when dey is loved." But Ah don' talk no moh' 'bout chullun 'cause Aun' Mattie got teahs in huh eyes thinkin' 'bout Lil Jumbo wid dat big split in his lil haid. But Ah ain' nevah seen no man sooo crazy 'bout a chile as Mahse Abel is 'bout dat boy! Sump'n gwine happen t'dat chile an' his pappy gwine be de one dat die!

"Dat dahkie got sump'n 'sides dahkie blood in huh," Aun' Mattie say when she see de gal Mahse Abel and Mistah Groenah bring f'm Jeffahson foh Moze Lambaht.

"She shoh gwine keep de bed wahtm foh Moze," Ah say, an' Aun' Mattie say 'blasphemin'' an' leave mah face stingin' lahk a bee wheah she slap me. But dah gal ain' what she appeah to be! No suh! When she see Moze Lambaht she look at him wid dem light eyes 'uv huhs an' ain' nothin' 'cep love an' relief showin' dah. She shoh love dat man Moze, an' he love huh, an' ain' no han'somah sight dan dem two stan' in' b'side each othah sayin' 'Ah do' in front o' dat Sam preachah. No suh!"
"Mahse Abel sho' tuhnin' Moze Lambaht 'ginst him;"
I tell Aun' Mattie. "Seem t' me lahk Moze don' do nothin' right no moh, an' him tryin' so hahd t' please Mahse!"

"He know moh 'bout Moze Lambaht dan yo do," she say.
"Mahse Abel don' ack right evah since dat preachah come heah. He wohk too hahd an' drink too much!"

"He don' spen' no time wid dat lady no moh... All time he talkin' to Pee Tee oh Mistah Groenh. Ain' no lady lahk huh man when he don' pay huh no mine."

"He move in Pee Tee's room t' sleep, too, an' Ah knows he got some sickness," Aun' Mattie say.

"An' dat ain' de only place he sleep," Ah say. "Dat ain' de only place..." Aun' Mattie gwine ruin dis ole face if she keep slappin' me lahk dat!

"Hesh sech talk! Lohd gwine sen' a cuhse on yo foh talkin' sech! Ain' nothin' 'cep dahkie gossipin'."

"Ain' gossip, Aun' Mattie. Dat guhl 'frad o' Mahse but she don' let on. She scahed Mahse gwine do sump'n t' Moze Lambaht."

"Ain' gwine lissen t' sech talk! He got dat lady an' he don' need no colored guhl." Aun' Mattie pretendin' she ain' lissenin' no moh, but she say:

"Who tellin' yo' dis?"

"Ah see 'im!"

"If yo is lyin' de Lohd gwine rot out all yo teeth," Aun' Mattie say. "When dis happen?"
"Happen evah time he sen' Moze away."

"If yo lyin', Jumbo, de Lohd gwine strike yo daid
while you's stan' in' deahl! Aftah dat preachah come?"
she ask.

"Befoh an' aftah."

"Jesus is lissenin' an Ah hopes yo ain' lyin',
Jumbo, moan Aun' Mattie. "What dat poh lady gwine do when
she fine out?"

"She know. . . ."

"How you know she know?"

"Way she look at Susina. Ain' lahk she hate huh
but lahk she know an' pity huh."

"Blessed Jesus!" cry Aun' Mattie twistin' huh han's.

"What gwine happen to dat poh chile?"

"She gwine run away wif de Indi'ns." Aun' Mattie
jes stah at me an lif' huh eyes to'd heaven.

"Lohd have muhcy on us all!" she moan. "Dey'll cut
out huh tongue an' scalp huh!" Den she tuhn t' me an'
luk me in de eye:

"How yo' know all dis, Jumbo?"

"Ah heahd Susina talkin' to Jim Ned."

"Jim Ned? Lohd Gohd! Dat why dat Delawah bin
'roun heah so much. . . .When dis gwine happen?"

"When Mahse Abel an' Mistah Groenah goes t' Denton
t'see 'bout dat stoh dey buildin' dah. Indi'ns gwine
come an' get huh."
"What else dey gwine get?"

"Dat's all... Susina say dey has t' promise not t' take nothin' else. She gwine light a candle in d' window."

"Oh Lohd!" cry Aun' Mattie, "Ah ain' gwine sleep no moh evah." An' huh face wet lahk she bin wohkin' in da fiel', but Ah heahd Jim Ned promisin' Susina dey won' touch nothin' 'cep huh.

Den when Mahse Abel and Mistah Groenah goes t' Denton dey come yellin' in da middle o' da night an' Ah knowed dey wuz drunk an' might kill Pee Tee an' dat lady, an' dat's jes about what dey done. . . . Dey come foh Susina but befoh dey come foh huh dey come t' likkah, an' when dey come heah dey don' know wheah dey is.

An' Mahse Abel done shot Moze Lambaht t'rough de haid 'cause he think Moze tol' de Indi'ns t' come heah. . . . An' Ah knows Mahse think he done right, 'cause he kill dat Badgah Fehis when he beat'n me. . . . Ah knows Mahse Abel think he done right.
PART III: THE FLAME

Chapter XI

Hotel Gonnough, two gray stories of clapboard on clapboard, rose above the post oak thicket covering the long northern slope of Elm Hill. Its front second story windows gave upon a red, dusty view of Elm Street, still being chopped and scraped through the heavy underbrush of protecting oak. Busy men and busy oxen had cleared the land surrounding the gray building, but sleek green limbs still poked brazen fingers at the thin pillars of the porch, daring it to grow. Heavy hewed timbers stepped—twelve feet wide—from the road to the planked porch. A massive, cross-boarded door led into a room fifty feet wide, fifty feet long, and in the center of this room began wide steps to the upper story. The stairway, built of the same rude-hewed logs, was carpeted with heavy wagon canvas tacked over an inch layer of straw; and oak rails, washed white with lime and carefully grooved into the logs, bannistered the stairs. Abel Gonnough had supervised the twin fireplaces which stared at each other across the wide room, and between them he sat, planning a bar of smooth, planed, sawed oak at an angle to attract the occasional southeast breeze of the summer. Hotel Gonnough, a topic
of conversation for the dusty summer traveler, warm haven for the frost-bitten winter pioneers braving the hostile but lucrative frontier of Texas. . . . Hotel Gonnough, inn of wasted gables on a thrifty frontier, folly of the rich Frenchman who lost a colony because he did not know the intricacies of swamp fever, who made a fortune in cattle because of the fever. . . . Hotel Gonnough, plump, healthy edifice in a village of anemic clapboard skeletons. Hotel Gonnough, expensive, hospitable, pretentious in the Denton, Texas of 1861. . . . Hotel Gonnough, where coffee, tobacco, cotton warp, and white mule whiskey sold seven days a week in the lobby. Hotel Gonnough, where a meat stall—a part of the livery stable, partitioned, sealed tight with tin stripping—was open three days of the week, and where fresh beef and fresh pork sold for five cents a pound, but sold only to those who were unwilling or unable to kill venison, turkey, or prairie chicken for themselves. Many of the settlers came to Hotel Gonnough to buy dressed beef or pork because they were curious to see the merchant Gonnough and his wares.

"'Course he gits them thangs fer her at Jeffer'sn," says a consoling neighbor to her neighbor. "Cain't make no dresses like them out'n what we'uns git t' work with." And the women nod, agreeing with each other, for each has just spent half a dollar buying beef—enough to feed her family for a week, so she could see Madam Gonnough in the
finery of a bright green cotton dress with real lace high at the collar and cuffs.

"Friendly though, ain't she?" says one. "Friendlier'n him. . . . but bless pat if he ain't as handsome a figger'v a man as ever come t' Texas. . . ." And they come back again and again to buy things they do not need. Come back to buy a look at Madam Gonough's green dresses from Jefferson and Doctor Gonough's blue eyes and white teeth. And they tell others to come. . . .

"We will put the lumber yard next to the courthouse," Abel told Ralph Groener, "and we'll make the office of the yard large enough for a saloon."

Abel had watched impatiently the slow process of men from Dallas County building a lumber mill on the East Fork of the river, but now milled lumber was plentiful, framing timber, ash planks for flooring, pine weatherboard, and Abel's wagons could haul it to Denton and sell it cheaper than Judge Winter's yard. . . . Judge Winters knew lumber could be had cheaper and it became cheaper; Denton grew. Log cabins disappeared; clapboard houses, gray, looking like imperfect triangles from a distance, rose in the hundred acre townsite.

But few people stopped at Hotel Gonough, for people who travel six or seven hundred miles by wagon sleep in the wagon or by the wagon; forty cents was too much to pay for a person's board and lodging for just one night,
although many looked longingly at the cheerful light sifting through the windows and rolled coins in their hands while they pondered before the huge gray building. But few people stopped at Hotel Gonnough. And Abel Gonnough did not worry about the lack of business. . . . Later people would stop at his hotel; later when Denton was important they would stop at his hotel. Most of the customers were business men who had left businesses in states north and east to look for more business on the busy frontier. More than occasionally a cowboy — rich with roundup or trail pay, loud and generous with red eye or white mule — found his way to Abel's hotel, seeking what the hotels in Kansas City or Saint Louis furnished the cowboy. He was disappointed to find that conveniences in Denton included only soft, clean beds and warm water for the morning. . . .But Denton's hotel had something that Kansas City and Saint Louis hotels did not have: a green eyed Frenchwoman with a warm smile and a friendly word, and the word spread, and the long Saturday nights of winter were noisy with guitar music and ribald songs of roundups and trail drives. . . .Cowboys were rich, liquor was cheap, bars were busy. Denton grew.

"Reckon I got 'bouta wagon load o' dust fer that ole mule'ta kick around, ma'm," a red faced cowboy told Annette, pushing his ten cents across the bar. He stared at her shamelessly, but she found nothing offensive in his stare.
She was old now, and her admirer was a boy, possibly seven or eight years older than her own son.

"Reckon you've got 'bout th' purties' green eyes I ever seen," drawled the youth. Annette smiled. She liked the slow, thick speech of the cowboys, the sincerity with which they spoke, forming each word with a roll of the tongue, making two syllables out of one. Suddenly Annette laughed.

"Do you want to know the secret of my beautiful eyes?" she teased, leaning near him in an act of strict confidence. The boy leaned closer.

"I always take two bottles of white mule home with me each night..." she whispered...

"Yeah...?" The boy leaned closer still, eyes and ears wide. "N' then whattaya do?"

"I pour them in a basin..." she confided, slowly.

"Yeah...?"

"And wash my feet in it!"

Annette laughed, and when the surprise of being tricked had passed the boy began to laugh with her. He drained his glass, passed it to her.

"Have one on the house," she told him. "And why don't you make it the last drink for tonight?"

"Why I don't s'pose I've had anoughta wash th' dust offa m'teeth yet, ma'm," pouted the boy. Annette
shrugged. "You fill 'er up three times, ma'm," he said, dropping coins on the counter, "an' I'll be gitt'n along."

Annette poured him a drink, trying to hide her amusement with an overly stern look.

"These here glasses is dryer'n a gopher hole, Miz Gonnough," one of the men called from a table. Annette made a motion with her hand that meant she understood. She took a bottle from the shelf and went to the table. The men stopped their poker game long enough to watch her fill the glasses and collect the change.

"It is almost midnight," she reminded the men. "No gambling on Sunday, gentlemen." Her words and phrasing were jocular, but the men knew she intended for them to quit the game before midnight. Saloons and stores kept Sunday hours, but gambling was not encouraged on the Sabbath.

"All right, Miz Gonnough," one of the men said in the same mood, "jist one more hand'll make me rich enoughta give to th' Lord's collection plate." The men and Annette laughed, filling the room with happy noise. Without hurrying Annette corked the bottle and started to the bar. She saw Abel standing just inside the door, a scowl shadowing his face. She walked past him without looking at him.

"Where is Muriel King?" demanded Abel when she was near enough to hear.
"Her mother had a baby this morning," Annette answered quietly. "Muriel is at home with her mother."

"How many times must I tell you you are not to work in the saloon, Annette?" Abel's voice was level, his mouth thin and white.

"There was no one, Abel," explained Annette without raising her voice. "The men do not like for the darkies to wait on them."

"No," he agreed through narrow lips, "the men would rather have you to flirt with them... to tell them stories of the street!"

"That is ridiculous, Abel. The men are most respectful."

"The laughter I heard was hardly respectful," he snarled. "Get in the apartment and stay there. I will tend the bar." A long look passed between them, cold, hostile, futile. "Get in the apartment," he repeated.

"Yes, Abel," Annette said softly. "Of course. . . ." She held the bottle of whiskey toward Abel but released it before his fingers closed around it. The crash of the bottle turned all the heads in the room, and the men saw Annette turn her back to her husband and walk out of the room.

"G'night, ma'm," said the young man still standing at the bar.
"Good night," Annette answered politely but inaudibly. She hoped the boy had not noticed the hot tears in her eyes. Abel's voice followed her to the door of their apartment in the rear of the hotel.

"Sorry, gentlemen... Time to close for the night." Annette closed the door of the apartment, stood with her back against it, trying hard to hold the tears behind her eyes. Many minutes passed in the darkness of the room; finally she found the lamp and began to undress, but before her clothes were off she was across the bed sobbing. She heard Abel's knock but ignored it.

"Annette."

"Yes?" she called without moving from the bed.

"Open the door."

"I am in bed, Abel."

"Open it," he commanded. She brushed at her face before she left the bed to open the door. Abel did not look at her but stepped from the door to the bed and held the candle he carried over the bed.

"Where is the boy?" he demanded.

"With Jumbo," she told him. "Ralph Groener went back to Icaria this afternoon." Abel whirled to face her, staring.

"I want him here when I come home!" he shouted angrily. "Do you care so little about him you let him stay the night with an ignorant nigger?"
"Jumbo is not an 'ignorant nigger'. Abel is as safe with him as he would be here."

"Probably safer," Abel spat. "At least he does not have to see his mother selling herself to a crowd of drunk cowboys."

"You know that is not true, Abel," she said quietly, tonelessly. "You have no right to say such things."

"Then why do you insist on working in the bar when I have forbidden it?"

"Am I to stay hidden, Abel Gonnough?" she snarled. "Am I to lock myself away like an unpleasant memory? To be forgot?" She could not hold back her tears now; they choked her as they spilled from her eyes. "I am not dead, Abel! I will not live in the darkness because you no longer want me to be seen!"

"People talk about you, Annette. I have heard talk. . . ."

"And you believe this talk because you want to believe it!" she cried. Her voice rose uncertainly until it became shrill, monotonous. "And have you heard the talk about the rich Doctor Abel Gonnough and Miss Constance Boulter?" she hissed. "There is talk that Doctor Gonnough's trips to Pilot Point are not business. . . ." His hand stung her face, stopped her words. Her eyes glared into his with a fire brighter than the candle's flame.
"You are not to mention her name!" growled Abel.
"She is something you do not know about. . . ." Annette laughed, tossing her head back defiantly. Her laugh was like the echo of his slap. "But I do know her, Abel. . . . She is a child, reaching with childish fingers. . . . Only a child!" His hand smacked into her face without stopping her laughter. Through her tears she saw the blurred, dark fury of his eyes. "We reach when we are so very young, Abel. . . . We reach. . . .!" And she closed her eyes to avoid seeing the hate burning in his eyes.

"Bitch!" he cried, anger trembling in his voice. "I love Constance Boulter." He watched the effect of his words on Annette, saw her face pale in the dim room. "And she loves me." He spun about and left the room, slamming the door.

Annette stood still, listening to the sound of his footsteps; when it was quiet she began to laugh again.
CHAPTER XII

Wagons coming from the east and north creaked up the hill to Denton every day during the late spring and early summer. Settlers, weary of the slow wagons, sore from endless miles of uneven timbered trails, grew nostalgic and sentimental at the sight of a doctor's office, a lawyer's office, livery stable, blacksmith shop. Denton, Texas. They were astonished to find three general stores and a hotel. Denton even had a jail, a minute, unplumb log structure with wooden bars held on by stout log poles leaning into the ground from the side of the building. On the north side of the square towered a two storied shingled courthouse with neat, sturdy stairs leading to the top floor. One saloon—its flat, high front slanting into the southeast breeze—stood at the northeast corner of the small square, while a boardwalk, loose and warped from sun and rain, covered the ground from the hitching post to the building. Several large trees had been thoughtfully spared to shade the patient horses waiting for their thirsty riders who were inside Gonnough’s Saloon. Denton, Texas, a raw, gray, untidy frontier town shorn of beauty by winter's blades. ... But it had an atmosphere of permanence, an air of stubborn resistance as strong as the heat of summer and
the cold of winter. It bent like the tall, false front of the saloon, groaning and swaying in the wind, but it was seasoned, pliant, grooved, anchored, and it stayed. And the settlers, satiated with uncivilized existence on the trail, stayed. . . . Three hundred families had found homes in Benton by April of 1861. . . . A hundred families a year! A phenomenal rise in population for a frontier town. . . . for Doctor Abel Gonnough's town. . . . Benton, Texas.

"How long y' reckon it'll take t' mend, Doctor?"

"Leave the board on it and keep the bandage tight. You can use your arm in six or seven weeks."

The man nodded, rubbing his newly bandaged arm against the leg of his trousers. The effects of the whiskey Abel had given him were not yet worn off, and he regarded the doctor with heavy, red eyes.

"Painin' me real awful," he told Abel. "Shore glad t' find a doctor in these parts."

"Where have you come from?" asked Abel. The man had come to him an hour ago, a badly set broken arm dangling helplessly at his side. Abel made the man drink half a bottle of whiskey while he ground the severed bones back into place. Whiskey lessened the pain, but not enough. Sweat covered the man's face and pasted his clothing to his thin body.
"Come from Missouri," he told Abel. "We was told the weather was fit t' travel south durin' November' n December, but danged if Preston's Road ain't colder'n a witch's tit. Me an' Elsie Ann's been travelin' without sleep since Red River."

"You plan to settle in Denton County?"

"Yessir... Got frien's settled at Rue. That's where we're goin' to. Me an' Elsie Ann's Presbyterians."

"Farmer?" Abel asked. The man shook his head.

"Ain't yet but plannin' t' be." He lifted his splinted arm. "Don't reckon I'll be worth salt till this here heals proper."

"What did you do in Missouri?"

"Me an' Elsie Ann run a little place at Saint Looie... sorta' bar 'n barber shop. Elsie Ann took care o' th' bar an' I took care o' th' barberin'."

"Well, you won't be able to do much farming with that arm," Abel told him. "Why don't you stay in Denton? I need a bartender, and you can tend bar with one arm."

"Hm... Don't know what Elsie Ann 'ud say t' that. We come a long ways t' git land o' our own."

"File your claim and come back here to work," suggested Abel. "Denton will be large someday... The money in the county is here."

"Don't know... Figured on farmin'."
"I own the hotel north of the square. Your wife can take care of the hotel bar and you can set up your barber shop in the same building. . . . Denton has more than three hundred families now."

"Take a little cash to do that," the man said uneasily. "Me an' Elsie Ann's got a little, but not much more'n it takes fer supplies 'til we c'n raise our own."

"I'll lend you all the money you need," Abel told him casually, enjoying the incredulous look on the man's face. "You can repay the money when you think you can afford to."

"Now that's mighty nice o' you t' make that offer, Doctor, but s'posin' I don't make no money?"

"I'm willing to invest in you. . . . and Denton. . . . If it is impossible for you to pay me back. . . ." Abel shrugged, indicating that this prospect was of little concern.

"Hrm, mighty generous o' you, Doctor. . . . Temptin' too. An' it ain't like me 'n Elsie Ann's younguns startin' out t' farm. An' we don't neither of us know much about land 'n such."

"Talk to your wife," Abel advised. "You will find she will appreciate being in a town where supplies can be had and where sickness can be taken care of."

"Reckon she would at that. . . . Elsie Ann's poorly most o' th' time and she needs close t' doctors." He
studied Abel for a thoughtful moment. "Mind tellin' me why you're s' set on me'n Elsie Ann stayin' at Denton?"

Abel laughed, touched the man on the shoulder in a gesture of genuine friendliness. "I have been in Denton County twelve years," he said. "Came from France to Denton in 1848, four years after the first settler. . . . Of course I want my town to become an important place."

He smiled again, touched the arm again. "The only way Denton can become important is to have people like you settle here." The man with Abel was pleased, blushing.

"I'll talk it over with Elsie Ann, Doctor. I'll shore talk it over with Elsie Ann." He rose to leave. "How much f'r sett'n th' arm, Doctor?"

"That will cost you a more than serious discussion with your wife." Abel's words puzzled the man for a moment, then a smile slowly raised the corners of his mouth.

"Oh. . . . Well, I'm shore much obliged, Doc. I am shore much obliged!"

"And I'll be much obliged if you decide to stay here, Mister. . . .?"

"Compson," supplied the man. "Name's Benjamin Horace Compson."

"Glad to know you, Mister Compson."

"Much obliged again, Doc." Benjamin Horace Compson started for the door, paused to smile. "An' I'll shore
talk it up fancy-like with Elsie Ann. Seem t' me she'd be real proud t' live in a place nice as Denton." He nodded his head at Abel and closed the door. Abel looked for a long time at the closed door. Ben Compson would—Abel knew—stay. He and his wife would stay, and the next person who came to him for treatment would be persuaded to stay. ... People! Settlers! Make them feel wanted, make them see there are people in Texas who care about them and who could help them. And make them obligated, a source of future income.

This is to build, Abel Gonnough! Denton is your settlement. This is building it, growing with it. This is to build, Abel Gonnough!

Abel took out his book and entered the name of Benjamin Compson; after a moment's deliberation he put the sign of one hundred and fifty dollars by the name, closed the book and stared ahead at the bare wall of his office. Compson was a good investment. ... His wife could work at the hotel and her wages would pay for space for her husband's business. ... In a few years Ben Compson would need land, buy land, and he would need buildings. He would buy land and building material from Abel Gonnough. In the little book were eighty-four names and eighty-four figures. ... In time there would be more and more and more. Abel relaxed and smiled happily, but his pleasant reverie was short-lived. Someone knocked.
"Come in," he called, slightly annoyed by the interruption, but his annoyance disappeared as quickly as it had come. In the opening of the door stood Constance Boulter.

For a moment his surprise left him speechless. Constance had never been to his office before, had never been seen with him in public places, and the color of her face and her frightened wide eyes told him her visit was a necessity. She hesitated a moment just inside the door, glanced briefly behind her as if expecting to see someone there.

"I hoped I would find you at your office this morning, Abel." There was a long pause before his name.

"Constance!" He went to the door to see that it was closed, then he turned to her to take her in his arms. "I am glad you came." He pulled her to him until he felt the firmness of her breasts heaving against his chest. She lifted her head to him to show her small, white teeth over her bottom lip as if in serious concentration; he felt her clenched fists between his body and hers. She was not holding her mouth to receive his kiss. "What is it, Connie?" he frowned.

"Abel. . . ." she said, turning her head aside and down, "Papa knows. . . ." Now she turned, looking straight into his eyes. "He is coming here."

"Does he know you are here now?"
"No. He is with Judge Winters. I . . . slipped away from them." She began to sob quietly. "I am so ashamed," she said, avoiding his eyes. "Papa will not speak to me, Abel. . . . He just looks at me. . . . as if I were unclean!"

"How did he find out?" demanded Abel. "How?" He let his hands drop, regarded her questioningly. He watched the tears in her eyes and they drew him to her; his hand touched her pale face gently, soothingly. His chin rubbed against the silken hair, touched the clean soapy smell of her as she pressed nearer him. Now she gave him her lips, and for a long moment she was completely his. But tears struggled for release, and Abel felt the tremor of her body against his.

"What are we going to do, Abel?" she asked him, disturbed by the kiss, her wet eyes wide in pleading. "Papa may try to kill you!"

"Do not worry, my darling," he assured her. "Your father will not hurt me." They kissed again. "But he must not find you here." Abel opened the door, looked in every direction. "Go to the store," he commanded. "After I talk to your father it will be all right."

Constance hesitated, searching his face. "Promise me nothing will happen to Papa, Abel."

"I promise you nothing will happen." Still she hesitated.

"I am so ashamed," she moaned, "so ashamed for our sin."
"Hush!" whispered Abel. "It will be all right when I have talked with your father. He pulled her mouth to his cheek. "Tell me that you love me, Constance." But she could not answer; she could only hold tightly to his arms with her fingers.

"You must go, my darling," Abel told her. Before she could speak he opened the door. "It will be all right... There is nothing as powerful as our love. Your father can not stop it." His words stopped her exit; she turned to him as if to speak, but Abel stopped her:

"Please go, Connie. Trust me." When she was through the door Abel closed it without a sound. He walked to his desk and sat, waiting for Reverend Boulter... waiting...

Abel remembered the first time he saw the Reverend Boulter, a gaunt man with blue circles under blue eyes, and a voice that would frighten the devil himself. With the Reverend had been his twenty-four year old daughter, whose badly cut black dress did not disguise the ripeness of her breasts or the slender roundness of her hips. Coiled yellow hair rested on the high collar of her dress, polished gold against the black material, and Abel saw her blue eyes sparkle when she looked at him, saw the desire there. The vision of the girl stirred an excitement in Abel that he had not felt in a long time, challenged him.
"I am leaving for Decatur, Big Sandy, Montague, Jacksboro and Weatherford," Reverend Boulter told Abel, projecting his deep voice up and down the stretch of Elm Hill. "I will stop at Birdville in Tarrant County and come back to hold a meeting in Lewisville. I will be gone more than a month, and I think my daughter will be safe with you and your wife."

"Of course she will be safe with us, Reverend," Abel told him. "You need not worry about your daughter."

"God will take care of my own, I know," boomed the Reverend, "but I will feel better if she is in a place with a doctor."

"I will look after her, sir," Abel assured him, suppressing a smile, "and surely she can come to no harm with God and a doctor." But the grave Reverend missed the implication of Abel's words.

"Then she is in your care until I return," agreed the Reverend solemnly. "We will watch..."

And watch Abel did. His eyes followed the youthful beauty of Constance Boulter and his mind filled and overflowed with love for her.

"Don't be a fool, Abel," Annette told him apathetically. "You are old enough to be her father!"

But Abel did not feel old enough to be Constance's father; he was only old enough to be her lover. And he knew he was handsomer than any man Constance Boulter had
ever seen, for the years had lined his face with strength, and hard work had left his body lithe and powerful, still narrow at the hips, wide and full through the shoulders. Constance Boulter was attracted to him he knew, for her eyes shyly followed his tall brown figure about the hotel, looked embarrassedly into his blue eyes. She was embarrassed when he asked her to have her meals with him and Annette, but she accepted, and he found her shyness charming. She ate her food quietly, excusing herself when the first meal was finished.

"Stay with us and have some wine and cake," Abel offered.

"I have never had wine except in the church, Doctor," she apologized. Abel's laughter caused her to blush, painting her cheeks and eyes with a pink, warm glow.

"It is an old French custom," Abel informed her. "I do not think even your sainted father would disapprove."

"Perhaps just a little, then." She held the small glass in both hands and tasted the wine gingerly. The pink glow shone still on her face. "I knew some French people when I was a little girl in Georgia," she told them. "I loved the sound of the language they spoke."

"Le Francais est la langue d'amour."

"It sounds beautiful... whatever it is you said."

"I said only that French is the language of love."

She looked away from him. "Do you agree?" Now he looked
closely at her downcast eyes. "Have you been in love, Constance?"

She answered slowly, not at all surprised by the question as he thought she would be. She looked from her glass to Abel and back at her glass while she spoke:

"No. ... No. My father is the only man I really know. I suppose he is the only man I have ever known."

"But many young men have been in love with you," Abel teased. "Isn't it so?"

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Constance. "I see very few people my own age. ..." She lowered her eyes quickly.

"Papa doesn't approve of dancing, and that seems to be the only time people. ... young people, get together. So few of the cowboys come to church on Sunday."

"Someday you will meet a man who will tell you how very beautiful you are," Abel said, watching her face, "and then you will be in love. Then you will be in love."

"I don't think I will ever meet such a man, Doctor Gonnough," she answered frankly. "Papa says I must always stay with him and look after him now that mother is gone."

"But he does not mean that you must never marry!" Abel wanted her to talk; he loved the sound of her soft voice. Constance spoke an accent much like the Negroes but not harshly, prolonging the vowels of her words and omitting "R's" from her speech.
"I won't think of getting married as long as Papa needs me, Doctor."

"Someone will need you more than your papa needs you," Abel said quietly, staring into her eyes. His stare frightened her a little and she turned her gaze to Annette.

"Doctor Gonnough is a romantic, cheri," Annette apologized lightly. "Men are children when love is concerned. They never grow up." Annette laughed. "Not even when they are very old men," she added, pointing her voice at Abel. "It is the men who make love, but it is the women who make marriages." Abel heard her meaning, but the girl with them only laughed. Annette finished her wine and rose.

"You will excuse me," she said to Constance. "I promised to help my son with his writing tonight." She offered her hand to Constance. "He will be starting to school in the spring, and I'm afraid he has forgot how to spell since the end of the summer." She turned to Abel. "He will not go to sleep until you tell him good-night," she reminded him.

"I will come soon," he answered. Constance and Abel watched Annette until the door closed behind her.

"She is very beautiful," Constance said.

"Yes. . . ." agreed Abel without enthusiasm.

"And you have a beautiful son. He looks just like her. . . .I mean he has the same green, green eyes."
"You have made friends with the boy already?"

"We met this morning when he was saddling his horse."

"Ah! I am afraid he is happiest when he is with the horse! He says that Mister Beck's school is a waste of time."

"What are your plans for your son, Doctor Gonnough? Will you make him a doctor?"

"A doctor? Not unless he wishes to be," absently answered Abel. "And I have no plans for him, except that he take care of what I am building for him now... I would like to leave him the town of Benton."

Constance laughed. "Papa says you own most of it now. He says you are a very rich man."

Abel laughed. "In Benton, perhaps, where wealth is a relative thing." Then he added seriously: "But Petit will be rich." He lifted the wine bottle but the girl shook her head. He poured a drink for himself. "Are you at all interested in money, Constance?"

"Not very," she answered. "We have always been poor... I expect we always will be, living off what the people in the church give us. Papa says God meant us to be poor."

"And do you believe that?"

"I don't know... I used to watch the rich ladies in Atlanta fanning themselves with silk fans and riding in carriages, and I even envied them their luxuries..."
but Papa says the rich have no chance of getting to heaven, no chance at all, and I decided I'd rather go to heaven than have a carriage to ride in." They laughed.

"Your father is a very religious man. Few men would leave a big church in Georgia to come to the brush arbors of Texas."

"Yes, he is. Poor Papa. . . . He had a dream about coming to Texas, you know. He woke me and my mother at one o'clock in the morning and made us get ready to leave Atlanta! He said God came to him in his sleep and mapped out his journey... Told him to build his church in Texas. . . ."

"Does he want his church in Denton?"

"Oh yes! He prays every day, asking God to show him how a church can be built here."

"And has God shown him how?"

"Well... Judge Winters has shown him a lot on Bolivar Street that he is willing to sell, but so far he hasn't offered to help pay for the building."

"How much will this church cost?"

"Four thousand dollars, Papa says. He wants the biggest and finest church west of the Sabine River."

"That is a lot of money!" Abel frowned. "Does he honestly think that Judge Winters will give him that much money?"
"Papa thinks it is the Judge's Christian duty," Constance replied. Abel shook his head.

"I am afraid your father's hottest brimstone will not frighten Judge Winters into giving him that much money." He sipped his wine, twirling the glass slowly in his fingers. "Why hasn't the Reverend asked me for the money for his church?" Constance did not answer him but dropped her gaze. Abel chuckled at her response to his question. "Does your Papa think my money might contaminate his building?" he asked, smiling.

"Papa never mentioned asking you for money, Doctor Gonnough. I don't think he... would ask anyone outside the church." She stood, and Abel noticed a thick piece of leather wound tightly about the waist of her ill-fitting dress. The belt accented her straight back and pointed breasts. She saw his eyes on the belt and touched it, conscious of her awkward gesture. "I... I'm sure Papa would appreciate anything you could do to help him," she faltered. "Goodnight, Doctor." She did not look at Abel as she spoke. His eyes did not move from her.

"Goodnight, Miss Boulter." Her hand reached for the door and his words stopped her. "Perhaps I may find it my 'Christian duty' to help your father build his church."

"Perhaps... Goodnight, Doctor."

"Goodnight, Constance."
Abel sat in the room sipping his wine slowly, thoughtfully. The candle sank lower into its holder, but before it was quite gone Constance Boulter had become an important part of Abel's plan to help her father. . . . She had become Abel's most immediate plan.

Abel saw Constance each day and each night until her father came back from riding his month-long circuit. When Abel suggested to Reverend Boulter that he be allowed to contribute money for the church the Reverend was amazed and puzzled. His reaction was not what Abel had expected.

"Thank you, Brother Gonnough," replied the Reverend, his voice loud, still funereal, "but God has given me a cross to bear. The own children of Jesus must contribute to the church. Judge Winters will be visited by the Holy Spirit if there is no other way. Thank you, Brother, just the same." He then clasped his bony fingers about Abel's wrist. "The greatest contribution you can give to the church is yourself, Doctor Gonnough. Give yourself to Him and your money will be accepted in heaven."

But Abel Gonnough was not interested in heaven. He was interested in winning Constance Boulter by building a church.

"Give me time, Reverend," said Abel. "Give me a little time."

"We have a patient God, Mister Gonnough," Reverend Boulter said, his arm still on Abel's wrist. "He waits
for the stray lamb long after the flock has returned to the fold."

Constance had become more necessary to Abel than his businesses, but he knew her loyalty to her father and he knew her father's fanatic stubbornness. A man who rides a three hundred mile circuit to preach without payment presented an impossible barrier. Abel realized that the only way he could be with the girl was to be a convert in her father's eyes. He rode to Pilot Point to hear the Reverend Boulter preach. When Constance saw him she gave him a timid smile. Her hand shook in his.

"You came all the way here to listen to Papa preach?"

"I have been out of the church too long," he told her, "and I have been away from you much too long." He wanted to kiss away the fright in her eyes, but he kept himself aloof and dignified. "You are the prettiest girl in all of Texas," he whispered. He saw the blood rush to her face to make her pink cheeks pinker still.

"You really mustn't say things like that, Doctor Gonnough."

"I try not to say them, Miss Boulter, but I find I can not resist you."

"People will hear you," she warned.

"Tell me you love me and I promise to say no more.. . . here."

"Shhh. . . ."
“Tell me, Connie. That is the only way to keep me quiet.”

“I can’t tell you that,” she whispered, her hand trembling in his grasp. “People are looking at us.”

“Say it, Connie. Tell me you love me.”

“Doctor Gonnough...”

“Tell me!”

“I love you, Doctor. Now please let me go.”

“I will... but not for long. Your father is going to leave for Little Elm after the service to preach a funeral. Invite me to your house this afternoon.”

“No!” exclaimed Constance helplessly. "Widow Myers is staying with me until Papa returns. You must not come to the house."

“It will all be very proper if the Widow Myers is there. Invite me.”

But it was not necessary for Constance to invite Abel to her home. Reverend Boulter, gratified to find Doctor Gonnough in his audience, came to Abel with arms outstretched when the service was over.

"Thank the Lord you could find your way here today, Brother Gonnough," he beamed. "May your visit prove a turning point in your life."

“I well think it may, Reverend,” Abel told him sincerely, looking at Constance.
"A funeral has called me to Little Elm today. . . . Poor Sister Kennedy's eight year old, but my daughter would be honored if you can find time to take dinner with her and the Widow Myers."

"It is I who am honored," Abel said, bowing. Constance Boulter stared at the ground, trying to keep a smile off her lips.

"Yes, Brother, this may prove the turning point in your life," repeated Reverend Boulter.

"You preach a fine sermon, Brother Boulter," Abel said solemnly. And Boulter, overcome by his own words to the congregation and by Abel's compliment, pounded Abel on the back affectionately. He went happily to Little Elm.

After dinner Abel sat with Constance and the Widow Myers in the parlor of the Boulter home while the two women embroidered pillow cases and talked about neighbors Abel did not know. The Widow Myers was at home in the dim, drab surroundings, but Constance Boulter was fresh, alien. Finally Abel could stand it no longer. He said to the Widow:

"I thought perhaps I would ride to the Point while I am here. Do you feel like riding, Widow Myers?"

"Why lan' sakes alive, Doctor," the plump widow gasped, "y'ought t' be able t' look at me'n tell I ain't in no condition t' go horseback. Since pore Lem was took I've had a man's chores t' do seems like, an' with m'
bronichal trouble'n all seems th' most I c'n do's jest drag about." She sighed, the sigh of a martyr climbing to his cross. "You'n Connie ride over t' th' Point why not? I'll jest make m'self com'f'tble 'til y'get back."

"Stop by my office the first time you come to Denton," Abel told her professionally. "I have some medicine that will make you feel sixteen again."

"Lan' sakes alive!" shrieked the Widow. "Take a ox wagin a foot deep in pills t' make me feel that young, Doctor."

"But you are a remarkable specimen of womanhood," insisted Abel. Widow Myers smiled sweetly at her embroidery and attacked it with renewed energy.

"You should be ashamed for flirting with Widow Myers so shamelessly," Constance reprimanded him when they were on their way to the Point. They walked the horses slowly through the bright cool afternoon, pausing often to look at the trees coming alive after their winter death. In the distance the great hump of earth that guided Indian, Ranger, Settler was touched with green. Pilot's Point, visible and welcome to the immigrants to Texas.

"But look how a few kind words helped her 'bronichal' trouble," Abel laughed. In the next instant he was serious. "Connie, I've been like an insane man since you left Denton." She made no reply; the hooves of the horses dug rhythmically at the narrow trail. "I want you more
than you will ever understand. ... And I know you want me."

"I don't let myself think about you," she said at last.

"Still you do think about me, don't you?"

"Would to God Papa had never brought me to Denton!"

"Don't say that, my darling. Never say that," he begged. "We would have met... It was meant to be."

"No, Abel," she said before he was quite finished. "You must go away and never come to me again."

"You don't mean that," he told her. "You want to see me as much as I want to see you."

"That's true!" cried Constance, wiping at her eyes with the back of her hand, "but I would rather be dead than disgrace Papa. ... You have a wife, Abel, and a son."

"We do not love each other, Constance. Annette would gladly leave me if I but offered her money enough."

"Papa thinks divorce is sinful. You must go away and forget about me."

"I have tried to do that! Can you forget me? Forget a man who loves you as I love you?" The horses walked slowly, neck and neck. Abel's leg touched her horse each time the horse stepped.

"Yes! I will make myself forget, Abel! You must do the same." He reached out his arm and caught her around the waist. Before she knew what had happened his arm
pulled her from her horse and held her against his side. Her feet dangled helplessly.

"Abel!" she gasped. He set her gently on the ground and jumped down beside her. Before she could speak again his lips were pressed hard against her mouth. She struggled to free herself for the length of the kiss and then went limp in his arms. His lips found her ear, her neck, pushed through her hair.

"Constance... Constance," he murmured. "My darling, my darling."

"Abel," she sobbed, "oh Abel."

He lifted her to him and held her tight against his neck and face.

"Abel...?" She clung tightly to him.

"Yes, my darling..." Sobs shook her body as he walked with her. "Yes, my darling."

The freed horses wandered a few yards down the trail and began to nibble at the young grass, quivering with pleasure at the unexpected relief from duty. Occasionally a strange sound made them toss their heads high in an attitude of listening... Then they shook the sound from their ears and returned contentedly to their grass...

Abel rode into Denton the next morning as the first rays of the sun found the porch of the hotel. He patted his horse into the stall and looked at the light burning
in the window of the kitchen. He took out his key and let himself in through the back door.

"Abel?" Annette called in the direction of the sound. He went into the kitchen where she was boiling coffee.

"Yes." Without a word she dipped boiling coffee into a cup and gave it to him. "I had to stay in Pilot Point longer than I expected," he explained without interest. She said nothing. He finished his coffee in silence, relishing its hot strength.

"How is Petit?" he asked, rising.

"He is fine," she answered without feeling. Abel stretched himself and yawned.

"I want to sleep until noon, Annette. Please don't call me unless it is something important."

"Yes," she said, still without any feeling. "Of course."

"You aren't happy to see me," he said pleasantly.

"Are you happy to be here, Abel?" she asked, her voice underlining the word.

Without answering he walked out of the room and closed the door. Annette sipped her coffee slowly, watching the rose color of the dawn drip across the window. She heard the noise his boots made as he dropped them on the floor. Silence.
The days away from Constance were endless, an eternity of sunrises and sunsets without pattern or meaning; the moments with her were brief, a pause between the ticks of the clock measuring their love... And then God called Reverend Boulter to organize a church, and again he brought his daughter to Abel and Annette for safekeeping.

"I am not at all reluctant to leave my daughter with you here since you've become a man of God, Brother Gonough."

"It is our pleasure, Reverend, since you have been called to your great project."

"He knows how much a man can do, Doctor," Reverend Boulter said, raising his eyes to heaven. "He knows... And the Reverend Boulter rode northwest to spread gospel on the unsliced bread of the wilderness.

A week after the preacher had gone Abel came to Annette, found her sitting in the slanting sunlight of the kitchen window. He saw so little of her he was surprised to find her suddenly grown old in the white of the sunlight. Gray had touched her bronze hair, and her cheeks had begun to fade with the same gray. Lines about her mouth were deeper, wider. And only her eyes, green as wet oak leaves in spring, had not changed. They regarded him coolly from an immeasurably long distance, no longer searching, no longer caring to see into his heart.
"Make a bargain with me, Annette," he said without preamble. "I will give you five thousand dollars if you will make me free."

"I have made you free many years ago," she said from her distance in the sunlight.

"I want to marry Constance Boulter."

Sunshine and silence followed his words, then Annette began to laugh. The tears on her face sparkled in the light.

"A child, Abel! She will not keep you young!"

"I am serious! Listen to me." He grabbed Annette by her arm and pulled her roughly to face him. Now she stood before him, her head tilted away from him in defiance. "Take the money and go," he said.

She pulled free of his grasp and straightened her back; her green eyes, narrowed, peered straight into his.

"I will go, Abel." She spoke slowly, without emotion, choosing each word carefully. "But it will cost you more than five thousand dollars."

"Then how much?" he spat.

"I will take my son with me when I go."

Abel could only stare at her; at last his lips began to work, forming words. His face was drawn and gray with anger.

"You are insane!" he cried at last. "Surely you can't believe I would let you take my boy!"
"A woman does not walk away and leave a child she loves. When I go I will take him with me." The sun rose higher outside the window and shaded part of her face.

"I would kill you first," he said softly.

"That is my price."

"Try to take my son, Annette Mercier, and I will kill you." His fists closed and opened threateningly; perspiration streamed from his forehead, bubbling hot anger. For a moment he stood as if unable to move his feet from their position, then he swayed slightly backward, spun, slammed out of the room. Annette listened to his boots as they thudded down the hall. Finally she heard them stop. He knocked loudly on a door; she heard the door open and close. She stared through her tears at the lifting sunlight. Abel had gone directly to Constance Boulter.

Before Abel had finished telling Constance about the scene with Annette she was sobbing, the heels of her hands pressed against her eyes to erase the picture of what he was telling her. Abel reached for her but she drew away from him.

"We have no right to make her that unhappy," sobbed Constance, rigid and aloof in her own misery.

"She is not worth your tears, my darling," Abel consoled. "She does not love me or the boy."
"You are wrong, Abel. She does love you." She held her head high and looked away from him. "We must stop seeing each other." Her words, definite, final, frightened him. He had a glimpse of his prize slipping through his fingers; he reached desperately, greedily, to recover it. He pulled her face to his, his eyes searching hers.

"You are the only woman I have ever loved, Charlotte!" he cried hoarsely. "Annette and I were alone. ... We were both lonely. ... We never loved each other!"

"Abel!"

"She told me she was going to have a child," he explained, his palms open to her in pleading. "I never loved her as I love you."

"But you must stay with her now. This must be the last time, Abel. We must not meet again. ... ."

"Charlotte!"

"Why do you call me Charlotte? Twice you have called me that."

Abel turned from her, shaking his head from side to side to clear it. Her words had twisted his heart and brain until he could not think.

"If you knew how I want you. ... to touch you! Just to see you!"

"Who is Charlotte?" she insisted. "Why did you call me Charlotte?"
He looked at her a long time before he put his hands over his eyes. "It is someone I knew a long time ago... in Paris," he said vaguely. He went on his knees before her. "I love you more than life. I can't let you go." His hands throbbed on her hips. She looked away from him, feeling the heat from his hands against her body.

"You must," she said quietly.

His hands pushed harder at her, his long fingers digging into her flesh.

"No," he implored. He felt the slight tremble of her legs as she knelt before him in the floor. Her lips found his ear, brushed it lightly, then pressed hard against it. Her tears dripped hotly on the side of his head.

"Abel, Abel," she sobbed. "Oh, Abel..."

His arms pulled their bodies together, and the soft odor of her neck and hair was suffocatingly sweet. Now he held the world in his arms... a world that spun frantically, dizzily, and finally dipped into thick, soundless darkness beautiful with scent...

Abel did not know how long he had been waiting when the door was flung open. The white, contorted face of Reverend Boulter glared down at him. Blue circles under Boulter's eyes were blacker now, deeper than Abel
remembered, but the eyes above the circles were blacker, deeper with hate. Judge Winters followed Boulter through the door.

Abel regarded the men curiously without rising. Boulter pointed a bony finger at him. His voice when he spoke was deep black.

"Before God and a witness I condemn your adulterous soul, Abel Gomnough!" he shouted, and as Abel watched he saw his accuser stiffen and sway in the direction of his pointing finger. Blood left the Reverend's face, drained it of all color, and the parted lips became invisible. No more sound came from the parted, death colored lips, and suddenly the Reverend Boulter toppled forward on the floor, his finger still pointed accusingly at Abel. Then came a sound; the last sound Reverend Boulter was to make came from his throat.

Judge Winters slipped his hand under the fallen man's head and watched it loll lifelessly on its side. Abel felt the pulse, found none. The two men stared silently at the chalk-colored mask that was no longer a face. The thin dead lips turned sharply down.

"God Almighty damn!" swore Judge Winters. Abel grunted.
The news of Reverend Boulter's death spread through the town and gathered people together. They sat in their houses and discussed the loss to the community, making it a personal bereavement. Around the tiny square the men grouped to shake their heads in unison.

"Plumb tuckered out seemed like t' me last time he visited us."

"He must o' knowed he wuz ailin' er he wouldn't at been at Doc Gonnough's."

"Hard on a man's old as him ridin' all that distance 'tween here'n all them places he preached at. I'm glad he come t' Denton t' die... Reckon he'da like it that o' way."

"Truest man o' God I ever knowed!"

"Thank th' Lord his girl was with 'im t' th' last... .Needed somebody t' look out fer 'im since pore Sister Boulter was took."

"Don't know what she'll do now."

"Might thank o' marryin' now her papa's gone."

"Little late t' think o' that seems t' me like. Ain't none eligible hereabouts anyhow."

"Purty thang... Seen 'er at th' Winterses' Store buyin' material. Funeral stuff I reckon."
"Well, he's one'll surely find his just reward. A better man than him never walked the streets o' this town."

"S'pose he'll have the whole county here't th' fun'ral."

"Reckon so. Knowed th' whole county f'r shore."

"Don't speak well f'r Doc Gonnough lett'n 'im die while he was lookin' at 'im."

"Ain't much could be done. Th' Revernt wuz old, an' I reckon he wuz plain tired. He went like he'd o' liked t' go."

Abel walked toward his hotel in the gathering dusk of the raw spring day, past the small knots of people who nodded politely to him as he passed, then quickly put their heads together to discuss the tragedy of the day. Abel smiled to himself. How people enjoyed the entertainment of a death, a fire, a windstorm! Reverend Boulter's death would cause speculation for days, furnishing release for the pent up emotions of these people, isolated as they were from the escape offered by a theater or traveling show. It was an event of great importance, releasing more sentiment and tears than a religious camp meeting, satiating appetites hungry for disaster. The news of Boulter's death would cover the county faster than the rains of April, and all who could leave their farms would load the family on a wagon and drive to Denton. Businesses
in the outlying settlements would operate—if they operated at all—with disinterested skeleton forces, staying reluctantly behind while owners and wives and children hitched and loaded for an indefinite stay at the county seat. Some would drive for two days for a glimpse of the revered Reverend's remains, picnicking along the way, thinking of the terrible catastrophe but grateful for a recess from the monotony of their lives. Whiskey, talcum, and razors would sell as long as supplies lasted. Abel made a mental note to order more whiskey.

By Saturday night the knoll in the center of the town would be bright with many campfires, campfires of a curious army bivouacked out of respect for God's greatest warrior. Saloon doors would swing on their hinges like squeaky metronomes ticking away exciting days. Merchants would stand in doorways smiling impatiently until time to lock doors and count the day's receipts. Holiness! Homage! Holiday.

The smile was still on Abel's face when he walked into Ben Compson's barber shop in the corner of the hotel. Mrs. Compson, practical and officious, had the downstairs of the hotel bright in expectancy.

"I won't have you workin' yerself t' a early death, Ben Compson," she told her husband, printing signs that raised prices for his services five cents. "People expects t' pay more at such times as this." And she
surveyed the hotel lobby in happy anticipation of a large, generous crowd of mourners.

The barber shop was empty of customers when Abel entered, and he seated himself in the chair without any exchange of words. Abel was Ben Compson's steadiest, most frequent customer, and Compson knew his moods. Tonight the Doctor wanted to think, he knew, for details of the Reverend's death had reached the shop, and of course Doctor Gonnough would be grieved, being such a close friend and advisor of the Reverend. Compson lathered Abel's neck and shaved it before he spoke, leaving an abrupt straight line of dark hair even with the bottom of the ears. He dusted on a heavy film of talcum and fished hot towels from a pan of boiling water, holding them on long wooden spoons to cool.

"Your boy was in today, Doc. Growin' like a weed!"

Abel smiled at the mention of his son. "Yes he is," he agreed.

"Instructed me t' cut his hair exactly like yours," Compson chuckled. "Done th' best I could, but I told 'im he couldn't expect no curly sidewhiskers jes' yet!" Abel laughed, enjoying the relaxing effect of the hot towels on his face. "Too bad 'bout Preacher Boulter," Ben Compson continued. "Good man... Too full o' hellfire, but a good man."

"Yes."
"Never looked too healthy t' me," said Compson, shaking his head. "Old feller like him should slow down."

"He should never have gone to Montague," Abel said. "I told him the trip was too much for him."

"Yep," grunted Compson, pulling the razor effortlessly across Abel's cheek. "Of'en times th' flesh ain't as willin' as the spirit." The gentle, slow scrape of the blade against his skin set Abel thinking about his meeting with Constance early in the day. . . . When the news of her father's death reached Constance she collapsed and refused to see anyone; Mrs. Winters put her to bed and barred visitors from the house, but Abel knew that Connie would send for him. She had not, and the incident was many hours old. No doubt Judge Winters had told Constance what happened at the office, but she could not possibly blame Abel for her father's fatal attack. He was old, tired, and the shock of finding his daughter in adultery had been too much. She would send for him. . . . Constance knew about her father; Judge Winters knew. There was actually nothing violent or irregular about his death. . . . Unless Judge Winters had made it appear violent and irregular. Winters would not speak, Abel decided, for fear of implicating Constance. Abel was safe until he could see Constance and explain to her, and his explanation would comfort her, he knew. When she could think clearly
she would appreciate how timely the insurmountable obstacle in their love had been removed. Given time, Connie would feel the relief and gratitude Abel felt. Only Annette remained now, a solid and forbidding barrier in their path, but he could cope with Annette. She must leave; Annette must leave; she really had no reason to stay. He would tell her tonight, in a few minutes, and then he and Constance would be free of everyone but each other... The thought made Abel impatient, eager for his encounter with Annette.

"Hurry, Ben," he urged, anxious to complete his plan, savoring his exhilarating spirits.

"All finished, Doc," Compson told him, splashing bay rum from a special bottle. "Clean as a stalk o' cane."

Abel inspected himself critically in the shop mirror, running his fingers contentedly across his smooth face and hair. His brown face glowed appreciatively at the reflection of graying handsomeness. Full, level brows, darker than the thick hair brushed back from his forehead, shadowed his clear eyes, bluer and darker in the yellow light of the lanterns. His strong chin had become broader with the years, accenting the deep cleft in the tightly stretched skin, skin that even the unsparing winds and suns had failed to age as they age most men. Networks of deep lines triangled outward from the corners of his eyes, but they were not brands of age, only marks of a
man who had squinted long at the blinding colors of many
suns. His long, wide lips stretched open across square
white teeth. Abel was satisfied. Forty-two years had
not cooled or slowed the blood in his veins. He was still
young, still handsomer than any man his age had a right
to be. He adjusted the bow of his string tie to let one
end dangle two inches below the other, cursing the stiff-
ness of the celluloid collar that was less white than
the new shirt he wore. Textile mills in Harrison County
were making better shirts than the shirts of a year ago
and they were cheaper than the imported English materials.
. . . Perhaps in time the mills would find a way to rid
their products of the brown impurities. . . . He brushed
invisible specks from the shoulders of his loosely
tailored jacket, noticing with approval that the cut of
the jacket heightened the broadness of his shoulders and
made his hips appear narrower. He was the well-dressed
Doctor Gonnough of Paris once more; gone were any traces of
the man who once cursed and scraped at an unproductive spot
of Texas prairie. Except for the narrow-toed, high-heeled
black boots he wore he might have walked down a fashion-
able street in Paris as one of the immaculately costumed
shoppers on the Rue de la Paix. While he was still looking
in the mirror he saw a farmer from east of the city enter
the shop. The man sat in Ben Compson's chair and nerv-
ously crossed and uncrossed his legs until he was comfortable.
"Wife sent me t' git clean fer th' fun'ral," the man growled in explanation. "Unexpected 'bout Brother Boulter ain't it?"

"I heard Doctor Gonnough here tell the Reverend not to go to Montague," Ben Compson said as he tied a cloth about the man's neck. "Yessir," he continued, loud with authority, "Doc warned him that trip to Montague might be his last but it didn't do no good." His scissors clicked a straight white line through the long hair at the neck. "Looked mighty sick t' me last time he come here... Should o' listened t' th' Doc. Might still be livin' t'day."

The man in the chair nodded in agreement. Compson nodded.

Abel smiled as he walked out of the shop. He felt clean, safe. Ben Compson was an excellent investment, a good friend. And now to Annette, and there was still an almost happy anticipation. Abel Gonnough was strong. He was safe, clean.

At the door of Annette's room he hesitated a moment to straighten his tie before he knocked. Ready. He knocked, and quickly knocked a second time. At last the door opened a crack and he heard Annette's voice:

"Yes?"

"I want to talk with you, Annette. Let me come in."
At his words she flung open the door and walked back into the room, her face turned to him only for the time it took to let him in. The sight of her shocked him. He had last really noticed her in the strong, unkind sunlight of the kitchen window; now in the dim light of the candles her face was white, lined with black lines, her eyes ringed from lack of sleep. When she heard the knock she was lying fully clothed on the bed, but she had not answered the door until she found a heavy blue shawl to wrap herself in, and across her shoulders, reaching to her knees, clasped tight at the neck by her white hand, the shawl hid the curves of her body and gave her the appearance of a faded, formless old woman. A fleeting surge of pity swelled in Abel. Annette did not turn to Abel but continued to stare out of the window at a tree tapping against the sill, unseen but heard. The room, the woman, the atmosphere were gray and blue, with darker, grayer, bluer corners.

"Reverend Boulter is dead," announced Abel. He waited, but only the branch of the tree tapped in reply. "You must arrange to leave now, Annette."

He watched the back of her head jerking in the shadows, knew she was crying soundlessly. Finally a muffled sob broke the silence.

"Tonight?" screeched Annette, laughing when she had finished the word. "Will you bring Constance Boulter to
my bed tonight?" She whirled to face him while she laughed. "Shall I kiss my son goodbye and steal quietly away into the darkness, Abel Gonnough?"

She was sick, he realized suddenly. The deep lines about the mouth and eyes...the swollen, sleepless eyes. Again he felt a pity. She stood before him, poised, panting like a cornered animal, her eyes flashing darkly in the white face. Abel heard the pity he felt creep into his voice:

"I am sorry for you, Annette." Her breathing had become heavier, noisy in the large room.

"I am sorry for you, Abel Gonnough!" she cried. "If there is pity in your heart then pity yourself for what you are doing." Her voice rose, her laughter swelled. "You are not God, Abel Gonnough! You can not wave your finger and expect the world to obey!" She stepped toward him, pulled the shawl tighter about her throat.

"I want no argument," Abel said quietly. "Leave tomorrow."

"No!" she spat softly, "not tomorrow or the tomorrow after that..."

"Don't be a fool, Annette."

"...Never," she said, without listening to his words. She shook her head. "Never!" And a grim smile played about her mouth. "You will have to kill me the way you killed Reverend Boulter!"
"Hush!" he commanded. "Only your filthy mind would think of that."

She laughed again, a long, shrill laugh without amusement, a cry. "Yes! The shock of finding you had spoiled his precious daughter killed him... Killed him as surely as you killed Moses Lambert!"

"Be quiet, Annette," he growled at her. "Be quiet."

"No! I will be quiet no longer," she yelled fiercely. "I will tell them all about you... all about the great Doctor Gonnough..." Laughter jumbled her words. "... all of them, Abel. I know and am not afraid of you, Abel. Not afraid... I know, know! I will tell them all...!

"Bitch! You filth of Pigalle gutters," he swore, taking a step to her. "It was you who told Reverend Boulter!"

His accusation stopped her laughter. She faced him, calm now, deliberate in her denial. Her lids drooped heavily across her eyes.

"I told him nothing... nothing," she said, her voice as heavy as her eyelids. "As low as I have fallen I still have pride."

"Pride of a Paris whore!" he screamed. He came at her now, his face dark with anger, mouth twisted down in fury. "You told him lies! Lies! Lies!" Before she could move, his hand smacked into her face, turning
her head half away from him with the force of the blow.

"No!" she screamed, backing away from him. Again his palm thudded into her face, leaving a wide red welt. Her hands went to her face for protection; his open hand crashed against her fingers and dropped them.

"Stop it, Abel!" she screamed again. His other hand caught her face and her head sagged. A corner of her mouth oozed blood. His hand came at her again but she pulled her head into the protection of her shawl and his hand grazed the top of her head. Again his hand lashed down at her, and again she avoided the blow by stumbling. She pulled toward the bed.

"No!" she groaned.

He came at her now, his arm raised to strike. She stumbled, pulled herself from the floor and ran past him to her bed. At the bed she fell, gasping, moaning without making words.

"Lies!" shouted Abel.

Her hand dug underneath the pillow, and for a second she seemed to embrace the pillow and draw strength from it.

"No..." she moaned. Slowly she pulled herself to her feet, dropping her shawl as she rose. Her dress was dark with splattered blood. In her hand she held a small revolver, levelled at Abel. Blood dripped across
her chin from her cracked lips, and her voice rose—raspy, thin, and bloody—choked by her own emotion.

"Touch me... again, Abel... and I will kill you."

A weird smile lifted the corners of her torn lips. Her words stopped him where he stood.

"Fool," he said quietly. "Put down the gun."

Her hand holding the gun began to shake as she brought her other hand to steady it. While Abel watched, her whole body began to tremble. He stepped toward her.

"The gun, Annette," he said, reaching.

"Stop, Abel," she pleaded weakly, bracing her back against the wall. He took another step.

"You would never use the gun, Annette... Give it to me."

Her arms could no longer support the pistol and it dropped to her side, but in the same instant Abel moved she whipped the gun between them and he stopped.

"Stay away from me," she gasped.

Her trembling was more visible now; her breaths came faster, noisier, and he knew in another moment she would faint. Another moment... He waited, stepped quickly forward and right. But Annette had anticipated his move and pulled the trigger before his forward foot touched the floor.

The impact of the bullet pushed him back, bent his knees, whirled him left. Grabbing his left shoulder with his right hand he bent in pain.
"Annette. . . ." he growled, and she fired again, blindly, not looking at her target. Abel heard the bullet whine as it sped past him and ripped into the wall. Now he lurched forward, grabbed at Annette's wrists.

"Damn you to hell! Give me the gun. . . .!" He felt her fingers release their grip on the weapon, felt the metal through the warm blood dripping between his fingers. And Annette collapsed against him, convulsed and gasping for breath, her breasts hot and wet against his shirt.

"Oh my dearest God," she groaned. And her body was limp against his. "Abel. . . ." she sobbed, "Abel. . . .?"

Without taking the gun out of her hand he shoved it around until it dug into the pit of her stomach. He fired once, felt her reel backward, fired again. . . . She did not fall.

Her fingers clutched the lapels of Abel's jacket, and her wide eyes stared questioningly into his for a full second. Then he felt her head spill against his stomach as a long shudder shook her body. Her nails scraped softly at the material of his jacket as her spread fingers lost their hold and sank slowly toward the floor. . . .

While she sank her lips worked, forming a word, but before the word came out her head split hollowly against the planks
of the floor, and the arm clutching at the holes in her stomach sprawled in a crooked bend. Once more while he watched she tried to form a word with her bleeding lips, seeking his face with her green green eyes. About her head her loosened hair spread like a soft bronze rug, and she sank to rest in it as the last breath leaked noisily from her tortured body. She was dead. . . . dead as a sound that is never heard again. Dead. Only her eyes were alive, staring at him from the floor. Dead. . . . The lost segment of the circle was restored.

Footsteps, heavy, pounding, ran to the door of the room. Abel knelt beside Annette and found her pulse as the door burst open. In mute shock in the doorway stood Ben Compson, Jumbo, Little Abel. The scene before him caused the little boy to make a grunting sound as he pushed his way from behind the two men in the doorway to run to the woman in the floor.

"Mama!"

The shrill cry pierced each corner of the room. He looked wildly from the body of his mother to the face of his father.

"Mama?" he cried again, quieter this time, a question in his words and in his eyes.

Abel pushed himself between the boy and the bloody form on the floor, shielding the child in the comfort of
his shoulder. His lips caressed the boy's face, his hair, his trembling neck.

"She tried to kill us, Petit... She tried to kill us," Abel whispered in the boy's ear. Little Abel stared dumbly at his father. Suddenly he pulled himself from Abel's arms and raced to the door, burying his face in Jumbo's stomach. He began to scream. Abel stared at the faces in the doorway.

"She tried to kill us both," he said again. "Both of us."

After he said the words he rose and crossed to his son, offering the shelter of his arms, forgetting for a moment the pulsing pain in his shoulder.

"Petit?" he begged softly. "Petit?"

Little Abel burrowed deeper into Jumbo's fat stomach and screamed...
CHAPTER XIV

When Mister Mathew Burris, river gambler, land speculator, ferryboat captain, recently turned undertaker, was summoned from his establishment to supervise the burial of Annette Gonnough he had not yet fully recovered from his responsibility for the proper display of the late Reverend Boulter. He had expended most of his energy and ingenuity on the Reverend, because many people were expected and he wanted his initial burial to come off successfully. His small building was full of Reverend Boulter's friends when he was told about the suicide of Annette Gonnough; he sighed incredulously and wondered if he had been lucky after all!

When news of the Reverend Boulter's death reached him, Mister Burris was still in the process of unloading furniture and coffins from his three wagons after the long trek from Tennessee. The duties of an undertaker were strange enough to him. He had acquired two wagon loads of furniture and a wagon load of pine coffins just three months ago from a man named Morris who knew more about managing a funeral home than he knew about managing a deck of cards. Morris had been en route to Texas to set up his parlor, and Mathew Burris took his wagons,
furniture, coffins, and his place and continued the trip. His plans were vague; as quickly as possible he would sell the property and go to New Orleans. He had settled in Denton because one of the wagons broke an axle just after his caravan passed the Denton courthouse. He found no buyers for the wagons and their contents; consequently he opened a store with the furniture and thought he would dispose of the coffins as they were needed. . . . He had not anticipated such an early need. Since he was the only undertaker in Denton he was selected to supervise the interment of Denton County's most famous preacher, and he was pessimistic about the outcome of such a venture.

"We'll want the Reverend layin' in 'til Sunday afternoon," the spokesman for the Boulter family told Burris. "He'll wanta' look nice for all th' people comin'," the man said belligerently.

Burris thought quickly. Friday! This meant the Reverend had to last more than forty-eight hours through March, and thus far the month had been unusually warm.

"Sunday afternoon?" Mathew Burris said tentatively.

"Yessir. I'll do th' arrangin' for them that wants t' set up." And before Burris could tell him the arrangement was quite impossible the man was gone.

Forty-eight hours! Mathew was perplexed. But he was a gambler, a man who lived by his wits, and he
decided to gamble; the more he thought of it the more the game intrigued him.

He searched until he found among his winnings a small book written partly in Latin, partly in script he could not decipher, and a few crude illustrations that helped him not at all. He saw in the book the word "alcohol" several times and concluded that this beverage—until he examined the book he had always thought of alcohol as a beverage—had other uses. Promptly he sent his good wagon to Sand Town to haul back forty gallons of whiskey.

And Reverend Boulter, whose eyes seldom beheld liquor and whose lips had certainly never been polluted by the evil brew, was soaked in a bath of raw whiskey. Mat Burris locked his doors and placed the body of the Reverend in a strong draft until the intoxicating odor became less offensive, and by the time the first friends of the deceased filed solemnly into the small room the whiskey odor could have been a new embalming solution brought by Mat Burris from the east. They were satisfied; Mathew Burris was elated. So when the news of Annette Gonnough reached him he felt fully qualified to care for the unfortunate woman although apprehensive lest some of the townspeople should ask embarrassing questions about his profession. He had plenty of whiskey left from Reverend Boulter. . . .
Clothed with proper dignity he drove his wagon to Hotel Gronnough. He was in business, and the new role was as thrilling as a high-stake poker game. Doctor Gronnough was rich he knew, and Mathew Burris was glad he had decided to devote his future to preserving the dead and comforting the bereaved. It was morally satisfying and lucrative as well, and he was pleased with himself as he and his assistant loaded Annette's body on the wagon and prepared to leave. Ben Compson's wife came close to changing his mind.

"Reckon me'n Ben knowed 'er well as any in this town an' a body could o' plumb knocked me over with a feather when Ben come t' tell me she was dead. I come as quick as I could, an' Lord knows I've did all I could but of course there ain't much none of us can do in such cases," she told Mat Burris, ignoring his request to speak to Doctor Gronnough. He nodded politely and started to leave, planning to return later, but she caught his arm and forced him to attention.

"No need t' worry 'bout th' money, Mister Burris. Doctor Gronnough's a rich man and he don't hold with skimpin'. You do all y'can an' we'll see that you get whatever you think it's worth. My poor sister Ellen, took with flu in forty-two, buried in a coffin lined inside and out with tin. Tin. . . . Don't reckon you've such a thing as that at your place, Mister Burris."
"No ma'am," he replied contemplatively, "just plain, long lasting pine."

"Well, I know th' Doctor'll want th' best. Nothin' too good fer he and his family y'know. Course her goin' like she did makes it hard, awful hard, on Doctor Gonnough, but we just cain't foresee what's goin' t' happen to us, can we Mister Burris. Would y'like a bite t' eat?"

"No ma'am, thank you."

"Maybe a cup o' coffee," she insisted.

"No thank you, ma'am."

"Well," she smiled, "it's been pleasant talkin' with you, Mister Burris, under the unpleasant conditions o' course. She allus wore green. . . .I've chose th' darkest green I could find fer her layin' out dress. Green. . . . She woulda wanted it I'm sure. Doctor Gonnough, pore man, tries t' be helpful, but you know how it is, Mister Burris. When there's a death I think there should be a woman. A woman. . . .A woman with experience in such things, and after that terrible accident a body cain't expect Doctor Gonnough t' be doin' 'round much, supervisin' an' such like. . . ."

"Exactly what did happen, ma'am?" His question delighted Mrs. Compson; she reached for his arm with a warm, friendly smile.

"You sure y' won't have coffee?" Her eyes pleaded with him to come in.
"Maybe I do have time, ma'am."

"You just come in, make y'self at home. Coffee's hot. Well, Doctor Gon nowhere don't say much. He's a quiet one if ever a quiet one there was." She bent near him with her next sparkling gem of information. "In th' light o' things I think maybe he's been too quiet." She nodded her head in agreement with herself. "Indeed I do! Pore soul, it ain't fit t' talk 'bout th' departed, but Benjamin said t' me just th' other day that 'she' was actin' strange. Strange... Threatened t' take th' boy — there's a boy, Mister Burris, a sweet youngen th' spitt'n image o' his daddy, twelve years he must be — well, she said to th' Doctor'n o' course th' Doctor told this t' Benjamin that she meant t' take th' boy and leave! Leave...! Well! Imagine what that done to a man like th' Doctor! An' all that after he give her a house like this an' all. And th' clothes he give her!" Mrs. Compson missed the cup, poured coffee on the table in her excitement. "Lan' sakes alive! Her closets looks like a women's furnishin' store. Most all green things... Green. Now I'm not one t' say she wasn't a good woman, Mister Burris, but she was French, y' know, an' somehow them people ain't like us in lots o' ways. French... I've read books," she confided, "lots o' books, an' I know how difficult it would be for a rich, spoiled woman o' her type t' come t' Texas an' live like we hafta live. Couldn't do it myself hardly, an' Lord
knows I ain't had it soft. Maybe it's just expectin' too much of a girl like her t'put up with such." She leaned close to whisper loudly. "It ain't known t' all, o' course, Mister Burris, but her folks was both aristocracy in France. Aristocracy. . . . Well, Benjamin says th' Doctor kept her away from people much as he could 'cause she was 'strange', an' I just suppose — y' understand there ain't no way o' bein' sure'n all any of us can do is suppose — that she was tryin' t' take th' boy an' leave an' th' Doctor tried t' keep her. Tried t' keep her. . . . Well, Mister Burris, you know a woman distraught as her ain't responsible, an' she somehow got a gun an' . . . ." Mrs. Compson stopped, brushed her eyes with her wadded handkerchief. "Well, ever'one knows what happened. I know it just kills th' Doctor t' think about it. Would me, but it surely ain't his fault. Pore soul. No tellin' how long he's been tried by things like this here. More coffee, Mister Burris?"

"She never tried to harm anyone before did she?" he asked, passing his cup to the woman.

"Not that any of us knows about," retorted Mrs. Compson, "but I just believe this here wasn't th' first time. Oh, she was purtty, in a way, an' nice t' me an' Benjamin as she could be, most o' th' time, but I seen somethin' in her eyes, Mister Burris, somethin' that I just cain't explain, but I never thought much about it, her bein' French an' all. . . ."
"Well, I'll come back and see Doctor Gonnough later," he told her when he finished his coffee.

"No need to," Mrs. Compson assured him. "Just you do whatever you think best accordin' to th' circumstances, Mister Burris. Mister Gonnough shouldn't be disturbed, really. Pore soul. . . . Just you come back in th' mornin' an' th' Doctor'll see you then." She patted Burris intimately on the back. "He'll feel more like talkin' then. In th' mornin'. . . ."

"Thank you, Mrs. Compson."

"Thank you, Mister Burris. Nice to have you among us. Town needs a undertaker. Ain't civilized just putt'n people in th' ground once they're gone without proper intonement. We never had much," she said, shaking her thin face from side to side, "but we never skimped when one of us was took. Just don't think it's Christian holdin' back when a person's got t' be buried. You come back, Mister Burris."

"I'll come back in the morning, ma'am."

Mrs. Compson waved to him and watched him leave; he walked away from her as quickly as he dared.

"Goodbye," she called, dabbing her eyes. "A real fine man, Mister Burris," she muttered to herself.

Through the night the lower windows of Hotel Gonnough were bright with many candles, and footsteps — strange and
familiar — tiptoed through the great room. Ben Compson's wife, a timid woman made suddenly brave, almost aggressive, in a time of crisis, dabbed constantly at her eyes with a dust-colored handkerchief while she cooked great quantities of food that would never be eaten and dusted furniture that would never be looked at.

"Elsie Ann's a good hand in a moment o' need," Ben Compson told Abel consolingly. "She's no stranger t' tragedy, bless'er. Knows what's got t' be done an' does it." And Ben Compson watched his wife with pride as she mournfully examined all the cupboards and uttered comments on the quality of the Doctor's furnishings. She clucked her teeth sadly at the waste now that the mistress of Hotel Gonnough was dead.

"I do declare, Benjamin," she said, inclining her head in confidence, "these people knowed what gracious livin' was." She dabbed her eyes. "Don't seem right t' be took when a body has s' much!" She looked around and then whispered in his ear. "Price's still on th' silver servin's. . . .Hundred and forty dollars!" She sniffed noisily. "Pore soul, all them dresses cain't do her no good now." Suddenly she quit sobbing. "Benjamin," she said, grasping her husband by the arm, "you keep your eyes 'n ears open. . . .Doctor Gonnough might be sellin' this place now..."
Abel sat in the shadows of his room, waiting for the wound in his shoulder to throb into submission, but even the raw, white-hot whiskey he forced down his throat could not make the pain surrender; the sedative he sought was not in the whiskey. Raw and hot upon his lips, the drinks had to be forced down, and they bubbled in his stomach, swelled hot and sour. He paced the floor in his stockings, enjoying the coolness of the planks, walking back and forth soundlessly, not wanting to hear the noise his feet made. The March air outside the window was faintly chilled with the edge of winter, and through the window the breeze blew coolly on his wet face, yet the sweat came out on his forehead, his back, soaked the clothes he wore. Something lonelier than death walked with Abel in the shadows of the room. . . . The vision of his son's face looking questioningly at him across the body of the dead Annette followed him, led him. Petit! Petit had run from him! His arms had been outstretched to his son and his son had run from his arms, afraid. . . .

"Petit," he whispered to himself, summoning his son from the shadows, "Petit, Petit," But only the March breeze sighing through the window answered him. There was nothing in the shadows except shadows.

Abel tiptoed to the boy's room and opened the door silently. His movement made no noise, but a movement from the bed told him that Jumbo heard him. Little Abel was
under the covers, a small mound snuggled close to Jumbo, who lay clothed and watchful on top of the quilts.

"Mahse Abel?"

"How is Petit, Jumbo?" Abel whispered.

"He sleepin'."

Abel lighted a candle and carried it to the bed. The tousled, peaceful face on the pillow with its tightly closed eyes and sweet, still mouth stirred Abel with a mixture of anxiety and affection. He sank by the side of the bed with his hand poised as if to stroke the child's sleeping face, but he did not touch him. Kneeling, he watched the child until the eyelids flickered and the small fists came from under the covers to brush away a dream. The dream went, and Petit crept closer to the heat of Jumbo.

"Take him to Icaria early tomorrow morning," Abel told Jumbo in a hoarse whisper. He looked into Jumbo's white eyes. "Tell him, Jumbo. . . . Try to make him understand." The two men looked a long time at each other in the candle's flicker.

"Yassah," nodded Jumbo. "You try gett'n a lil sleep, Mahse."

Abel shook his head in agreement, still looking at the sleeping boy, warm and safe against Jumbo. Abel stretched his neck, kissed the child lightly on the forehead, closed his eyes to make the picture last in his mind.
His lips touched the pale tuft of hair over the child's ear, touched it as softly as the flicker of the candle touched the shadows of the room. The child did not stir.

"Take Aunt Mattie with you and stay there until I send for you," Abel told Jumbo. He rose, hands in the pockets of his trousers, still gazing down at the sleeping son. "Goodnight, Jumbo," he said quickly, pivoting to hide his wet eyes from the Negro.

"G'night, Mahse Abel."

Abel nodded without turning. When he was through the door he reached back into the room to close the door behind him.

Through the rest of the night Abel sat staring at the wall of his room. When Annette's wide, green eyes opened to look at him from the gray shadows he reached for the bottle of whiskey. . . . When dawn filtered through the open window he was dozing in the chair, the bottle empty in his lap.

A noise outside his window roused him. Sunshine! The long, gray night had passed. He rubbed his eyes trying to identify his surroundings, shook his head to clear it of the night. Sunshine! The shadows were gone, swallowed by the orange light of morning. The noise again. Abel went to the window in time to see the two darkies and Little Abel drive off in the wagon. The boy held the reins in his hands, patting the horses' rumps
lightly with the loose ends, urging them up the rise of the hill. Once, while Abel watched, the boy looked back, but Jumbo's black arm went quickly around him and he was again urging the horses. Abel watched until the hill sucked them out of sight, and then he noticed that his hands were shaking from the effort of leaning on the window. He went to the basin to splash cold water on his face and neck. The night is past, he reminded himself while he mopped at his face with the coarse towel, and there are many things to be done today. . . . He must see Constance today, tell her, tell her, and he knew she would understand.

"Now we shall see," he told himself, "the strength of Abel Connough."

Last night his brain had been muddled, frightened, unsure. . . . But the night was gone, and with it the blackness. He was no longer afraid. He had saved his son; Petit was still his, and someday the boy would know and come to him with gratitude and a great love in his heart for what he had done. And Constance would come to him; long before then she would come to him. She would come, Petit would come. What was Abel's Abel had saved. . . . He dried his face carefully and went down to the kitchen for coffee, and for the next half hour he sat sipping his coffee, slowly, letting the warm color of the morning thaw his body.
"Doctor Gonnough?" Mrs. Compson spoke haltingly, "Mister Burris is here with. . . ."

"Thank you, thank you," Abel interrupted her. He swallowed the remains of his coffee and followed the woman into the lobby.

Mathew Burris stood in attendance by the wood casket he had placed across two sawhorses. A table cloth stretched over the tops and legs of the horses to cover all but a few inches of their feet. Mathew Burris did not move until Abel stood beside him.

"Done the best I could, Doctor," he said rather apologetically.

Abel nodded, his face toward the improvised stand but his eyes high on the wall overhead. He did not want to see, but he knew Mrs. Compson and Mathew Burris watched him from beside and behind. Burris cleared his throat. When he spoke his voice was uncertain and high. Abel turned to him.

"Doctor Gonnough," he began, avoiding Abel's stare, "Judge Winters told me to tell you to come to his office right away." Burris breathed in relief. His last words were blurted; obviously he did not want to relate the message.

Abel turned to him. "Did he say why he wanted to see me?" Burris shook his head, looked away. "When did he tell you this?" Abel asked.
"Him and Sheriff Clancey came by my place just before I came here."

"I see," Abel said thoughtfully. Suddenly he asked: "Did Judge Winters and Sheriff Clancey hold an inquest, Mister Burris?"

Burris was embarrassed. He passed his hat back and forth between his hands, batting his eyelids with every breath. He shook his head up and down several times before he spoke.

"Reckon that's what it was. Judge Winters and the Sheriff and Wendell Taylor came last night to... examine... the... body."

"Oh?" said Abel without surprise. "Isn't that unusual?"

Mathew Burris flushed darkly. "I don't know, Doctor," he stammered. "I... I ain't been too long in this business."

"I see," Abel replied quietly. Mister Burris put his hat behind his back, but it still went rapidly from hand to hand. "Thank you, Mister Burris," said Abel, extending his hand to tell the man goodbye. In his confusion Mathew Burris grasped his hat in the wrong hand and shoved it toward Abel. Quickly his other hand came to his rescue and he shook hands, his eyes on the floor. "Tell Judge Winters I will come right away."

"Yes sir, Doctor. If there is anything... ."
"Thank you. I'll let you know."

Abel followed Mathew Burris to the door, watched him drive away. When the wagon disappeared at the left turn of the hill Abel closed the door of the hotel and walked slowly toward the courthouse. Several times he paused as if listening, staying in one place several seconds with his head tilted attentively. At the turn of the hill Abel straightened his jacket, wiped the dusty toe of his boot on the bottom of his trouser leg. He walked on, taking long, deliberate steps until his boot heel made a sound on the first step of the stairs leading from the street to the second story of the building; here he stopped to square his shoulders, lift his chin. The men in Judge Winter's office heard the step, firm, definite, on each plank until Doctor Abel Gomnough stood filling the open doorway.

Sheriff Clancey and Judge Winters were bent together in conference when Abel entered the office. The other man in the room was Wendell Taylor, laborer, errand boy, gossip-monger, apprentice to Judge Winters. Taylor took one step backward when he recognized Abel.

"Gentlemen," Abel nodded, politely bewildered. "I got your message, Judge," he said expectantly, turning to face Winters. The two men faced each other across the room, each appraising the qualifications and weaknesses of his opponent. There was no exchange of courtesy
between the two men, no pretense. Each recognized an
enemy and each was waiting.

"Well?" Abel said at last, breaking the long silence.

Judge Winters cleared his throat, rose, walked past
Abel to spit through the door. After he spat he cleared
his throat again.

"Gitt'n to th' point, Gonnough," the judge said,
omitting Abel's title insultingly, "we're jest a little
confused concernin' yer wife." He walked again to the
door, spat again, tossing his head high to clear the
bannister of the minute landing.

"Oh?" Abel replied, no hint of discomfort in his
voice, "just what exactly don't you understand, gentlemen?"

Judge Winters seated himself before he answered.

"We're tryin' t' keep Denton from becomin' a lawless
frontier town, Gonnough. . . . Best way t' start, seems
like t' me, is investigat'n deaths that ain't natchral.

... Violent deaths such as this here."

"Everybody knows what happened," Abel explained
patiently. "Annette was ill. ... She had been for some
time." Abel looked away from the judge for a moment. "I
only blame myself for not realizing just how ill she was."

"Hmm. Seems t' me like you'd o' knowed, Doctor,"
said Judge Winters, rubbing his hands across his chin.
Abel heard the insult in the word doctor. ... "her bein'
sick 'n all,"
Abel tensed. He had an answer, still he was reluctant to appease Judge Winters. Abel, the King, had been summoned by Winters, the court jester, and he resented the intrusion by the realm of comedy. For a long silent moment he hated the fat face of Winters as he hated the small, sharp teeth exposed by the sneer of Badger Ferris.

"A doctor can not see a sick mind, Judge Winters,"
Abel told him, still patient, only slightly condescending.
"A broken limb is visible... The limb is easy to see and easy to mend, but a broken mind... A broken mind like your mind, Winters. The jagged splinters of your broken, greedy mind protrude through the fat folds of your oily skin like cypress roots peeping out of slimy water! Only a cracked, distorted mind such as yours would dare call me here in hope of humiliating me before your oxen-stupid henchmen... A broken mind is hidden, malignant, not easily discovered until it is too late to mend."

"Hmm," muttered Judge Winters, lost in a maze of words. His eyes fixed on Abel, narrowed, pierced. "Might o' been a broke heart then," he mused, drawling.

"Perhaps," Abel replied in the same tone. His impatience with the interrogation grew. Judge Winters' expression was almost a smirk.

"We thank it's a mite peculiar, Doctor, that yer wife wuz bruised about th' face," Winters said nastily. "Jest how would you explain that, Gonnough?"
Abel waited. When he spoke his voice was as level as the top of the table between them.

"There is little explanation needed," Abel replied easily. "Annette stayed by herself much of the time..." He paused, giving his words time to impress Winters. "When she was..." And again he paused, looked away as if actually ashamed of what he was about to say. "When she was drunk she had no control of her physical resources. Several times she fell down the stairs," continued Abel, pausing to shake his head, "and each time she hurt herself badly, I'm afraid..." Silence. The expression on Judge Winters' face showed Abel nothing. "I tried to keep whiskey away from her, forbade the darkies to give it to her, but..." His hands turned upward. When he spoke his voice was low in his throat. "The last time she fell was the morning before..." Abel stopped.

"The mornin' before what, Gonnough?"

"The morning before she shot herself, Judge Winters."

"Hmm. And y' s'pose anybody else seen her 'fall'?"

"I don't think so. I did my best to keep anyone from seeing her when she was...like that."

"Like what?"

"Drunk," said Abel flatly. He was afraid to say more, for he felt the anger rising in his voice.

"Hmm." Winters placed the heels of his boots on the table that was his desk. "Tell me why she wuz shot twicet."
Abel was calm again. "We were struggling for the gun." He shook his head. "She kept pulling the trigger. . . ."

"Y'thank she aimed t' kill you then her." A statement.

"I don't think she meant to kill anyone," Abel insisted, pointing the word. "She was sick. . . . She had no idea what she was doing." Abel looked at the other men in the room; they listened, eyes downcast in what Abel interpreted as embarrassment.

"Reckon what caused this here sickness, Gonnough?"

Abel shrugged, shook his head, looked out through the doorway. "Many things, probably," answered Abel, addressing his words to something outside the door.

"Annette saw many of her friends die at Icaria." Pause.

"She was a gentlewoman, unaccustomed to storms and sicknesses of such a wilderness." Again he paused, overcome by the memory of Annette Mercier. In a moment he continued, his eyes moist. "Annette had never been long away from her father and mother—wealthy French aristocrats—when I brought her to Texas." He stopped, shook his head slowly.

"I should never have brought her here. . . . In a way I feel responsible for her. . . death."

"That's kind o' th' way we feel, Doctor Gonnough," said Judge Winters bluntly.
Abel brought his gaze from the doorway to the judge. The crudeness of the man surprised him, angered him, but the man wanted to surprise him, anger him. As quickly as he could Abel got his anger under control and answered gently, sweetly, but his brows were drawn together and his mouth was set. He tried hard to smile, almost succeeded.

"Isn't that rather absurd, even to think, Judge Winters?"

Judge Winters carefully inspected the toe of his boot before he answered.

"Ain't absurd as y' might thank, Mister Gonnough," he said to his boot toe. "Y'see, it jest happened that a friend o' you — an' a friend o' mine — passed through here last night..." Judge Winters spoke slowly, word by word, like a child saving the icing of the cake for the last delicious bite. "A Mister Cannon, Mister Gonnough." He looked at Abel to see what effect the name had had on him, but Abel's face showed nothing except heavy brows drawn together in thought.

"Cannon? Mister Cannon from the Land Colony?"


"What does Mister Cannon's visit have to do with me?" Abel asked sharply, regretting his words even as he spoke.
The judge's insinuating attitude and speech was beginning to irritate Abel, beginning to tire him. Obviously Judge Winters had a plan when he called him here. What was the plan? Why was he suddenly brave enough to try intimidating Abel? For a moment Abel thought of reaching for the fat face and knocking away the smirk there, but that was exactly what the judge wanted. He was trying to trick Abel through anger to indict himself. He was waiting for Abel to attack, but Abel knew he was waiting. . . . He relaxed to play the game as best he could.

"Mister Cannon tells us that yer wife died th' first day y'all come to Icaria." The judge waited.

"That is true," Abel answered.

"N'also a fella—" Judge Winters glanced at a piece of paper open on the table, leaned closer to see the writing—"name o' Leebron. . . ." Again he waited.

"Yes. . . . Herman LeBron," said Abel, giving the name the correct pronunciation. He listened, straining for the judge's next words. Winters consulted his paper again before he spoke.

"N'this here Leebron brought a Annette M-e-r-c-i-e-r t' Benton with 'im." The mispronounced French words would have amused Abel in another situation; now they merely added to his growing irritation.

"That is also true," Abel replied, staring hard at the man, becoming impatient for action.
"N'this here Annette's th' one dead now at Burris's F'n'ral House."

"Whatever you're trying to say, Judge Winters, say it!" snapped Abel. He noticed the eyes of the other two men blink and focus on him. His shouted words had betrayed him and he censured himself; before he spoke again he made his voice calm, level. "I don't mind cooperating with anyone, Judge. I have nothing to hide, but I resent any disparaging remarks about my dead wife." His stare met Judge Winter's stare. Winters lowered his eyes, scratched his head.

"Don't mean t' talk slight 'bout nobody, Doctor," Winters said almost apologetically. "We jest need t' know certain thangs and there ain't no way o' knowin' less we hear truth." Sheriff Clancey and Wendell Taylor shook heads in agreement.

"Then tell me why you brought me here. . . . I have no time to play games with you, Judge Winters. No time!" His words were final, crisp, the words of a man who meant what he said. His eyes blazing into the older man's were defiant and bold. Winters coughed. And now Abel knew exactly what to say. He pulled himself to his full height.

"Now you listen to me," commanded Abel. "I don't want Denton to become a lawless frontier town as you put it, Judge Winters. I came here of my own free will because I believe in justice, want to see justice done. I was not
arrested, not summoned to appear here. . . . I came because I have nothing to hide and I want everybody to know it! Now say what you have to say and get it over with," he demanded, "or I will walk out of the office and there is not power enough in the whole town to make me come here again!" He had won; he saw his victory written in the faces of the men in the room.

"Truth o' th' matter is, Doctor Goonough," Winters said, and the politeness was noticeable, "th' people wanta try you fer murder." Now Judge Winters had said it, but it had come too late. Abel chuckled, and when he saw the amazed look on the faces of the other men he commenced laughing.

"People?" he asked, stopping his laughter long enough to speak. "What 'people', Winters?

"Why, th' people connected with law'n order y'might say," sputtered the judge defensively.

"The names of these people, Judge?"

"Why. . . . why Sheriff Clancey and Wendell Taylor here is two," Winters stammered, beginning to redden. "N'Alabama at th' stables, n'me fer one. . . ." Winters stopped, unable to convince even himself. "Lots o' people in town, Doctor," he added after a silence during which Abel regarded the man like a professor listening to an ill-prepared recitation. Judge Winter's face became redder and redder as Abel watched.
Abel turned to face Sheriff Clancey. "Do you think I murdered my wife, Mister Clancey?" Abel demanded.

"Well I ain't one t'. . . ."

Abel stopped his words. "Do you? Say yes or no!"

"I ain't sure, Doctor."

"That means that you would not be willing to stand up in court and say I did. Is that right?"

"I'd have t' hear more than I've heard. . . ."

Again Abel cut into his sentence. "You would say just what the judge told you to say wouldn't you?"

"I reckon I'd. . . ."

". . . .because Judge Winters here put you in office and you know damned well he can put you out unless you do as he says," shouted Abel above the voice of the sheriff. Before the sheriff could reply Abel spun to face Wendell Taylor, saw Taylor visibly cringe against the rough wall of the office.

"And you, Wendell Taylor!" cried Abel, "you would drink urine from the devil's own bladder if Judge Winters told you to! Would you stand up in court and accuse me of murdering my wife?"

Taylor looked at the judge without answering. His look was the look of a man about to be flogged. Abel grunted in disgust.

"You seem suddenly to have no supporters, Judge Winters," Abel said, icing his voice. "A bluff works
best when at least one good card is showing, Judge," he said, smiling now. The smile disappeared. Abel turned to Sheriff Clancey and Wendell Taylor.

"Get out," he ordered softly. Taylor looked at the judge for permission to leave but was on his way out before the judge could nod.

"Leave us alone, Sheriff," Winters told Clancey. Clancey ambled uncertainly to the door.

"There's jes' one thing I'd like t' git straight with you, Doctor Gonnnough," Clancey said, turning. "If I wuz ever convinced you wuz guilty, by God I'd shout it from th' highes' buildin' in this town." He paused, his fists clinched on his hips. "You jes' don't impress me none, Doctor." Leisurely Clancey stepped across the threshold and disappeared from sight down the stairs. Abel listened to his boots count off the steps. He liked Clancey.

"I didn't want to embarrass you in front of your friends, Judge Winters," Abel smiled when the two of them were alone, "but you try bringing me to court and so help me God I'll run you and your crowd out of Benton." There was no hint of malice in Abel's speech; he was using a tone to scold a disobedient child.

"If ever y' git God on yer side, Gonnnough, I'll leave town o' my own accord." At least the old judge had a sense of humor; the tension in the room was less.
"You're an old fool, Winters," Abel said without bitterness. "I wanted an inquest... I knew I wasn't guilty... You knew it too, but what you had in mind, Judge..." Abel stopped, regarded the judge intently.

"Just what did you have in mind, Judge Winters?"

Winters made no attempt to answer the question; instead he rose from his seat and went to the cupboard. Without consulting Abel he poured whiskey for both of them.

"You haven't answered my question, Judge," Abel said, when he had the glass in his hand. Winters tasted the liquor, smacked his lips. Squinting at the glass he said:

"You answered it, Gonnough... I thought maybe I could bluff m' way to th' pot."

"You had the wrong man to bluff," Abel told him consolingly. Winters poured himself another drink. Abel refused.

"Y'beat me to it, Gonnough," the judge sighed. "I wuz drawin' to a inside straight anyhow."

Abel laughed, enjoying the man and the moment. Abel had to admit to himself that the old fellow had courage. Suddenly he was serious.

"Tell me, Winters... You threw away your highest card. Why? Why didn't you tell them about Friday morning at my office?"
The judge shrugged. "I don't deny I'm a mean sonofabitch, Gonnough, but I'm nice t' them that's nice t' me." He tasted his drink. "Strange as it seems, Preacher Boulter 'n Connie wuz th' only real friends I had in this town."

"You might have convinced them that I killed my wife if you had told them what you knew about Constance and me."

"Maybe," agreed Winters, shrugging, "and maybe not... All th' same I never planned t' tell nobody 'bout you'n Connie. 'Course," he added after a pause, "it wuz my plan fer you t' tell."

"What did Mister Cannon tell you?" Abel asked. Winters gave an impatient shrug, dismissing his question as unimportant.

"Only that yer wife wuz killed an' you took up with this here woman."

"You didn't have enough evidence for a trial, did you, Winters?"

"Reckon not," he conceded. "I jes' don't like th' idee o' Benton becomin' a lawless frontier town. What I got, Gonnough, I got peaceful. Dislike vi'lence... allus have."

Abel laughed. "And the smart take away from the strong, eh Judge?"

Judge Winters pondered the maxim a long time before he was amused. "Reckon so," he admitted, chuckling.
His look lingered on Abel's face, and Abel was not certain whether it was a look of admiration or real envy, because the narrow eyes of the judge were inscrutable. Still chuckling he said:

"But by God, Gonnough, if you ain't strong as a blue norther'n smart as a new-whetted Bowie knife! You've sewed up Denton tighter'n a strap o' wet rawhide." His eyes were still narrow, still probing, but Abel decided there was nothing unfriendly in his stare. "You'n me could work together, Doctor Gonnough."

"What do you have in mind, Judge Winters?" Abel asked amiably, interested in his new friend, but incredulous about any sort of cooperative enterprise. Judge Winters clasped his hands in back of him and began pacing the floor. His bottom lip protruded in thought.

"There's gonna be a war shore as God made little green apples, Doctor. . . . A real gone t' hell shootin' war."

"Ridiculous!" scoffed Abel.

"Ain't as ridiculous as it might seem, friend," the judge said through his pursed lips. "I keep in touch. . . . Friends in South Ca'liny 'bout made up their minds t' resist th' Union."

Abel roared. Rumor! News of the nation came seldom and always late to Denton, but surely if a civil war were imminent every corner of the United States would
know!  Rumor!  Abel laughed again, set down his glass.

"... N' if they resist, Gonnough," continued the judge unabashed, "Texas'll jine 'em."

Abel listened, still wondering what all these speculations had to do with him and Judge Winters. "So?" Abel said, waiting for the man to continue.

"So me'n you could have supplies ready t' sell t' both sides while th' North and th' South is gettin' ready fer battle."

"But how can we supply both sides?" asked Abel. His amusement was giving way to interest.

"By sellin' meat 'n cotton t' Mexico an' them in turn sellin' t' both sides... . . ." Abel's opinion of the judge grew; here was a shrewd planner. Assuming there was a war between the states of the north and the southern states this might be a highly profitable venture.

"Suppose there isn't a war?"

"Friends at Austin thanks there will be... . . ."

"You have many 'friends' Judge Winters." Abel grinned.

"Ain't friends in th' strictest sense," Winters drawled. "Ain't one of 'em wouldn't go fer their grandma with a ax, but... . . .they keep in touch. Might say they're ambition'er'n most people."

"People like you and me, you might say," Abel suggested lightly, a look of genuine amusement on his face.

"Might say," agreed the judge.
"Do you have 'friends' in Mexico?" Abel asked.

"Best friends I got," the judge assured him solemnly.

"Real good friends is in Mexico."

Abel laughed. The whiskey warmed him like a hot bath. The battleground of an hour ago had become an entente cordiale, and he liked the judge. He knew he must not trust him, but he could like him. The man was a colorful character at least, and a rarity, an honest dishonest man willing to admit it. Abel set his glass near the bottle of whiskey and the judge poured him another drink.

"We might just make a deal, Judge Winters," Abel said, toasting him with his drink. The judge held his glass aloft.

"I've learnt not t' buck you, Gonnough," the judge said seriously. "It's peein' into a strong wind."

Abel laughed; both men drank.
CHAPTER XIV

Crowds arriving for Reverend Boulter's funeral were met by excited whispering crowds filled with news of another even more spectacular drama, the suicide of Annette Gonnough. And still whispering, disguising their curiosity with long faces and sympathetic nods, they clumped noisily in and out of the hotel, pausing on the wide steps to discuss the mysterious circumstances and the imported drapes drawn across the tall windows. Their barbaric, unsolicited, pagan ritual completed, they stomped happily back to their campfires and saloons, content and satisfied. Abel endured the torture patiently, dreading the long, slow trek behind the cart that would lead him and the crowd to the cemetery on the high ground south of town. He hated the ceremony, the hypocrisy involved in tribute for the dead. . . . At last the high ground, the agony, the tearful crowd, the monotonous, lengthy words of the minister blown away on the rough March wind. At long last Annette was gone; the crowd prepared to leave. He could go. . . . He could go to Constance; it was no longer necessary to wait. He had waited too long. . . .

"She's still terrible upset 'bout her pa," Winters told Abel when he told the judge of his visit to Connie.
"If I wuz you I wouldn't go. Wife has Connie in bed, an' that there's where she ought t' be."

But Abel ignored the warning. If Connie was sick she needed him; she had not sent for him because of what the Winterses might think. ... And he was eager to see her, for what he had to say to her would be better than any medicine, more healing than any rest. Abel had to see Connie, quickly. He took longer and longer steps, pulling the panting Judge Winters along with him.

"I should have gone to her before now," Abel said critically.

"Do's y' like," panted Winters, "but my advice would be t' wait 'til afterwards. ... She ain't ate nothin' since we brought her to th' house. ... Jes' lays there lookin' at th' ceilin'."

The judge's words made Abel hurry faster; he realized he was almost running and slowed his steps to match those of the puffing Winters. The two men left the remnants of the crowd and turned west on Sycamore Street. Judge Winters' ugly, pillared house—architectural bastard of east Texas colonial mistress and west Texas frontier sire—ruled the street from its gray height, its new planks exposed nakedly in the afternoon sun. They listened for footsteps approaching the knock, but there was only the sound of a shutter banging softly in the wind. At last they heard the scrape of a heavy board as it was pushed
upward out of its gate lock. Mrs. Winters looked inquiringly from Abel to her husband. She did not know exactly what her attitude should be toward their recent-enemy-now-new-friend. She nodded grimly.

"Connie's upstairs on th' left," Judge Winters told Abel. The woman who had admitted them disappeared without saying a word, tiptoed away on moccasined feet as silent as an Indian.

Abel climbed the stairs and opened the door of the room, stopped in the doorway. Through a small, high window at the south end of the room filtered a beam of sunlight, slicing in half the fuzzy shadows of the room. The inside walls of the room were unpainted, still smelling of turpentine and damp pine forests of east Texas.

Motley quilts, tacked to the unfinished walls tapestry-like to keep out wind and dust, hung limply, incongruously, moved in the wind that found its way into the cracks. In the absence of rugs a quilt had been spread by the side of the great log bed. Constance lay white and small against the blotches of color, dwarfed by the gigantic oak posts of the bedstead. A pile of quilts not in use occupied the empty half of the bed, and in contrast to the over-furnished downstairs of the house the guest room looked empty, completely uninviting. The room was like Mrs. Winters! A small streaked mirror by the head of the bed reflected all the colors and turned them brown,
distorting them comically. The room was Mrs. Winters! Without a sound Abel went to the bed to kneel on the quilt. He let his fingers lift a strand of the girl's unbound hair that spilled over the pillow like pale flax, held it to his face, relishing the clean soapy smell. He put his lips against her ear, touching the lobe with his teeth.

"Connie?" he breathed.

She stirred, blinking her eyes several times against the light and shadows of reality, not moving her head on the pillow. Abel whispered again.

"Connie, my darling." His lips slid from her ear to her temple. She moved her head quickly, startled by the feel of his lips. When she saw him she pulled away and sat up in the bed, clasping the quilt against her to cover her gown. Now she was awake, her eyes wide and staring.

"Abel!" she whispered hoarsely, moving imperceptibly away from him. "What are you doing here?"

"I came as quickly as I could, my dear," said Abel, reaching. "What a long day it has been without you," he sighed tiredly, still reaching for her. But Constance stared at him, pushing her back into the stack of quilts. His arms stopped their search, dropped on the covers.

"What is it, Connie? What is it?"

"Go away from here," she cried softly. "Please go away."
Abel stared open-mouthed, struck dumb by her words and the look of horror on her face. She sat rigid, the quilt high at her neck.

"Connie!" he cried. "It is Abel!"

She shook her head, and once more his arms reached for her, palms upward in pleading, his trembling entreatying her to recognize him.

"You killed Papa," she sobbed. "You killed Papa!"

"No!" he begged. "No, no, no."

"You promised me nothing would happen to him and you killed him!" she sobbed louder now, lips trembling, eyes brimming. She was trying not to cry, but as he watched her she began to shake and moan. Long, laborious convulsions shook her whole body, rippling the cover she held to her and tearing from her chest loud gasps. "Poor Papa. . . .Papa. . . ."

"Listen to me. . . ." His voice rose with pleading. "I had nothing to do with your father's death. . . . nothing." He sat on the bed, touched her cautiously. Please believe me, Constance."

"You killed him."

Abel closed his eyes, trying to think. He felt the sweat rise on his forehead, drip across his eyes. His head went emphatically from side to side.

"And you killed Annette," Constance said, as if she did not quite believe it herself.
"Good God no!" Abel cried. "Oh, no."

He opened his eyes, but she had turned her head away from him; he saw her body shake, her head bend. He reached for her, grabbed her roughly, pulled her to him, shook her... She kept her eyes tightly closed, refusing to look at his face.

"I love you love you love you... Believe that I love you!"

"You killed them."

Abel let go of her and let his head drop. Perspiration soaked him, strapping his clothes to his body, tying him. He wanted to lash out, unbind himself. He had to breathe and there was no oxygen in the room. Constance lay still, facing away from him. Without warning he took her in his arms and kissed her mouth, pulling her out of the bed and into his arms. He held his mouth against hers, tasting the salt of tears and sweat. She was powerless in his arms; he kept his lips on hers until he felt himself suffocating... At last he took his mouth away and touched her face against his neck. She was quiet. The only sound in the room was Abel's labored breathing. He held the back of her head with both his hands, twisting his body gently back and forth across her breasts.

"My darling," he groaned, his eyes pressed tight together to shut out everything but the picture of Constance, "I could do nothing to hurt you... nothing
to hurt you." She was quiet now. The terrible moment had passed. He had startled her, he told himself, and in her hysteria she had thought he was responsible for her father's death. . . .for the death of Annette. . . . But the moment had passed; now she believed him. Now she knew the truth. She was in his arms now. She loved him as he loved her.

"Don't be frightened any more," he whispered.

"Believe in me, my darling, for I could never hurt you."

He felt stronger now, gulped the air and felt it fill his lungs, breathed easier. Finally he opened his eyes, and for a moment he was ashamed to find himself looking through his own tears. Believe me, Connie! Believe me. He squeezed his eyes together and cleared his vision, holding Constance to him all the while. I will never let you go too far from me, he promised himself. She had quit crying now; her head against his neck was very still. The moment had passed. . . . The terrible moment had passed.

Abel smiled and let her head down slowly, still supporting it with his hands. Tenderly he lowered her head until it rested against the pillow, letting his own face push beside hers, feeling her easy, regular respiration as her body rose and fell.

Abel did not know how long he lay with his head beside hers, but finally he raised his head and looked
into her face, longing for the smile he knew was there. . . . But there was no smile. What he saw in her face stopped the blood flowing through his veins.

"Charlotte!" he called sharply, shaking her shoulder. "Charlotte!"

His finger found her pulse. . . . He counted and let her wrist drop across her stomach. Her fingers were still and cool as he rubbed them, and his eyes on her face saw no joy, no pain, just relief and unconsciousness. . . . Unconsciousness! She had not forgiven him, yielded as he thought. So great had been her revulsion she had fainted! The thought made Abel sick, turned his bowels into knots that contracted and expanded with each breath. She hated him. She had defended herself against him by the only method he could not combat. . . . He had lost her; she was gone, alone and safe where he could never reach her. And he knew the next time he reached for her she would be gone. . . . and the next time. Suddenly he was weary. Suddenly he was very weary. A little color crept back into her cheeks and he stopped rubbing her hands, let his own fall by his sides. Without touching her with his hands he leaned his head forward until his lips touched her pale forehead. He smelled the cleanliness of her for the last time, touched his lips to her smooth skin in a farewell kiss, and before he drew his head away a tear splattered on her forehead. His finger
hung above the tear for a moment, then his hand made a fist. . . . He stood up, looked at the sleeping face a moment, whirled away, walked to the door.

Closing the door securely he stood with his back braced against the wood; stood straight, stood tall, locking out what lay on the other side of the wall. There was no one in the hall when he walked through. He let himself out without saying goodbye to the Judge or Mrs. Winters. Outside, the wind felt cool and good against his face and he lifted his head to it. Darkness... wind... cool strength.

Sunday night he would ride to Icaria, to his son. Yes! He wanted desperately to get away from Denton, away from the people, away from the memory of Reverend Boulter, the memory of Annette... the memory of Constance. He thought of leaving at once, longing for the peace of the house at Icaria and the days alone with his son, but he put these thoughts out of his mind in the next moment... The crowds would not leave until after Reverend Boulter's funeral, and they were spending money at his hotel, his general store, his saloon... He really had no one he could trust to look after his interests; he could not go to Icaria until the people left... 

Abel hesitated, turned right and walked toward the square.
The March Monday blew in damp and sunless, penetrating the thick leather of Abel's jacket as he saddled his horse. He hurried his preparations for the trip to Icaria, for low, lead-colored sky threatened the day with more cold, more rain. Abel mounted and kicked the horse into a gallop up the hill, slowing his pace for the trip across one side of the square to inspect the knoll that had sheltered the campers of the day before. Deserted...

All that remained of the colorful activity of two days and nights were the black remnants of campfires and a few strips of material clinging to the low branches of underbrush that the celebrants had not bothered to clear. Not a soul stirred in the early morning, not a door was opened or lighted. Deserted...The town, noisy, festive through Sunday afternoon, spread dormant and dreary before him, ashes of the great fire that had burned brightly for two days, two nights. Now the people who had come for the burial were far from town, creaking toward their dismal cabins, re-creating in their minds the sensations of their few days reprieve from the monotony of lonely frontier life. Abel looked at the sky as a few raindrops broke on the horse's neck. Let it rain! The circus was over; Abel was
richer. His saloon had sold its last bottle Sunday afternoon, two hours before Reverend Boulter was underground, despite the fact that he and Judge Winters had raised the price of whiskey two cents a glass. Shelves in Abel's general store were, for all practical purposes, bare of merchandise, and his slaughter house was clean, empty. . . . It had been a most successful weekend, a most successful long weekend.

But more important than sales was the interest shown in the town Abel was building. . . . People looked longingly at the conveniences they were unaccustomed to. Wooden sidewalks kept skirts and boots out of the black slush of the road, and some of the more prominent merchants boasted awnings over the entrances of their store. . . . A hotel in Benton served food on clean table cloths. . . . Benton had cleared streets laid off and named—Elm, Locust, Oak, Hickory, Sycamore, Prairie, and the one with the foreign name, "Bowdark." Two streets had lights where they intersected the square, lanterns affixed to tall poles, and there was talk of a big church being built in memory of Reverend Boulter. Benton was civilized; it even had matches for sale! And it had lumber for sale, lumber all piled, ready for building!

"Lord knows, Doctor Gonnough," a woman customer told Abel, "I don't feel real safe with strikable matches about,
but my, what a blessing on a cold mornin' when there's breakfast t' be got!"

Yes, Abel assured himself, your property is valuable. Most of the settlers will leave their farms after a few years and move to Denton, and they will buy from Abel Gonnough, grateful for the opportunity.

Rain fell faster now, and as he rode past his general store he made a note to have the wooden walk leading to the street repaired. Then he spurred his horse into a gallop once more and sped down the hill of Elm Street, south. . . . Soon he would head his horse into the west wind and cross Hickory Creek, then south again to Oliver Creek and Icaria. Home to his son. . . . He spurred the horse into a faster gallop, hurrying to escape the rain, hurrying to his son. . . . But the rain followed him, a wet, gray shadow. . . .

When Abel arrived home, Aunt Mattie told him that Ralph Groener had taken Petit to hunt prairie chickens a few miles from the house, and he set off immediately to find them. After a few minutes he could follow the sounds along the bottom of Denton Creek. He stopped to watch a covey of chickens flap out of the grass as a gun exploded, saw his son dash from the blind of a hickory thicket to retrieve a wounded bird hopping wildly through the imprisoning grass. He called to the boy and waved. Little
Abel stopped in his pursuit of the felled chicken to look at his father, but he made no move to go to him.

"Petit!" Abel waved again, and slowly the boy's hand went over his head in a gesture of recognition. Ralph Groener, dusty and wrinkled in his familiar buckskin clothing, came out of the thicket to grin at Abel through a stubble of beard. The innovations of civilization had not touched Groener. His hand-sewed buckskins and moccasins, his long hair tied in the back with rawhide string, even the slightly discolored smile on his weathered face, were all styled for primitive living; even here, on the periphery of civilization, he appeared a little incongruous. Abel gave the man a warm smile, thinking again that Groener belonged to no particular place and yet belonged to every place. . . . Strange man, good man, good friend. The men embraced with no outward sign of affection.

"Well!" exclaimed Abel, kneeling in front of his son. "You seem to have grown into a real hunter!" This meeting made it easier for Abel to talk to the boy and he was grateful. The look the boy had given him across the body of his dead mother haunted Abel, and all the way from Denton he had rehearsed the conversation of their meeting. This was easy; the boy was excited over the hunt and full of news. Abel relaxed, thankful that the initial encounter was over.

"I shot four chickens, Papa!" Little Abel said proudly, "and I used the gun only six times," he added with slightly less pride.
"C'est magnifique!" laughed Abel, patting the boy on the shoulder with great ceremony. "We will have to give you a sharpshooter's medal, eh Groener?" The two men exchanged winks. Little Abel regarded his father with wide, solemn eyes. Groener made a coughing sound.

"Ralph Groener pulled a rattlesnake, and killed it, from under a log, six feet long!" Little Abel told him in a jumble of words, "and there is a cougar visiting the barn, Papa!"

"Here now!" Abel chuckled. "You must tell me one thing at a time, Petit." How like Annette the boy is! thought Abel. The same wide, green eyes, the same smile that transforms his face into a thing of warm beauty! He could not resist pulling the boy to him. In a moment Little Abel was struggling to breathe.

"Hey!" the boy gasped, freeing himself gently, "you will pull me in two, Papa."

"Because I have not seen you in such a long time," smiled Abel. He frowned at the boy in mock reprimand. "And what is this word you have learned? This 'hey'?"

"It is a word Ralph Groener uses," the boy hastened to assure him. "It means nothing bad, Papa. . . ." His thin dark brows drew together in concentration. "I am not sure just what it means," he said gravely, "but it means nothing bad."
"I am sure it is all right," agreed Abel, winking again at Groener. "Why don't you take the chickens to Aunt Mattie and have her cook them for us?"

Little Abel looked at Ralph Groener, nibbling absently at a dry blade of grass, and his eyes traveled from Groener to the ground. He dug at the earth with the toe of his small moccasin.

"I promised th' boy we'd cook our vittles over a campfire," drawled Groener. Little Abel raised his eyes and looked expectantly at his father.

"But of course," Abel assured the boy hastily. "We will have a picnic, eh?" His son's eyes were lifted now, interested once more, wide, shining... green.

"Tell y' what, Abe," Groener said to the boy, "since y' daddy's here I ought t' git back t' that ole sow."

Seeing the boy's look of disappointment he added: "Reckon if'n I don't take a hand she'll be scatterin' them piglets half way 'cross th' county." The boy's features worked into a smile at the words. Groener shouldered his gun and started toward the house, dropping the chickens on the ground.

"'N don't f'rgit t' put plenty o' mud round them chickens," he called. The boy and the man watched him leave. For a moment after Groener had gone there was an awkward silence between the boy and his father, a moment of uncertainty, an uncomfortable moment when Abel wished Groener had not gone. The boy broke the silence as he picked up the dropped birds.
"Ralph Groener told me how to cover chickens with mud and bake them in the coals of the fire."

"You like being with Ralph, don't you, *Petit*?" Abel asked kindly. "And I like for you to be with such a man."

Ralph Groener knows more than anybody," he said proudly; then his eyes were on the ground. "Ralph says Mama is happier in heaven than she was even with us..."

Abel nodded, his lip between his teeth. "That is true, *Petit*. You must think about it that way, *mon fils*," he added quietly. Abel wanted to talk to the boy about his mother, but he did not know how to begin. He was grateful to Groener for discussing Annette with the child.

"Sometimes I miss her, Papa." The boy's words were a simple statement of fact, emotionless. Abel longed to hug the child to him and kiss the moisture from his downcast eyes.

"I miss her too, *Petit*... But she does not want us to think about such things!" Abel smiled, turned his eyes to the sky. The stormy weather of the morning was gone; the sky hung above them as blue and clear as polished glass. "Not on such a beautiful day," he finished.

"We burned a candle at the little altar in Mama's room," the child explained to his father. "Aunt Mattie said Mama wanted us to do that."

Abel was tired, suddenly, tireder than he had thought. He knelt beside the boy and took him in his arms. The child still held the chickens he had killed.
"Your mother was very sick, Abel, very sick," he said softly, "and sometimes she was... confused. ... the way you get confused when Mister Bell gives you a difficult problem in arithmetic, or an unfamiliar word to spell... ." He stopped, took the child's elbows in his hands and looked into his face. "Do you understand, fils? She was very sick, but she loved you very, very much... the way I love you." The boy blinked, but his green eyes did not waver.

"I am sorry that I was mad at you, Papa," he blurted, blinking his eyes faster. "I thought you hurt her, and I... ." He could not finish, ashamed of the sob in his small voice. He put his face against his father's shirt. "But Jumbo said you wouldn't hurt anybody unless it was somebody mean," he said, his words muffled against the shirt. "Jumbo told me how you saved him from being whipped and you wouldn't hurt anybody, he said."

Abel closed his eyes, holding the boy closer to him. He did not want to talk, did not want the moment to end, wanted to keep the small body close against his. Beneath his lids his eyes were wet. At last he moved the child's face and cupped the small chin in his great hand.

"Enfant," he said, his voice low and almost harsh with intensity, "I don't want to hurt anyone... Sometimes it is necessary to do things that may seem wrong at the time, but you must always believe that whatever I do, I do for you."
When you are older..." Abel touched the smooth forehead with his lips..."you will understand." His next words were lighter, but intimate, almost secretive. "I am building a town for you, mon fils, a whole town!"

Little Abel did not understand, but he knew his father was proud of himself for what he was doing and he smiled.

"How can you build a whole town, Papa?"

Abel laughed, glad and relieved, for the seriousness of the moment before was gone with the naiveté of the question. Abel was no longer so weary.

"It is not easy, my boy," he confided with pretended dignity. "Only a very strong man can build a town."

"You are very strong, Papa," cried the boy eagerly, pushing his thumb into the hardness of his father's arms. Abel contracted his biceps in a comical gesture and made a fierce face.

"Mais oui!" he cried with exaggerated smugness. "I am strong enough to build a roaring fire for our chickens if you are strong enough to cover them with mud!"

Little Abel laughed and pulled his knife from his scabbard, brandishing it with proper bravado appropriate to the game they were playing.

"Mais oui! Je suis plus fort que dix!" shouted the boy. Abel threw back his head and filled the clearing with his laughter. The French was imperfect, for the slow drawl of Texas had already crept into his son's speech, but it
made him happy to hear his own language, and the sight of the sturdy brown boy splitting the air with his hunting knife warmed him with an overwhelming sense of pride and possession. Seeing his father so amused caused the boy to laugh, and the two voices rose in happy union. Laughter! Laughter that was in perfect harmony with the bright blue of the sunshine and sky, the brown and green of early spring. Abel Gonnough's spirit soared high above the clearing, raced across the unobstructed heights of the dazzling sky. . . . Here is my son, World! This is how he loves me!

"I shall have a fire roaring long before you have the birds cleaned," Abel teased. He started his search for wood.

"How long will you stay, Papa?" called the boy.

"A few days," Abel told him, pleased by the question. "And when we go back to Denton, Petit, we will build a new house. . . . a house for you and me."

The boy did not answer. He was happily scraping at the birds with his knife. Abel stopped at the edge of the clearing and leaned against the warped trunk of an oak tree. He saw Petit's knife slit the underside of the plucked bird, watched as the child's deft fingers slid into the opening to draw forth the entrails. He shrugged happily, fondling the warded tree. His caressing fingers climbed higher until they reached a low limb angling out from the trunk.
Firewood... Abel's strong fingers closed around the branch, still caressing it; one mighty pull ripped it from the tree...
CHAPTER XVI

"Never knewd Apr'l t' be s' cold!"
"Lord knows what we'll have in time. . . . People workin' on th' Lord's day'n all."
"It don't seem right."
"It ain't right!"
"Well, it pays good. Doctor Gonnough ain't one t' wait on th' Lord even. . . . 'N her not two weeks laid away. . . ."
"It don't seem right."
"It ain't right! Cain't thank why th' Doctor needs sech a house. Ain't but him an' th' boy!"
"Lanier says them cypress joists cost more'n most o' th' houses here'bouts."
"'N it's pure foolishness! Mister Ballard says oak wears as good an' oaks is plentiful. Putt'n on airs, I say."
"'N that arkytech all th' way fr'm Jefferson. Lord knows, a body won't be fit t' live within a mile o' that place."
"Well, don't know as I'd like to. . . . Don't know as I'd like to. Him bein' French'n all a body cain't tell what might happen."
"You trade with his store?"

"Course I do! Cain't buy no decent materials at th' Winterses' store. And vittles is cheaper. We compared."

"Vittles is cheaper, but I declare. . . . Well."

"I know. Mister Ballard makes fun o' me, too, but a woman sees what goes on inside a man's mind quicker'n another man."

"Lanier says I 'imagine'. . . . but it ain't 'imagination'."

"Seems him and Judge Winters is awful chummy o' late. Use' not t' speak back a while ago."

"Lanier says Judge Winters owns what little piece o' th' town th' Doctor don't own."

"Limestone blocks bigger'n two men c'n lift fer that place t' set on. I told Mister Ballard. . . . Must be expectin' a earthquake 'r th' like!"

"Seems a real shame she ain't there t' wear all them dresses."

"There'll be somebody, Mister Ballard says."

"That money ain't gonna' jest lay idle. . . . There'll be somebody."

"I'd insure my salvation 'n give some o' that money to th' church."

"A camel cain't get through th' eye of a needle."

"Shame she ain't alive t' see th' house a'buildin'."
"She sees. . . She sees. . . ."

"Take a month t' make them pillows."

"Don't know as I'd like pillows front o' my house. Like t' see out."

"Well, they do keep a body private."

"Well, you cain't hide from th' Lord. That's one a body cain't hide from."

"Some tries."

"Some tries anything. How's Pansy Ruth?"

"Fine. . . Nothin' but croup. Bark bitters cleared it up right off."

"Knowed she'd do all right once't y' got out o' Elm Flats."

"Must o' been that. . . . Mister Ballard wanted 'him' when Pansy Ruth wuz expected, but I told Mister Ballard I'd done had six — two of'um alone — an' I reckoned I could have another without 'him'."

"Birth's no place f'r a doctor less a body's sick, but Lanier's th' same. Men don't realize women cain't keep dressed proper an' have a child at th' same time!"

"I aim t' have women assistin' long as I'm able. Told Mister Ballard that. . . ."

"That black is real devoted t' that boy."

"Ugh huh, guards 'im like he wuz solid gold! Lord knows he's enough t' scare away trouble."
"Big as two men. I don't thank it's Christian, ownin' people 'n all."

"I hear tell 'he' won th' black in a game o' poker."

"Ain't hearsay. . . . Lanier's acquainted with him that lost 'im."

"Don't seem right gamblin' with folk's life. . . . 'Course he's black."

"Well, th' Good Book says 'do unto others. . . .'"

"Suppose 'they' read th' Book?"

"Like as not they don't. Too busy o' Sundays raisin' that house."

"Well she wuz Cath'lic 'n all, 'n that explains lots."

"Ever'body t' their own taste I allus say. . . . If a body wants t' kiss a cow they c'n kiss 'em. Jest don't know no better I reckon."

"Mister Webb told Mister Ballard th' boy does good at school, real good."

"Certain amount o' learnin' s'good, but it ain't ever'thang."

"Mister Ballard never went t' school, 'n he's done as good as th' next 'un."

"Seems t' me money's all a body needs nowadays."

"Seems. . . . Ever'body busy storin' up treasures on earth."

"They tell me that kitchen'll be 's'big as that hotel saloon!"
"Stretches clean 'cross th' west side!"

"Lord knows I don't need sech as that with all my cookin' . . ."

"'N must be near t' eight sleepin' rooms. . . 'Eight!"

"All I know's what Mister Ballard says, 'n he says there'll be somebody. A man don't build a house like that f'r nothin'."

"I've got a mind t' ask Lanier. . . Cain't git 'im t' talk much, though, him bein' such good friends to th' Doctor."

"Mister Ballard's th' same, th' very same! Says th' Doctor's bus'ness is his bus'ness 'n long as he's paid f'r his labor he don't care how th' cow eats th' cabbage."

"Well I'm that o' way. Live 'n let live's my idee."

"I don't believe in pryin' an' I don't like them that pry."

"Y'got them shangles in place?"

"Ain't a crack wider 'nuff t' leak goose drippin's."

"Hmmm, y'know how it is with 'him'. . . . Examinin' ever'thang like he meant t' commit surg'ry 'r sump'n."

"By God if he ain't thorough! Y'd thank them blocks wuz bein' united in marriage th' way he had us scrape'n mortise 'em."

"Well he knows what 'e wants, I reckon, but danged if
it ain't like me a'tellin' him how t' cut somebody up f'r operat'n'."

"Never saw no man's particular's him. Wants them oak planks fitt'n tighter'n shrunk underdrawers. Wants 'm sanded smooth 's glass."

"Hmmm. . . . 'n right now y'could drag a newborned baby's ass 'crost them planks an' never pick up a splinter. More sandin's gonna make 'em too durn purty t' walk acrost."

"I've wore out seven o' them sandstone blocks a'ready."

"Wear out sev'n more. . . . He's payin' good."

"One thang's t' be said f'r th' Doc. He ain't close with money."

"Hell, I reckon he don't need t' be close long as bulls has a hankerin' f'r cows. . . . They tell me he don't have no idee th' number o' cattle he's got at Icarie. Jes' roun's up three'r four thousan' an' starts north ever sprang."

"Takes money t' make money. It ain't no secret."

"I been expectin' him an' Judge Winters t' raise prices all along, but I reckon they know people has t' live."

"Prices is cheap, considerin'."

"Pork's gone up. . . . Eight cents a pound now. Course we ain't fond o' pork at my house."

"Grain-fed hogs ain't worth them prices. Course beef's dern nigh as expensive. . . . That look plumb t' you?"

"Looks straighter'n a cat's tail at breed'n time."
"He'll notice if it ain't plumb straight. I hear tell they've sent them Davidsons here t' be tried. Down at th' jail now."

"Lucky f'r them they ain't been lynched."

"Ole Winters'll hang 'em sure as dogs has little pups. He ain't one t' be swayed concernin' justice."

"They tell me ole Winters wuz all f'r tryin' th' Doctor 'til th' Doctor convinced 'im his wife shot 'erself."

"I never doubted but what she done that 'erself, but if he'd been guilty th' Judge 'ud have him sweat'n jes' like anybody else."

"Y'thank th' Davidsons is guilty?"

"Ain't no doubts! Sheriff at Bowie found th' goods they stole."  

"Which 'un done th' knifin'?"

"Won't neither of 'm say! One's gonna hang sure's crab apples is sour. . . . Both 'less one tells on th' other."

"This here shore don't look like that arckytech's drawin'."

"Reckon it'll look right once there's a frame 'round it."

"When's th' trial commence?"

"Ben Gompson says last o' th' week."

"We won't never need no paper long as Gompson's barberin' here."
"Talk is th' Doctor's sellin' 'im th' hotel."
"Might as well. That wife o' Compson's seems t' have took over."
"Reckon she handles th' pocketbook f'r Ben."
"They tell me he asks f'r her permishun 'fore he relieves hisself."
"Must o' give th' Doctor a good price."
"Payin' it out, I'm told. . . .Take 'em thirty years."
"Well, th' Doctor don't need th' money right off, an' if he ain't here t' collect there's th' boy."
"His daddy ain't only featherin' that boy's nest... . . . He's layin' it full o' eggs."
"You notice how that nigger looks out after th' young'un? Don't nothin' 'cept air git 'tween them two."
"Th' Doctor'd skin that nigger alive if anyth'n' happened t' that boy."
"Some woman'll be lucky anuff t' be that boy's maw one o' these days. Th' Doctor ain't a man t' live sangle."
"Talk wuz he wuz boilin' in 'is britches f'r Connie Boulter. . . . Must o' been talk. She didn't waste no time 'round here after her paw died."
"Reckon she figgered a ole bucket like th' Doctor didn't have no bizness in a new well. . . . Reckon this here idee o' a cistern'll work out?"
"Never seen one. That arkyteck seems t' thank so."
"Rains lots where he comes from. Dryer'n a
hisser's tit 'round here in summers. All them pipes
'n tanks seems a waste."
"Well he's set on it, an' its his money."
"Cain't see how he figgers t' be finished by th'
first o' May."
"Likker 'n bonuses f'r all them that works overtime'll
git it built by then."
"Sarah Frances don't like f'r me t' work on Sundays.
... Spends th' money all th' same, though."
"Same with Thelma Jewel. I figger work's work, an'
I doubt th' good Lord 'ud be displeased at a man tryin'
t' make his livin' an' keep his fam'ly."
"I tell Sarah Frances that if th' Lord ain't broad-
mindeder'n most folks a pore man ain't got no chance.
That's as steady a wall as I've ever saw."
"Hmmm. ... Days is gett'n longer. Reckon we might
finish 'fore May at that."
"Cain't do no more'n try. Trial start'n last o' th'
week y' say? Seems a shame t'miss it."
"Cut'n dry's f'r as I'm able t' see. Them Davidson
Brothers got th' same chance as a snowball in hell."
"Sarah Frances'll be there ever chance. She don't
git all th' facts in a case, but she shore makes a'
interestin' story out o' what she does git."
"Thelma Jewel don't believe no man has th' right t' send another man t' th' galleys, but danged if she won't be on th' front row with a picnic supper at th' hangin'!"

"Doctor must figger on putt'n a hospit'l in this here room. Never seen sech a big room in jest a livin' house."

"Reckon he figgers on 'entertainin' lots. If it don't rain we might not have no trouble finishin' on time."

"After th' way it poured durin' March it may not."

"Yep. Cain't tell about Texas weather an' a pregnate woman. Thelma Jewel ain't real happy t' be expectin' agin. She says 'fore she c'n wean one t' vittles another'n comes howlin' in."

"Sarah Frances laid down th' law a spell ago... Says if th' church wants members it'll hafta find some other way."

"Hmmm... Cain't thank o' no other way offhand."

"'Pears t' me that o' way, but Sarah Frances 'ud go through her change 'fore she'd change her mind."

"Shore hate t' miss that trial."
"I declare if Mister Ballard ain't plumb tuckered out o' nights when he gits home!"

"Lord knows what we'll put up with 'fore that house is finished. Lanier's crosser'n a sett'n hen. It's them hours they work."

"S'lookin' better all th' time. 'Course we know they ain't followin' them archyteck's plans exact."

"Lord knows what it 'ud look like if they did! Wouldn't want all them points top o' no place o' mine, but Lanier says th' Doctor is real pleased."

"I've seen th' like atop churches, but I don't hold with putt'n 'em on houses people has t' live in. Why, I'd be plumb afeared t' stay th' night under all them steeples!"

"I told Lanier, I said even if we could afford such I wouldn't want no house like that! Layin' up treasures like he wuz goin' t' live forever. 'Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moths and rust doth corrupt' I allus say."

"For where y'r treasure is at, there will y'r heart be at also."

"Them pillows does look right nice, though. I wouldn't want 'em, understand, but they do look right nice."

"Mister Ballard says you c'n see yore face in th' floor."

"Did he tell you 'bout that tin tub bigger'n a grown man?"
"Tub f'r washin'?"
"No! Tub f'r bathin'!"

"Well, Lord knows we git jest as clean fr'm a pot in front o' th' kitchen fire. Reckon that's one o' them French inventions."

"Lanier says a body could drown in sech as that."
"Iye soap an' water won't clean th' soul that ain't pure."

"I could understand 'her' want'n somethin' like that there, but I cain't f'r th' life o' me understand a man want'n t' keep hisself s' clean!"

"Mister Ballard says bathin' removes th' natcher'l oil in th' skin. It's rare when anythin' but his face gits washed."

"Lanier too. How do you thank th' trial'ull go?"
"Them Davidsons is guilty! I've knowed it from th' start."

"Nice lookin' boys."
"Seems a shame t' hang fine lookin' men like them two, but on th' other hand it's their just reward."

"Well I hope it ain't over 'til I git t' go. Jest couldn't go off'n leave Fanny Ruth... She looks real peaked."

"She git plenty o' red meat?"
"Seems t' me she does... Gonnough's is sellin' Peruvian Bark Bitters... Cost more'n we c'n afford,
but Lanier don't hold back when th' children's concerned, 
that's one thang t' say f'r Lanier."

"Have y' took Pansy Ruth t' 'him'?"

"Lanier's been after me t' do that, but I hate t' take th' Doctor's time 'n all."

"Why, I wouldn't feel that way at all! He's real good 
with young'uns. Reckon that's from havin' one o' his own."

"Well, we can't afford t' run t' him ever' time some o' us is ailin'. We ain't rich even if he don't charge 
much."

"Never charges atall 's far as I know."

"Well, we ain't those that impose on a body's good
nature."

"Seen th' boy 'n th' black t'day. I declare, it's
real odd how much that young'un looks like 'her'."

"I've noticed. Lanier says he don't know why th'
Doctor wants them large rooms. . . . Less o' course he
figgers on holdin' church meet'n's."

"Either—that—or—you-know—what!"

"But there ain't been nobody. . . . Less o' course
Reverend Boulter's daughter comes back."

"I don't look f'r that. Th' way she carried on 'bout
her paw! Well, I said t' Mister Ballard: A body'd thank
her husband 'ud been took 'stead o' her paw!"

"Folks is sayin' there might o' been somethin' 'tween
th' Reverend an' his daughter. . . ."
"Heard that... but I cain't believe it! Wasn't nobody holier'n him, an' him a man o' God if ever there wuz!"

"I'm jest sayin' what people is sayin'.... Course she wuz purty... purty as any in these parts I'd say."

"Y' suppose they wuz ever... Y'know what I mean?"

"I wouldn't want nobody t' hear me say this, but... Well, th' Doctor's as fine a'lookin' man as ever I saw, 'n I don't doubt she wuz took with him."

"'N' him took with her! That blond hair'n all. I c'n see as how they'd be stricken each with th' other."

"'N him bein' French 'n all. Hot bloodeder'n most, I'm told...."

"Well, I don't doubt but what they did! I don't doubt it f'r a minute! 'Course he wuz good t' 'her' long as she lived. Never denied her nothin' s'far's anybody knows."

"Imagine her goin' like that! All that money 'n that hotel 'n all them clothes... Some thangs I cain't understand. An' that's why th' Doctor drives himself."

"Some thangs we ain't meant t' understand. Do feel real sorry f'r that boy, though. That's the very reason he drives himself... tryin' t' f'rgit her."

"Well, I jest hope whoever th' Doctor chooses is good t' that boy! I told Lanier... If an'thin' happens— 'course I don't expect it to—then I don't want th' childern t' be without a woman. I feel that o' way!
A man cain't raise up a fam'ly no matter how good he might be. I told him I wanted 'im t' have a woman.

"A man needs a woman. . . . A woman c'n git by alone, but not a man. I said th' same t' Mister Ballard."

"Lanier says th' Doctor had a full acre o' dirt hauled jest t' fill in f'r ground about th' house."

"Been watch'n them wagons haulin' it. Lord knows I like a purty yard, but havin' dirt hauled in. . . ."

"Well, he don't miss th' money I feel sure."

"Maude Sheffield says she don't intend goin' to th' trial! Seems t' me people 'ud be interested in public functions."

"S'gett'n worse'n worse. People don't seem t' care much no more."

"Well, I like t' see justice done, 'n if Judge Winters hangs them two I feel obligated t' attend th' hangin'."

"I feel th' same. Lanier says a hangin' ain't a fit place f'r a woman, but I don't feel that way. I consider it a duty to attend."

"Mister Ballard's a good man, but he neglects thangs like that 'til it's a real shame."

"I guess th' Doctor'll have a warmin' once th' house is completed."

"I said t' Mister Ballard: 'Who'll th' Doctor invite to his warmin'?"

"What'd he say?"
"Didn't say! He cain't thank o' nobody th' Doctor'd consider a' equal. I jest hope'n pray he don't ask Mister Ballard'n me."

"'N Lanier 'n me! I wouldn't thank o' goin'!"

"May not be a warmin'.'"

"May not. . . . Still he wouldn't thank o' movin' in without a warmin'.'"

"Cain't tell, him bein' French 'n all."

"It ain't likely. . . . Still a body cain't tell f'r shore."

"You goin' to th' trial Monday?"

"I aim t' go if at all possible. If Pansy Ruth's better you come by."

"If she ain't I cain't go. Mister Ballard wouldn't thank o' stayin' home when th' house 's got t' be finished."

"I don't like t' see Lanier workin' s' hard but it's a bless'n in a way. . . . We're ahead a little now."

"I don't believe in workin' on th' Lord's day. Told Mister Ballard so, but when a body needs th' money like us. . . ."

"I don't feel bad at all! If Lanier don't git that money it'll be got by somebody else, 'n Lord knows we need it."

"Us too. Well, you come by if y'can. Seems a body with a ounce o' civic mindedness should be there."

"Specially since th' men ain't able t' go. I'll try."
"Try calmel if bark bitters don't work."

"Might at that. Let me know if you'n Mister Ballard gets asked to th' warmin'."

"Oh, I'm sure we won't be. Wouldn't go if we wuz. Guess we should, though. Th' Doctor means well."

"I told Lanier that. . . . Well, all we c'n do is wait'n see."

"You come by. . . ."

"You come."

"Them gables adds a lot to th' looks o' thangs, surprisin' amuff."

"'N that shower we had a week back put a little water in them tanks. . . Never figgered that'd work s' good."

"Th' Doctor says he aims t' have them cisterns filled anyways, irregardless o' rain."

"He ain't been 'round 's much 's usual o' late."

"Been followin' th' Davids ons trial."

"Any doubt yet they's guilty?"

"Sarah Frances says they ain't got no more chance'n a bitch in heat."

"Thelma Jewel's been a'draggin' up t' th' courthouse ever day. Told 'er she wuz too fer gone t' be traipsin' round like a bride, but she says people's been knowin' 'bout pregnant women 'n babies since Eve bit in'ta that
apple, 'n she keeps right on a'goin."

"Women's funny...Sarah Frances 's been after me t' find out 'bout th' Doctor's warmin', but I keep tellin' 'er I don't know 'im that good."

"Havin' th' same at my place...Thelma Jewel's been makin' excuses t' stay away, but she won't let me be. Keeps pesterin' me 'bout a warmin'."

"I'd be willin' t' bet my left 'un there ain't no warmin'."

"That could be. Th' women thank there's a spell on a house that ain't been properly warmed."

"That there hall's a waste o' space t' me."

"Meant t' catch th' summers drafts 'n keep thangs cool."

"Seems a waste, though. Them pillars is right impressive. Porch 'n all looks real good."

"Ain't too homey. I like a place looks lived at."

"One thang my place looks an' that's lived at! Kids complainin' th' s'mornin' 'bout sleepin' on pallets."

"Gawd A'mighty! Me 'n Sarah Frances courted on a pallet...Hmmm. Courted up a real storm, too."

"Kids is used t' too much nowadays anyhow. Sidemeat 'n beans 'n cornbread wuz all my maw knowed t' fix, but danged if my kids don't holler like stuck pigs if Thelma Jewel don't give 'em syrup n' milk ever meal!"

"Makes it hard t' git by when kids wants too much. You notice that stock o' vittles th' Doctor put in?"
"Couldn't help noticin'. . . Began t' thank we'd made th' kitchen too little after all."

"They shore don't plan t' suffer no hunger."

"Well, he ain't stockin' all that fer th' boy'n him. . . Ole Doc's got plans. He don't plan t' spend many cold nights a' sleepin' by hissel'."

"Well, whoever she is she ain't from near here. He won't have no trouble findin' her that wants t' share this here. . . . House turned out purttier'n a speckled pup."

"Looks a heap better'n I figgered it would. Them workin' on th' grounds is gettin' th' outside looking real good, too."

"Must be ten loads o' cow dung out there now!"

"Must be. . . . 'n he'll be clear up t' 'is ass in it comes a hard rain. What's he aimin' t' plant?"

"That arckyteck's havin' all kinds o' bushes 'n thangs hauled fr'm th' creek bottom. Reckon he aims t' make this here look like that pitcher 'e drawed."

"Y'see what he done with them pieces o' rocks? Start'n a walk fr'm th' street t' th' porch o' th' house!"

"Well, danged if'n th' yard ain't knee deep in dung. . . . Reckon they need a walk."
CHAPTER XVII

Judge Winters scratched between his legs and silently cursed the hot day, his hot coat, the necessity of dignity respectively. He sat behind his bench puddled in perspiration, a film of sweat dripping across his fat face and tired eyes. The powder was not effective; his loins still itched and demanded to be scratched even though his wife had liberally sprinkled the offensive area with talcum earlier in the day. He thought about the uncertainty of the weather, the two weeks of April that had been cold and dry, a pleasant mingling of winter and spring; then the breezes had stopped, the clouds had vanished, and a premature summer had begun. One afternoon shower during the whole of April! Impatient, hot dry days not happy for man or earth. And the last two days... hotter, dryer. The stale air of the courtroom, tobacco-juice-spit odor, drifted into his nostrils and stung them. The log walls had long ago absorbed the smell of smoke and spit and dirty flesh, and sent the odor out with every breath of breeze. Judge Winters brushed at his nostrils with his handkerchief but the smell would not wipe away.

He looked without interest at the people squashed together on the splintered log benches, at the late arrivals
leaning on doors and windows, through the doors at the later arrivals still in their wagons, leaning against the glare of the sunshine to hear the endless monotony of accusations and denials, counter accusations and counter denials. . . . Why did they sit through odor and sweat and monotony? Why have you come, Madam, when your child might be born before you can get up off the bench where you are? Here was no question of guilty or not guilty. Sheriff Morrison of Bowie had caught the prisoners with the dead man's horse and more money than they could account for; even a bloody jacket had been found. . . . No question of guilty or not guilty. . . . The Davidson Brothers were as guilty as dogs with sheep's wool in their teeth, but what the court had to decide—and the reason they had been in session for four weary, suffocating days—was which one of the Davidson brothers had put six inches of knife blade into the back of a Mister Elmer Johnston of Bowie. . . . Each accused the other.

"Another six inch hole 'n we could divide by two," mused Judge Winters to himself.

He glanced at the sweating, bored prisoners and wished the jury would hurry. Not bad looking boys, the Davidsons. Hard to realize one was twenty-two and the other twenty-four, but a man could get mean in less time than that. No qualms about sending them to the gallows. Women would weep, but there was no place in the country for violence such as they
had committed, and it was up to the courts of Texas to convince them of this. A man could get what he needed without violence, but some men never learned that. . . . And because you never learned that, Clem and Daniel Davidson, your heads are going to be stretched right off your bodies, and may God have mercy on your miserable, violent souls. . . .

"We've reached a verdict, Y'Honor."

"Read th' verdict, Henry Wells."

"We find th' defendants both guilty o' accomplishin' murder on Mister Elmer Johnston o' Bowie."

Silence. The long odor of bodies and spit. Heat. . . .

"Then it's th' sentence o' this here court that you boys be given over t' Sheriff Clancey an' th' court'll set a date on which you'll both be hung by th' neck until dead. . . . An' may God have mercy on your souls. . . ."

And now they don't look young any more, the Davidsons, or bored, just hot and miserable like the rest of us. You are in no condition to run like that, Madam, no matter how urgent your news is. . . . I hope your child waits to be born until you get home at least. . . . Worst thing about trials is the smell; the odor of stale spit stays in a courtroom long after everybody has gone.

Judge Winters was still perspiring, still scratching, when he found Abel at his office an hour after the trial ended.
"Whew! April's been hotter'n a fox in a forest fire," he sighed, collapsing into the closest chair. "I'm proud it'll soon be gone."

"Complications at the trial?" Abel asked.

"Nope. Guilty as hell fr'rn beginnin' t' end." Judge Winters took the whiskey Abel offered him and drank it before he said what he had come to say:

"We're ready t' go south with th' cattle, Doc," he said, smacking his lips loudly. "'N we don't have t' worry 'bout gett'n 'em across th' river." He smiled. "'Friends' is takin' care o' that end o' thangs."

Abel poured them another drink. "I hope these are good friends, Judge. A thousand head of cattle represents a very large sum of money."

"Safe as fish in a froze pond, Doc! All th' Fed'ral troops has gone north."

"Then let's drink to a safe journey... for all of us." The two men touched glasses and drank them dry. The Judge shook his head and brought out his handkerchief to wipe his wet brow.

"Passed y' house t'day, Doctor. Handsome place. Newfangled, but mighty handsome." He shook his large head, a smile somewhere on his lips. "Reckon only you c'd manage t' git that much done in sech little time."

Abel smiled at the compliment, patted his pocket until the coins rattled. "That's what finished the house in such
a short time, Judge. People don't approve of working on Sunday unless it pays well." He paused to laugh. "A man can miss church once in a while... providing he contributes generously to the collection plate when he does go."

"Seems t' me like that's th' attitude," chuckled Winters in agreement. "Reckon that's about th' size o' it."

"Have you heard from... Constance Boulter?" Abel asked with sudden seriousness. The Judge shook his head negatively in reply.

"Jes' know she's back at Atlanta..." Winters stopped to frown at Abel. "Y' ain't figgerin' on... doin' nothin'?"

Abel looked away before he rose and went to the window. The dust floated just above the streets, drifting gently up and down.

"No," he answered at last. "I don't plan to do anything like that."

"Some wuz thankin' y' had that in mind when y' set out t' build that house'n all."

Abel smiled, shook his head. "The house is for Petit," he said quietly. "I built it for him." He walked slowly back to face Judge Winters, sat opposite him, rubbed his hand tiredly across his eyes. "I just want to be with the boy now and watch him grow," he sighed.
And he was surprised to hear himself add: "To every man there comes a time when he feels old, a little tired."

Judge Winters was startled, but he quickly composed his features and said reassuringly.

"It's this here damned heat! A man c'n stand th' winters 'n falls o' Texas, but by God if it ain't like th' front door o' hell come sprang 'n summer!"

"Maybe that is it," Abel said absently. "Maybe it is."

"... 'N you workin' on that house night 'n day's amuff t' make a twenty-year-old tired," the Judge said in a last effort to justify Abel's admission.

"Well, it's finished now. Finished. ... More whiskey, Judge?"

The Judge handed Abel his glass without taking his eyes from Abel's face. He saw in the face lines he had never noticed before, noticed the heaviness of the eyelids that suggested lack of sleep. He said softly but abruptly:

"Maybe y' miss her more' n y' care t' admit." His words surprised Abel, puzzled him for a moment.

"Her?"

"Y' wife," said Winters, tasting his whiskey. "Takes a little time t' get used to."

"Perhaps," Abel answered, dismissing the subject. But the Judge's words stayed with him, caused him to ask himself if this were true... He told himself it was not true, could never be true. Constance had been his only thought,
guiding him, forcing him. It was Constance, waiting for him at the end of the tortuous trail, who kept him running, stumbling, falling rising to run again, but always running, running. . . .Reverend Boulter and Annette had been dark obstacles along the way, blocking his path, slowing his progress toward Constance. They caused him to fall, tried to pin him down, but Constance beckoned, and he threw off them and rose, stumbling blindly, always toward her. . . . But after the long journey she was not there; she had vanished even as he reached for her. He heard her laughter but could not see her in the dense shadows where she hid, could not touch her. . . .And so suddenly she was not there at all. . . .The laughter ceased, the shadows become impenetrable. Had she been there at all? Had she really been there? The Reverend was there, stretched across the path where Abel had shoved past him. There! Still pointing his accusing finger! And Annette was there. . . .lying in the waste of the journey, staring at him with eyes like crisp, wet leaves. Annette was there, closer to him than the Reverend, but he did not have the strength to step over her and return. . . .Return to what? Where had he been when Constance beckoned to him. . . .?

"Reckon you've had a good week at th' stores," the Judge was saying. "I had m' best days since. . . ." He hesitated slightly. "... since th' people wuz here fer th' fun'ral."
"When will the Davidsons be executed?" Abel asked as if he had been thinking about this all along. Actually he had not thought of the trial and the Davidsons until the Judge's last sentence.

"Don't know exact," Winters shrugged. "They'll appeal, like as not. Got that right, y' know, but it won't do no good. This afternoon's decision'll stand up."

"When will it be if there is not an appeal?" asked Abel casually. Again the Judge shrugged.

"Well, I reckon we c'n strang 'em up soon's a gallows is built." He looked questioningly at Abel but saw no expression he could decipher. Doctor Gonnough was looking past the judge and the office, rubbing his fingers across his chin. Judge Winters waited as long as he could wait.

"What is it y'got in mind, Doc?"

"I was just thinking," said Abel, still rubbing his chin, still staring past the judge. "This is Denton's first public execution. . . ." He stopped. Winters waited.

"Yeah?" the judge said, curious now, anticipating a surprise in proportion to Doctor Gonnough's mysterious contemplations. "What is it y'got in mind, Doc?"

Abel looked at him now, and a mischievous smile lighted his features. His blue eyes twinkled; his mouth was a thin grin. He chuckled softly, playing with the judge, making him wait. The face of the older man beseeched him.
"This is Denton's first public execution," he said again. "Will it attract many people?"

"Reckon it will," admitted the bewildered judge. "What y'got in mind?"

"When will they be hanged?" demanded Abel.

"Soon's we c'n get th' gallows built," Winters explained again, confused and lost by the Doctor's words and expression. "Reckon that won't take too long," he added, waiting. . . .

"No, no," Abel said, gesturing with his fingers, "I mean what time. . . . What hour?"

Judge Winters leaned forward, his eyes narrow under his bushy drawn brows, complete bewilderment on his heavy face.

"Why, anywhere from eleven o'clock 'til sundown's th' usual thang. . . . What y'thankin' 'bout, Doctor?"

"From eleven o'clock until sundown," repeated Abel, his words indistinct and mumbled. "... from eleven o'clock until sundown. . . ."

Judge Winters relaxed, unable to follow the thoughts of his friend. He went back to his whiskey, let the fumes from his glass burn his nose. Abel rose and poured himself another drink, and when the drink was poured he twirled the glass slowly between his fingers.

"Could you make it Saturday?" he asked the judge suddenly.
"Saturday. . . . ? Reckon so. . . ."

"At sundown?"

"Don't see why not," Winters answered vaguely.

Abel sat now, ready to outline the plan that had formed in his mind. The judge leaned forward to listen.

"All right," commenced Abel slowly, emphasizing each word for the benefit of the listening man, "make the sentence read, 'between eleven o'clock and sundown. . . . Saturday afternoon, and instruct Sheriff Clancey to hang them when the sun is halfway down. . . ."

Judge Winters stared, unable to believe that this was all the doctor had in mind. Abel noticed Winter's exasperated look and smiled. At last he started talking again.

"Don't you see, Judge Winters? That will give the people in the county Friday night and Saturday morning to get here," he explained, still patient, still emphasizing, "and if the execution isn't until sundown they won't have time to leave until Sunday morning." Abel held his hands in a palms up position. "Sunday morning most of them will stay in town to go to church. . . . And even after church a lot of the boys will want a drink before they start home. . . ."

For Judge Winters the words suddenly fell into place, made sense.

"Well I'm damned if you ain't a shrewd 'un, Doc!"

"That gives us Friday night, Saturday and Saturday night, and part of Sunday." He held up his glass, toasting
not Judge Winters but someone he saw in his imagination.
"We'll give the people what entertainment they want, Judge. And we'll lower the price of all necessary commodities."
He smiled, drank, pleased with himself and his idea. "It will give me a chance to get back a little of the money I've spent."
"S'posin' they appeal?"
"Is there any doubt about their guilt?" Abel asked the judge.
"Not one damn bit," answered the judge positively, "but that don't mean there won't be no appeal."
"Did the people in Bowie really try to lynch them?"
"Ha! Dang near done it, too! Sheriff had t' pistol whip th' man ready t' kick th' horses. . . . Cain't thank now why he'd save 'em t' be tried," the judge added thoughtfully.
"Law and order, Judge," Abel reminded him. "No more frontier justice. Texas is becoming civilized." Judge Winters agreed with a shake of his head and a grunt. Abel continued:
"Why not give them two days to appeal. If they haven't asked for another trial by then, schedule the execution for next Saturday."
"Wouldn't have no trouble, at that," Winters replied, engrossed in the game he was playing, "'cause people is anxious f'r 'em t' hang. . . . That jail won't hold 'em
too long, an' we ain't got peace officers c'n stay on duty day'n night."

"And they aren't safe in Bowie. . . . Seems to me you don't have any problem."

But the judge was dubious, a little skeptical.
"Seems t' me a hell'uva way t' git people t' town. . . ."

Abel thought he had overestimated the judge's sense of humor. He began, placatingly:

"Well, of course we wouldn't hang a man simply to get people in the town, Judge Winters, but since the Davidsons are going to be hanged anyway. . . ." Again Abel turned his palms up, out. . . . "we may as well take advantage of the situation." He had still not convinced the judge, for the judge's face wore a worried frown, and Abel hastened to relieve his fear and enlist him as a colleague. "Put off the execution six months and people will have forgotten the Davidsons and their foul crime," he argued. "Hang them next Saturday and let their punishment be an example of Judge Winter's swift justice." He had won. A light glowed in the old judge's eyes.

"By God it seems t' me Saturday's a good time fer them t' hang!" exploded the judge as if the idea had been his. . . . "seems t' me Saturday's a damn good time!"

Abel did not answer. He was trying to remember what put the thought of an early hanging in his mind. . . . The
Davidsons meant nothing to him—two strange young men who had robbed and killed—yet he was deliberately using them for his own profit. . . . Why had he thought of their hanging and the crowds who would come to see them hanged? Judge Winters showed little enthusiasm for the plan in the beginning although he coveted the money the execution would bring to Denton, still Abel had argued for it, argued and won. Why? Why had he argued? He did not really need the money; his interests brought him an income far above his needs. He lived amid luxuries even his richest neighbors could not afford, and he had provided well and safely for his son and heir. . . . Why had he made such an issue of having the Davidsons hanged on Saturday? Why. . . .? He could not answer his question, but neither could he interpret the thrill pulsing through his body while his mind was creating such an idea. And the excitement had not abated until he had heard Judge Winters endorse the plan. Why. . . .? Abel was still pondering his thoughts, still trying to sort and arrange them into logical, methodical order, when he heard the judge again:

"Reckon there must be five, six thousand people 'round here'll turn out f'r a thang like a hangin'."

"One more thing, Judge," cautioned Abel, "I wouldn't tell anyone the exact time of the execution. . . . Just tell Clancey that you will give him the signal at the right time."
"Keep 'm guessin', eh Doc?"

"Keep 'm spendin'," mimicked Abel in the same drawl.

"I'll send m' wagon t' Sand Town so's you don't need t' bother."

"Fine, Judge," Abel said, offering the man his hand to indicate the end of the conversation. Another thought came to him as he was shaking hands with the judge.

"And Judge," Abel said casually, "Ralph Groener has the cattle ready, but... he doesn't need to know just where they are going. You understand?"

"I understood that t' be th' way, Doc. Groener thanks it's me buyin' th' cattle." Winters laughed at the joke as Abel led him to the door. "We'll pick up them cattle quieter'n thievin' Comanches'n be on our way."

"My regards to your 'friends', Judge," Abel nodded, almost bowed. Judge Winters walked through the scorching afternoon sunlight of the doorway, turned briefly to nod goodbye to Abel.

The judge laughed quietly to himself as he walked through the sunshine and heat. In a moment he was drenched with sweat, cursing the heat and his itch.

Abel closed his office and walked toward Sycamore Street. The white glare of the May sunshine was blinding after the shade of the office, and he walked leisurely, anxious to arrive but too weary and too hot to hurry. A lazy, inconstant breeze from the southeast stirred the dust
from his boot heels as he moved, but even the breeze was
tired, and the dust rose only a few inches from the ground.
It was already summer; in another week the days would be
hotter, dryer, dustier. Summer sky over inland Texas is
bright blue, monotonous as the vast acres of prairie it
covers. . . . Abel glanced with contempt at the hot, white
sunlight, wished himself home. . . . but he was too tired
to hurry.
CHAPTER XVIII

Abel was less weary as he turned west from Elm Street onto Sycamore Street and walked in the direction of his house. At the bottom of the hill he stopped to look at his building, tall, white...finished, commanding the hill and street with its regal gables and pillars, demanding privacy with its green slat shutters and thick doors. Finished! The last spot of bare wood soaked with turpentine and paint, the last nail driven into secure, thick cypress beams and joists. Another spring would bring green, shady life to the bald, scraped lawn, shutting out the mud and dust of the street. Finished! The long, rock-paved walk winding from the street to the massive door was his, open to others only on invitation. Finished...Sanctuary, seclusion.

He complimented himself for having hired an architect from Jefferson. Expensive, yes, but the architect was worth his fee for designing the graceful sweep of the high porch girding the pillars and shutters, the minute altar-like balcony resting lightly between the two front pillars, the slender height of the windows, the sturdy inviting beauty of the long, wide steps. This is the house you dreamed of on the frontier of the prairie, Abel Gomnough...This
is the house you pushed back the prairie to build. Finished! This is the product of tornadic winds and swamp fever, delirium and dreams, sodden fields and thriving cattle, passion, brutally long cattle drives. You have pushed back the frontier to build! This is Charlotte, and Herman LeBron.

Mark Robertson and Ralph Groener, who stinks of hell, an angel in disguise. This is the house on the land I came to be born in, this is the dark, sweet smell of Jumbo and Aunt Mattie, the filth of Badger Ferris with his small pointed teeth. This is corn, cotton, cattle! The brown and white and green of Susina and Annette Mercier.

Here is part of your curly-haired, laughing son. . . . Here is the healthy blood you have drawn from the veins of the prairie, Abel Gomnough. Finished! Proud, elegant, aloof, defiant. . . . brave. This is Abel Gomnough, high on a hill, head in the wind. Blow wind! Blow! This is Abel Gomnough, higher, stronger than the wind. . . . Now cross the street, let yourself into the coolness of tall shadowy rooms, listen for the sound of your son—music sweeter than myriads of open-throated birds. Listen. . . .

"Papa!" Little Abel came rushing down the long stairs to fly into his father's outstretched arms. Cool laughter after the hot, humorless day.

"Petit! Did you see me coming?"

"I have been watching for you for an hour through the upstairs window," Little Abel told him.
"For an hour!" Abel exclaimed. "Surely you have not been still for an entire hour!"

"But yes, Papa," the boy said seriously, "I have been studying my books... When the school starts in June I will know more than I am supposed to know."

"Then perhaps Mister Webb will permit you to teach the school," teased Abel. "But I do not want you to study your books all the time," he added. "Have you been outside today?"

The boy nodded slightly. "Yes."

"Oh? For how long?"

"For a long time," the boy said, looking away from his father. "It seemed a long time... There is no one to play with."

Abel saw the loneliness in the averted eyes, the downward tilt of the stubborn little chin. He felt a surge of tenderness. The boy looked at his father now, the signs of loneliness suddenly gone.

"But when you are here, Papa, it does not seem so long. It is never long enough when you are here."

"Then if you will permetez moi, mon fils," he told the boy gaily, "I will spend the whole day with you tomorrow... And perhaps the next day also," he added, seeing the child brighten at his words.

The boy hugged his father ecstatically, incredulously. An instant later his lips puckered uncertainly and his thin brows flew together.
"Papa. . . .?" he said tentatively.

"Yes, Petit?" answered Abel, trying to sound as serious as the expression on his son's face.

"Papa. . . .today, from upstairs, I saw Aunt Mattie take an armful of flowers and walk down the hill at the back of the house. . . ." He stopped, looked away for a moment, a guilty expression in his eyes. Abel waited, wondered.

". . .I followed her," he continued with effort, "and she put the flowers on a grave in the cemetery." He looked at his father's eyes for permission to keep talking, saw the permission and went on:

". . .I didn't tell Aunt Mattie I followed her, Papa, but I did ask her where she had been." Again he stopped; then he blurted out his next sentence. "She said it was none of my business. . . .Told me I shouldn't pry, she said. Papa, go with me to take flowers to Mama's grave." His father's expression caused the boy to quit talking. Silence. "She liked flowers!" he told his father eagerly.

Abel was tired again, weary, much older than he had been a moment ago.

"Of course, Petit," he said calmly, tenderly, trying to smile. "I am only sorry we have not been there before now. . . ." He put his hand on the boy's arm. "Your
mother would not want you to think about her too much, Abel. She does not want to make you unhappy."

"I am not unhappy when I think of her, Papa," the boy assured Abel with complete honesty and frankness, "but if Aunt Mattie takes flowers to her I am sure she would like some flowers from us..."

"Yes, Petit, yes. She would like that," Abel sighed. He felt exhausted, the exhilaration of his entrance was completely gone. He was astonished to find himself staring at the boy through a film of tears. Tears! The boy must not see his emotion.

"I will change my clothes," he said briskly, his foot on the stairs. "You run and tell Jumbo to put saddles on the horses," he instructed the boy.

"It is such a little way, Papa! We can walk through the woods."

"If you like," Abel consented, too worn to argue. He had suggested the horses because he wanted to be alone for a moment... He needed to sit in his room, needed to think. He tried again.

"Then why not go in back of the house to see if you can find flowers while I change?" At this suggestion the boy turned to speed out of the room. Abel heard him calling to Aunt Mattie.

In his room Abel glanced at himself in the hanging mirror. He had not slept much lately, and his eyes were
a bit red from reading in the poor light of a candle, but he did not see in the mirror the fatigue and weariness he felt. Cold water felt good on his hot face, and he dipped the soaking cloth again and again from the pitcher to his brow, but the weariness persisted. When at last he heard his son calling to him to hurry he straightened his shoulders and stretched his mouth into a smile; and the sight of the boy waiting for him at the foot of the stairs let the smile stay. He descended happily to meet him. . . . They walked out of the house, the man's hand on the boy's shoulder.

Little Abel left his father only long enough to accept the handful of flowers Aunt Mattie offered him, then he gave the man his hand, guiding him down one wooded hill and up another. Occasionally Little Abel looked up at his father and smiled; gripping the bruised stems of the flowers tightly in his small hand he bounced merrily over the rocky ground.

"Did you really mean you will stay with me tomorrow, Papa?" the boy asked, as if unable to believe such good news.

"Tomorrow and the day after that," Abel assured his son, glowing as the small hand in his spasmed with joy. "From now on, Petit, we will spend much time together. . . . I will not be as busy as I have been, and even after Mister Webb's school opens we will have the afternoons together."

"I like Benton when you stay with me," the boy confided, "but sometimes it is lonesome. . . ."
"Denton will soon have many people," Abel predicted, "and you will have many children to play with."

"Where do the wagons come from that stop in front of our house, Papa? They are filled with children."

"From all over the county," Abel replied, "but why do you say that the wagons stop?"

"They stop!" the boy said with great authority.

"Some of them stay for a long time, looking at the house and talking."

Abel laughed. "They have never seen such a grand house, Petit," he said proudly. "Most of them live in cabins like the ones at Icaria."

"You must be very rich to build such a house, Papa!" The boy's eyes glowed into those of his father's. "Jumbo says that what you touch turns to gold!"

"Jumbo is teasing you!" chuckled Abel. "He knows I have worked very hard for what we have, Petit." They came out of the wooded area into the clearing where trunks of blackjack and postoak trees were stacked about like small log houses. A hundred yards ahead of them the woods began again.

"Here!" cried the boy, pointing to a large, not square block of sandstone a few yards away. He knelt quickly, peered at the deep rectangle hollowed out of the rock, touched the letters he found there. "It is like a little cave in the stone," he called, exploring the rectangle with
his fingers. With a quick movement he placed the wilted flowers at the place where the low mound met the stone and stood up. "The opening in the stone is like the frame of a picture," he explained to his father.

"If the letters were on the surface of the stone they would soon be erased," Abel told the boy. "This way the wind and rain can not touch them."

Little Abel looked around at the other graves, saw them marked only with wooden crosses and tiny mounds of rocks and pebbles. He looked quizzically at his father.

"Why don't the other places have stones?"

"In time they will have stones," his father told him.

"You told Ralph Groener to bring this stone from Icaria," the boy said positively. "I saw him putting it into the wagon." Abel did not answer. Finally he touched the boy on the shoulder.

"You are most observant, mon Petit," commended Abel. "This is a lovely spot, eh?" he said, looking about him, trying to change the subject. Suddenly the boy broke and ran the short distance to the peak of the rise. His arm shot into the air, pointing.

"Look, Papa!" he cried, "the top of the house!"

Abel came to his side. "Yes..." The pinkish-gray shingles of the gables pointed a few feet into the air above the woods. The boy had stopped pointing; now he stood with his fists doubled on his hips, legs wide
apart. A thick lock of russet hair swayed gently on his forehead and Abel reached to touch it, remembering for a moment Annette's disarranged bronze hair on the pillow beside him. . . . How long ago it had been! How young we were only a few years ago. . . . And how very old the ones who are left have grown! Petit will soon be tall and slim, his green eyes on a level with my own, his childhood gone like a season goes. . . . He looked at the stumps standing in the clearing, noted that most of them had sprouted close-clinging leaves. . . . How fast the timber comes back even after it has been cleared! If the stumps are not pulled and burned they will grow again, tall again, take back their woods again. . . .

"It is almost sundown," the boy told Abel. In the north the sky was splashed with transparent pink, sunlight reflecting on wisps of clouds as thin as pulled cotton.

"Aunt Mattie will be waiting supper for us," said Abel. The boy glanced about him once more, but his gaze did not linger on the square stone.

"What will we do tomorrow, Papa?" he asked eagerly, "and the day after that?"

"Tomorrow?" asked Abel, feigning surprise, and seeing the boy's puzzled expression he added hastily, "When tomorrow is really here we will think of something." This pleased the boy.

Together they started in the direction of the house.
CHAPTER XIX

Breakfast campfires burned red and yellow, straight as candles in a church, as Saturday's dawn splashed colorlessly over the town, promising another dry, white-hot day. No leaf stirred, not a blade of grass moved, and the sun crept reluctantly from the cool rim of the east, rousing to life sweating campers from stone-hard discomfort of pallets, waking dreamers dozing fitfully on planks of wagon beds that had not cooled during the long night. Dawn, beginning like the dawn of yesterday and the dawn before that, pausing briefly to let life breathe before it spread itself smotheringly across the sky like a coarse, hot blanket. May... Texas... Blazing orange of summer.

An early arrival, lucky enough to be camped within reaching distance of one of the town's watering troughs, urged her protesting child from his soggy quilt, and from a tin cup poured water over his head, drowning his howls of indignation. This accomplished, she put a sandwich of boiled beef and thick cornbread before him, standing guard until the first mouthful was choked down.

"There's sweetmilk if it ain't spoiled," she told the disinterested youngster. "If it's blinky we'll have clabber f'r supper." Around her, in every direction, as far as she
could see in the dim light, people were cooking breakfast, eating breakfast, or polishing breakfast dishes with cloths and sand. Some had eaten and were packing for all-night journeys, not wanting to take the time to pack late in the afternoon. Some, planning to stay through Saturday night and Sunday morning, sat leisurely about their smoking fires, fanning themselves, declaring it was too hot for May.

"Must be still hotter'n this on south!" they declared.

"When it don't rain in April it's hot f'r shore in May," they answered.

5:30 A. M.

At the Hotel Gonnough, Mrs. Compson padded barefoot down the stairs to pour water on the porch. She muttered to herself, wishing it had not been necessary to lower the price of lodging and board to thirty cents a night. People came, all right, but they were not "genteel" like the ones who would pay forty cents. And they sat on the porch until all hours, talkin' and spittin' and of course she had to be up with the sun to wash the porch. She was glad they owned the hotel, proud to write her relatives back in Missouri about the big place she and Ben owned, but early in the mornings she was still tired from the day before, and washing the floor just took her appetite! She planned to say something to her husband. Not that it would do any good, she knew, but she planned to tell him just the same.
There was just so much she could endure all by herself.
Just so much... And it so hot already!

6:00 A.M.

Aunt Mattie, shapeless as a bundle of laundry, tore
off pieces of plump, white dough with her plump, black
fingers and watched Jumbo shove kindling into the cookstove.
He scraped a prairie match across the grate and the strips
of dry wood crackled.

"Dem prahie matches sho is de mos' convenience Ah's
evah seed!" she exclaimed, twisting the dough into loaves.

"Dat ole sun gwine be hottah dan any prahie match
come noontime. Dis heah is sho good prep-a-ray-shun foh
d' bad place!"

"You say dat 'n you's gwine fah yohself
'bout d' bad place!" Fire blazed, water bubbled, coffee
boiled, fragrant and black.

"Dat's de troof sho's dis ole haid tuhnin' gray as
a ole rat."

"Yoh stan' back, Jumbo! 'N don' go sweat'n on dis
heah bread! Yoh ruins dem loafs an' dis ole hand gwine
lay a piece o' fahwood 'longside yoh big gray haid."

Jumbo giggled, moved away from the bread.

"Heah yoh talk, Aun' Mattie, a body'd 'llow yoh
tahed dis ole niggah."

"Blessed Jesus an' his mammy!" exploded Aunt Mattie,
"when Ah's tahed o' yoh, niggah, dis heah month gwine snow
an' freeze. Now yoh pouh out dat coffee an' cut out all dis heah nonsense. . . .Yoh too ole foh couht'n, Lohd knows!"

"Lohd might know dis, but He ain' send me no wohd."

"Yoh pouh dat coffee oh Ah gwine sen' yoh d' wohd wid dis heah bowl ovah yoh sassy black face, an' dat's d' troof!"

Jumbo giggled. Aunt Mattie was still mighty pretty. . . .Big as a mountain, she was, but still mighty pretty. He giggled again, dodged her blow.

6:30 A. M.

Judge Winters yawned and sprinkled powder between his legs. The rash was worse, red and watery and itchy. Damned heat! It all started when he had to sit with his coat on all through the trial, sit in a pool of sweat. Fool wife had persuaded him to rub bacon grease and salt on his rash, and it had actually made it worse. Wife had never been much in a crisis. . . .She had been pretty, and that was about all she had ever been. . . .But it had been a good thirty years since she was pretty. She had been after him to build a new house, and in time he would be forced to build her one because she never gave up once she wanted something. Already she was finding fault with their house, and it not old yet. Well, parts of it were old; it had been built out of parts of several houses, but it was
reasonably pretty — prettier than his wife — reasonably warm, reasonably cool in the summer. She was just an unreasonable woman. It was certainly uncomfortable this morning, but there was not a house in the town — in the whole county — probably in the whole state of Texas — that was not hot today. Unusual, yes, early yes, but just hotter than is comfortable for people. He dusted more powder on his scalded parts and hoped. No riding a horse for him today! But it hurt to walk, too. Best thing to do would be to stay at home, but that was out of the question. . . . He needed to be at the store today of all days, and then there was his wife. It was better to bear the pain of walking around, chapped as he was, than to listen to his wife complain about the heat and the house. And she would. . . . She wouldn't let him alone until he built her another house.

7:00 A. M.

Abel Gonnough felt beads of perspiration ooze from the pores of his forehead and cheeks as he poured thick cream into his second cup of coffee. A breeze stirred in the room, but the air was thick, like the cream, and hot, like the coffee. Long before Jesus Christ was born the Romans built large windows on the south and smaller windows on the north, the architect from Jefferson had told him, and the cooling system did make a difference. . . . But Rome, as far as Abel Gonnough knew, never had
prolonged dry, windless, cloudless, simmering, hot weather like the weather of Denton. . . . Complete peace with Petit, a pact of understanding between father and son, father and friend, son and friend. There must never be the long, lonely interval between their carefree hours together.
The heat had not been unbearable yesterday—or the day before—or had they noticed it at all? Riding in the sun, hunting in the woods, splashing in the cool, green waters of Clear Creek, listening to the happy, laughing squeals of Petit. . . . They had not noticed the weather. . . . Perhaps the weather is unfriendly only when a disagreeable task has to be executed. . . . Executed. Today the Davidsons would see their last sunrise if they watched the sunrises, and part of their last sunset if a man standing on a gallows notices time, place, setting. Ten minutes past seven. Ben Compson will be waiting for me, ready with the news of the hour. A nuisance, Compson, but a good source of information, a good barber, a useful man, obliging man. A patient man by any standards to tolerate the witch he married, a groveling woman, a never-to-be-trusted woman who thought only of owning things, things people could see, things she could boast about in letters to her relatives in Missouri. . . . Ben Compson, patient man, would not open the doors of his shop until Abel arrived. He finished his coffee and rose.

"I promised Petit we would go to Icaria tomorrow,
Jumbo," he called as he was leaving. "Take him riding with you if he'll go, but don't stay on the streets after dark."

"Yassuh."

"And don't let him go in the creek."

"Nossuh."

"Goodbye, Jumbo. . . . I won't be back until late."

"Yassuh, Mahse Abel."

7:15 A. M.

Ben Compson polished the cracked mirror of his barber shop with a yellow, crumpled paper. Doctor Gonnough is late. Usually here ten minutes past at the latest. Probably busy today. . . . Today would be busy for all of them. Have to get a smaller stove for summer. Expensive, yes, but a man can't work alongside a roaring fire in weather like this. Shave with creek water for years, sure, but just put cool lather on a man's face and listen to him howl! Doesn't pay. . . . A man in business has to think of his customers or go out of business. The money for the hotel came from giving the customer what the customer wanted, what he expected, what he was entitled to. . . . Always complaining about that porch! If it isn't the porch it's dirty windows, or hinges on the doors, or horse manure in the front yard. I don't spit on the porch, don't put dust on the windows, don't creak the hinges, don't
drop horse manure all over the front yard! A person can't
go against nature, that's for sure. Some men had to spit,
that's all, and horses are going to drop manure right in
front of the pearly gates, if horses go there. I didn't
design the world; all I can do is what anybody can do,
and that is make the best of everything. Complaining
doesn't do any good. . . . The very next time you see a
horse about to manure in the front yard just you explain
to him that there's a time and place for everything! This
place could stand a new mirror, but that isn't as important
as a smaller stove. . . . If it gets much hotter I can just
set the bucket of water in the sunshine and let it boil. .
. . That's what she would do if she had her way. But she
is right most of the time, wise when it comes to making
a decision. . . . Just as well, I suppose. A woman can and
should help a man all she can, and whatever she does always
helps out. The minute something happens she is right there
to help all she can. The room is too small to move the
chair, and the stove can't be moved. . . . Just have to get
another stove or close up shop for the summer. Too much
heat is too much.

"Mornin', Doc."

"Hello, Ben."

7:30 A. M.

Sheriff Clancey rubbed his face, rubbed at the sleep.
Suppose the rope breaks? What does a man do if a person is half-hanged and the rope breaks? Start over? Why, a man choked unconscious. . . .! Anybody ever try to put a rope around an unconscious man's neck? If the gallows break. . . .And they could. . . .Just poles, temporary poles, not as safe as a strong limb of a tree, but the judge wanted gallows built and they had been built. Put together anyhow. I can't be blamed if it doesn't come off right. I didn't sentence them; just my job to see that the sentence is carried out. I'll do my job. Why worry about the Davidsons? They belong to Montague County anyhow. We do that county a favor. . . .They'd do the same for us. If something should go wrong. . . .Well, who's to blame? Us? No. . . .Sheriff Morrison could come down from Bowie and pull the trap himself. They're his prisoners. I don't mind! I'd never refuse to do it because I know about duty and all that. . . .Sheriff Clancey doesn't back down, the people will tell you that. Still. . . .All those people in town today. Must be three or four thousand people! Saloons will be busy. White mule will be drunk like spring water. . . .Two deputies won't be able to hold things down. . . .Fusses, fights. This weather is enough to breed fights between the best of friends. A man gets ornery when he stays too hot too long and drinks burning whiskey to boot. Maybe it will rain, cool things off a little. Not a cloud in the sky! This is going to
be a long day. . . . Sure hope nothing goes wrong with the hanging. If I had my way I'd wait for cooler weather, but Judge Winters. . . . Wonder why he's in such a dad-blamed hurry? This is going to be a long, long day. Yessir. This is going to be the longest day Denton has ever had. Just to be safe I'd better test the ropes. . . . Fools ought to close the saloons in town until the hanging is over, but the saloons will be wide open. . . . The saloons will be wide open. . . .

8:00 A. M.

In the big bed of the big room at the head of the big stairs in the big house on Sycamore Street slept Petit Gonnough, a cool, peaceful look spread across his face. And the noise of those awake downstairs was muffled to let him sleep. . . .
Abel Gonnough stood in the shade of his office doorway and looked out upon the swollen, moving town. People walked in circles about the small square, jamming the stores, pushing at one another with elbows in an effort to see and to be seen. Some who could not afford to shop sat in the center of the square, fanning themselves in the inadequate shade of their wagons. They wished the day away, longed for the comfort of night and the journey home, but others wound restlessly round and round the square, shopping for cotton warp and denim, wishing they could buy softer, smoother material, sighing at the price of calico, afraid to inquire the price of colored silk and black satinette; they tried crowding large, calloused feet into small, thin-leathered shoes, shook their heads sadly, unbelievably, at the incompatibility of foot and shoe. And boot heels tapped ceaselessly across planks of sidewalks, jarring planks and earth as they walked, squeezing gray dust out of the dry street. Saloon doors swung thud-swish-swish-swish-thud through the morning...Thud-swish-swish-swish-thud.

Beside the booted men, the barefoot boys in faded denim knee pants trotted like obedient dogs, unconscious of the blistering sun shining on their brown faces and arms,
happily oblivious to the heat and dust and filth settling on their bleached, streaked hair. Now and then a child stopped to dig a splinter from a foot, wrinkling his nose at the pain involved. The women followed men and children, watching them, separating them from the anonymity of the crowd.

Abel watched a furious woman hold her long skirts off the ground with one hand while she slapped viciously at the hindquarters of a cow balked in the path of the sidewalk, saw the woman's face scarlet with indignation. The cow removed, the woman adjusted her great bonnet against the sun, dropped her skirt only to lift it again—daintily this time—with the tips of her fingers. He smiled as the woman glided past him, her erect figure like a misshapen hourglass, drawn to a narrow circle in the middle with yards and yards of quilted calico.

Something had to be done about loose cattle roaming the streets. At other times the cattle grazed peacefully in the shade of the postoak thicket knoll in the center of the town, but campers had driven them out into the streets, where they wandered, searching for parched nourishment in the dust. Some hungry visitor would milk the cow before night, and the owner—if it had an owner—would offer no objections.

Pigs were the real nuisances. Rude and aggressive, they grunted at people's heels, darted dangerously between legs if food lay about. A squealing, running pig caused
many ladies to lift their skirts and scream in anguish, as much afraid of their ankles being seen as they were of the indiscreet swine. And every day there was the same distasteful job of scraping animal droppings from the sidewalks and doorways. If owners did not have pens for their livestock they could at least keep them tied. . . . But looking about the filth-ridden streets Abel knew it would take years to convince people that sanitation measures were necessary; animals and garbage were considered necessary evils, discouraged but never seriously objected to. Time. . . . time. . . . time. . . . Doctor Gonnough! Denton is a town on the frontier of Texas, a town of rowdy, eager people with little time to ponder sanitation, a town no worse and no better than a hundred towns in Texas. Time. . . . time. . . . time. . . .

Abel left the shade of his doorway and walked, restlessly, as he had seen the others walk, in the direction of his lumber yard. He walked past his saloon, full and noisy with drinking and gambling, without stopping. Later he would stop, but now he was more interested in the lumber yard, because people who bought lumber meant to build, meant to stay, and he made it easy for them to buy. A small down payment in cash or salable merchandise was all Abel Gonnough demanded for a fair load of building lumber, and the rest could be easily, comfortably paid for with low monthly payments. This practice cost him business
at the saloon, but most of the men managed to make their payments and visit the saloon frequently enough. . . . And lumber was more profitable than whiskey.

When he neared the lumber yard he happily appraised the stacked, labeled piles of lumber waiting to be called for. Harry Myers was counting boards into piles and sweating darkly on the white lumber.

"You ain't got more'n eight wagon loads o' lumber left, Doctor," Harry told him, pausing to sop his brow with his shirt sleeve.

"Sell it to them, Mister Myers," Abel told him.

"Say we'll have the lumber here by Wednesday."

"I ain't had a peaceful moment since mornin'," grunted Myers. "Them buildin' books you got with that last load o' lumber's done wore out from bein' looked through! Some jes' comes t' look 'n wish, but plenty of 'em buy," he said, pointing to the stacks of lumber.

"What about tools?" asked Abel. Harry Myers grinned, wiped his brow again.

"I'll bet a wagon load o' hammers left here t'day." Myers stopped to spit, aimed carefully at a plank, hit it. "My back ain't never gonna be th' same after liftin' all them nails!"

Abel smiled at the man, patted him across his wet back.

"Keep lifting them, Mister Myers." He winked. "Keep lifting them and I'll see if I can't lift your wages a little this week."
Harry Myers flushed. "I could use it, Doctor. Costin' more'n more t' live."

Once more Abel patted the man on his back. "We'll see that you don't starve, Mister Myers," he chuckled.

"You seen th' galleys, Doctor?" Myers asked.

"No," Abel answered, a question in his voice.

"Damndest thing I ever seen! Sheriff Clancey came right after dinner t' pick up more lumber... Said he aimed t' board in th' bottom o' th' galleys." Myers laughed, shook his head. "Damned if what he's built out there don't look like a corral f'r a herd o' cattle."

Abel did not care what Sheriff Clancey had built; he no longer associated the day with the Davidson brothers' hanging. He was eager to see Judge Winters, relished the pleasure of seeing the judge's face when he told him eight wagon loads of lumber were all that remained of the "ridiculous"—this was the judge's word—quantity Abel had had hauled into Denton in expectation of such a day. The old judge would squirm like a worm caught on a burning log; he would tell Abel it was just a lucky accident, but the asking price of Winters' Lumber Yard would be less, and when the price became less than the lumber yard was worth Abel would buy... Abel laughed as he thought about the judge with his still-filled lumber yard... Winters demanded cash, but people building houses seldom had cash, and even as prices at Winters' Yard became lower
and lower people came to Doctor Gonnough for lumber, lumber that could be bought and paid for on time. But Winters clung to his demands whether from necessity or pride, stubborn as a knot in a pine plank, and refused to let his lumber go out on credit. Let it lie there, Judge, and soon it will be gray and warped like you, and you can give it away. Abel bore no malice toward Winters, still he enjoyed beating him, and this time he had really pushed him out of competition. There was not room for two yards in Denton; the judge knew that, and he had repeatedly warned Abel not to compete with him... but that was a long time ago... and now there was no room for Judge Winters' yard. No room... Abel was still smiling when he pushed his way out of the crowd and climbed the stairs to Judge Winters' office.

Wendell Taylor and a strange man were in Winters' office when Abel entered. Abel tolerated Wendell Taylor because of his friendship with the judge, but he disliked the man immensely. Taylor was a coward, with the look of a frightened rabbit. True, he was useful as a catch-all servant of Winters, and loyal to the judge in a subservient, crawling manner, but Abel sensed an animosity in the man, an enmity that would someday explode violently. Behind the servile exterior manner of Taylor lurked something subversive, something perverted, something corrupt, Abel suspected, but he told himself that a man like Wendell
Taylor would never have the courage to revolt. Taylor slunk visibly when Abel entered the room.

"Judge, Taylor," acknowledged Abel with a friendly nod. The strange man in the room regarded him frankly he saw, and with a slightly hostile look in his dark, red-rimmed eyes.

"This here's Jasper Taylor, brother t' Wendell," explained the judge. "This here's Doctor Connough, Jasper." The two introduced men exchanged handshakes and open appraisals. The judge watched them. "Jasper here's jest back fr'm New Orl'ans. . . . Seems we got a lil ole war on our hands, Doc." Judge Winters was pleased with the news, eager to communicate it to Abel.

"Oh?" grunted Abel, unimpressed by both the words and the tone of Judge Winters.

"Jasper says Fed'ral troops fired on Fort Sumter back in April. . . . South Ca'liny's got herself into a shoot'n war shure 'muff." Judge Winters had been pouring whiskey into glasses since he started with the news, and he handed Abel a glass.

"I have heard a few rumors," admitted Abel, surprised that the news of Fort Sumter — providing it was true — had not reached them before now. He tasted the whiskey. "Do you think Texas will be in the war, Mister Taylor?" he asked, addressing the stranger.
"Talk is," the man drawled dryly, completely without interest, his black eyes dully focused on Abel.

"How soon?" Abel asked.

Jasper Taylor shrugged his shoulders with the same lack of interest. Without answering the question he put his glass of whiskey to his mouth and emptied it, wiping the drops from his lips with the dirty sleeve of his shirt. Abel was impressed by his lack of concern, impressed also by the apparent disconcern of Winters and Wendell Taylor. The judge seemed more than a little pleased with the news.

"Maybe the whole thing is just talk," suggested Abel. The man he had been introduced to pulled out of his slouching position and glared.

"It ain't 'jest talk', Doctor," he snarled, prolonging Abel's title offensively. "It's time them damned nigger lovers 'n Yankee half-breeds wuz given a lickin'."

"You don't like 'niggers', Mister Taylor? Or Yankees?" Abel inquired politely, controlling a sudden desire to push the man out of his sight. The man had been riding, he knew, for the dust was still on his shoulders, settled along lines of his long black hair, but there was a dirty look in his eyes that was not from the trail he had ridden. And his voice was dirty, touched by his association with filth. Jasper Taylor finished his whiskey, curled his lip contemptuously before he spoke.
"Blacks has a nasty habit o' fergitt'n they're black," he drawled monotonously, "'n I don't like nobody that fergits t' give respect where it's due. . . ."

Here it is, Abel realized suddenly. Here is the hostility and revolt Wendell Taylor feels but is too cowardly to express.

"We don't have any trouble with the Negroes here, do we, Judge Winters?" Abel said lightly, tingling with dislike for the man he barely knew. "And I suppose that at least half the people in this county were 'Yankees' before they came to Texas," he added suggestively. Without changing his tone he asked: "Where did you come from, Mister Taylor?"


His quick reply was a boast, Abel decided, almost a challenge. The discomfort of Judge Winters and Wendell Taylor was obvious now; the judge kept wetting his lips with his liquor while Jasper Taylor stood far out of range, blinking his pale eyes rapidly, keeping himself well out of the discussion. Abel did not mean to antagonize the stranger. . . . He had no reason certainly, for the man was a transient, a nonentity, a negligible factor he could safely ignore, and it was profitless even to spend the minutes in conversation with him. Suddenly Abel felt a little guilty for his intense dislike of the man, felt he had sacrificed a trifle of his dignity
to disagree with Jasper Taylor, and there was not reason. . . . no reason at all. But the desire to boast to Judge Winters about the lumber yard had vanished; his trip here had been a trivial errand after all. He had been eager enough to come here; now he was even more eager to leave.

"Well, I suppose we will be told about the war in time," Abel said, preparing to depart. "Everything all set, Judge?"

"Clancy's ready when. . . .ever it's time." He had almost said, 'whenever you're ready' and the three men in the office had understood what he had almost said.

"How are your supplies holding out?" Abel asked, ignoring the Taylors.

"Jasper here's goin' t' Sand Town afterwards. . . . He c'n brang back a couple o' barrels f'r y' if y' like." Judge Winters' pronunciation of barrels sounded like 'barr-uhls' and Abel stifled a laugh. He managed to smile as he nodded.

"Thank you, Judge. We'll need plenty of whiskey." Now was a good time to tell Winters what he had come to tell him. "What I need is more lumber," Abel added, a twinkle in his eye. Winters leaned backward in his chair and chuckled.

"Hear tell you jest about gone out o' th' lumber business, Doctor."
"That's right, Judge," Abel answered agreeably. "Eight more wagon loads of lumber and I can close shop. . . . Until I can get another stock of lumber, of course."

The two men laughed softly, enjoying their rivalry and friendly sarcasm. The other two men in the room regarded them tolerantly, without interest, staying out of the conversation and the laughter.

"Gentlemen," nodded Abel, taking a step toward the door, "nice to know you, Mister Taylor," he said with more than usual friendliness. Jasper Taylor jerked his head sharply in reply, failing to disguise his relief at the Doctor's departure.

"Let me know what y' need fr'm Sand Town," called Winters. Abel gave him a small wave and left.

Once more Abel glanced about him in the blazing afternoon. The crowd still wound round and round the tiny square like slowly milling cattle. It was still an hour before sundown, but already a crowd had gathered on the south side of the jail by the newly-built gallows. Only the top of the gallows was visible from where he stood, and he remembered Harry Myers's words and wondered curiously what Sheriff Clancy had built that looked like a corral, at least what Harry Myers thought looked like a corral.

Abel walked past McCready's Restaurant, noticed that the four tables and all the stools were filled. Flies buzzed thickly and angrily at the windows of the restaurant,
but two black youngsters, dressed in nothing but overalls slashed off at the knees, stood guard with large paper fans, dragging them like lazy pendulums across the openings of the windows. One of the little black boys, braver than his colleague, gave Abel a round, white smile of recognition. Abel stepped up to him, gave him a coin. The boy rounded the smile, widened his eyes.

"Much oblige, Mahse Doctoh!" he said through his smile. "Yassah!"

Abel stood for a moment under the awning of the restaurant listening to the noise from inside. The odor of grease and onions floated out to him through the guarded windows. A hot smell, unappetizing and dirty, incongruous with the neat, bleached front of the building with its whitewash sign announcing 'Homemade meals.' The printer had painted the 's' backward. Abel stepped out of the way and nodded courteously to three ladies coming out of the restaurant. One of the ladies, bonneted and skirted beyond the usual precaution, picked daintily at her front teeth with her fingernail, trying in vain to dislodge a stubborn bit of McCready's beefsteak. She saw Doctor Gonnough, smiled, still picking her teeth.

"...I said the same to Mister Frederickson... We can do without a new barn, I told him, but we can't do without the Lord and a place to worship... a decent place!"
"My! You should see what the Methodists have at Dallas!"

"Let them have their noise and glitter. . . . All a good Baptist needs is a roof and a full heart. . . . That's all."

Abel watched them disappear, smiled as one of the three ladies stopped abruptly to undo the hem of her long skirt from a protruding nail in the boardwalk. Time. . . . time. . . . time, ladies! In time you will have your church. . . . many churches. Time! Still smiling, Abel walked in the direction of his saloon, narrowing his smarting eyes against the glare and the almost visible heat reflected from the unpainted clapboard fronts of the buildings. . . . As he neared the saloon he heard the strains of a voice above the unmusical sound of a guitar floating over the din of people entering and leaving the saloon. He had not expected to find so many people at his place; the crowd had an hour ago begun to gather at the site of the hanging, noisy, fighting loudly for a good view of the gallows. . . . He passed men he knew, spoke cordially to them, slipped quietly through the door and stood with his back to the wall. All the celebrants were not gathered at the scene of the spectacle; many of them still glowed in Abel Gonnough's Saloon.

A cowboy, guitar balanced across his knee, sat on the end of the long bar. He sang with his eyes closed under
his pulled-down hat, sang to no one in particular, his voice hoarse with whiskey, his guitar untuned, nasal like his voice. The chords he struck were as heavy as his closed eyelids.

"...If she don't thank I'm fitt'n
T' haul her 'round th' town,
We'll jes' stay home a' sitt'n
An' I'll take m' britches down. . . .down. . ."

Here the singer paused, tilted his head, and the men about him chorused:

"...Down to th' creek on Mond'y mornin',
Wash 'em with hog fat 'n lye
I'll set around in
Th' clothes I w'z born in
An' wait f'r my britches t' dryyyyyyy. . .Wait f'r m' britches t' dry. . .

If she comes down Red River
Dressed in a sat'n gown,
I know jes' what t' give 'er,
An' I'll take m' britches down. . . .down. . .

...Down to th' creek on Mond'y mornin',
Wash 'm with hog fat 'n lye. . . . . . ."

When the song was finished the men stomped their feet and applauded the sleepy singer, calling for more, but by now the singer was not interested in anything except his drink, and he slouched from the bar to one of the tables, smiling drowsily in response to his noisy ovation. Abel crossed the room, acknowledging friends and customers as he went. Against the back wall, two men, drunk or exhausted, snored loudly, forgotten in their happy oblivion.

"Hi, Doc," said the bartender, neither respectful nor familiar.
"Hello, Mister Smith," Abel replied. "Friends of yours?" he asked, pointing to the snoring men against the back wall.

"Rode all night... Had two drinks apiece 'n fell apart in th' corner."

Mister Smith had been in Denton a month. He had ridden into town in the dirty suit of a city man, broke and hungry, but he refused to eat the meal Abel offered him until he had been hired. Busy man, quiet man, good with cowboys and farmers even though he had been neither, and he was honest. He poured a fast shot of whiskey, poured it clean, without spilling a drop, and he spoke a drunk man's language. Frail and softspoken, he managed the toughest men in the town, managed them usually without resorting to force, and the strangest thing about Mister Smith, the incredible thing about Mister Smith, pale and gentle as he was, was that he had plenty of force when he was drawn into action. Abel knew nothing about him, liked everything.

"How's your supply?" Abel asked him.

"Dry in two hours, Doc," Smith replied without hesitation. "These hombres got a thirst like a pack o' desert mules and th' bellies o' camels!"

Smith drew two bulging cloth sacks from under the counter and gave them to Abel. Abel made a mental note to tell Judge Winters he needed more whiskey and lifted the
They were heavier than he expected. This would be his best day to date. He gloated to himself just a little when he remembered that a chance thought, a suggestion to Judge Winters, had turned out so well for them. And there was much more to be got! Much more to be spent, counted, hidden away. Many of the people would celebrate all night; some would even last through Sunday. Smile, Abel Gronnough! Hold heavy bags of money in your hand and smile! Your town is a mine of gold, a seething, bright, loud, inexhaustible mine of gold. Smile, Abel Gronnough! Laugh, Abel Gronnough! Count, count, count, Abel Gronnough! What you see before you is yours, all yours.

"They're ready!" a man yelled through the door of the saloon. "Th' hangin's about t' begin!" A shout of approval greeted his words. Feet left the bar and ran; some left the bar and staggered toward the door and the excitement outside.

Abel walked to the door of his office and watched the saloon empty. A few men hurried to the door and disappeared, whisked away from their waiting by the man's words. At the bar the men turned up glasses and bumped them carelessly in haste to finish their drinks and be gone. Several did not move; they drank without haste and ordered more. The two men snored by the wall until a friend jabbed at their ribs several times with a not-too-gently boot toe. The waking men made faces and stretched,
and finally wobbled out of the saloon without seeing the walls or the door. . . Only six men and Abel finally remained in the saloon. Mister Smith took a newspaper from under the counter and sat at the end of the bar to read it. Outside the noise grew. Feet and voices running, calling.

At the door of his office Abel shook his head and laughed merrily to himself. "Go, you seekers of the morbid! Go feast your eyes on condemned men and thank your Gods with your perverted hearts that you are not standing on the new boards of a gallows! Go! Hurry! Run! Run and fill your eyes with the horrible sight of a broken-necked man dangling helplessly at the end of a rope. . . . Fill your eyes. . . . Then come back to Abel Gonnough's saloon and fill your bellies with raw white mule and red-eye whiskey, try to erase the picture you have seen, try to burn it out of your mind with cheap whiskey. . . . Pay the price of admission. . . . Pay Abel Gonnough, for he has arranged your feast! Enjoy it. . . . You need to enjoy it. You deserve your entertainment, fools that you are. You deserve your entertainment, poor wretches. And the price is cheap. . . . Pay Abel Gonnough as you pass through the saloon, the lumber yard, the general store. Pay, for it is not free. Nothing in the world is free, Comrades. But you can be rich for a moment, for two men are giving their lives to entertain you. . . . And for a fraction of a
moment too minute to record, Abel felt completely opposed to all he had seen of the human race. He was an alien, outside the circus. But only for that immeasurably small measure of time did he think that, for he suddenly recalled the ladies from McCready's restaurant talking about a church in Denton, and some nerve deep in the fibers of his body tingled ecstatically. He lifted the bags of money that held a small part of the day's receipts, lifted them slowly up and down, making a figure that resembled a human scale attempting to balance. . . . He was not outside the circus. . . . He was in the center ring, master of all performers.

What would the pious ladies of Denton say if Doctor Gonnough built them their church? How bright would be the smiles, ladies! How charming you would be to poor, heathen Doctor Gonnough, finding virtue in every vice because your beautiful, rainproof building is at stake. . . . How very, very misunderstood the good Doctor Gonnough is! How terribly, irreparably, we have wronged poor, generous Doctor Gonnough. He has been in darkness, now see how he shines! Doctor Gonnough has built an altar to God! What greater work? An Altar. . . . Abel Gonnough's altar, ladies.

I, Abel Gonnough, will build you your church.

Oh, Doctor Gonnough!

Good Doctor Gonnough!
I, Abel Gonnough, will build your church, ladies, an altar, ladies.

Oh, Doctor Gonnough! An altar to God!

An altar to Abel Gonnough, ladies.

Oh, Good Doctor Gonnough, good, good, good! Say a long prayer for Doctor Gonnough, ladies.

Thank you, ladies. Thank you. And now I must go to my store to count the material and hardware sold today.

Abel locked the door of the saloon’s small office, glad to be out of the small oven. Money was safe enough in the room. A foot square window was the only access to the room besides the door, and Mister Smith's eyes would see if anything unusual happened near the door.

The saloon was empty now, and Smith still at his corner engrossed in his ancient newspaper. Someday Abel planned to look at the newspapers Mister Smith kept around him, and there perhaps he would find something which might identify this man from nowhere. It really did not matter, he told himself. Smith was trustworthy, a valuable employee. What he had been could stay in the shadows.

He opened the front door of the saloon on the last half hour of the hot day. Still cloudless, still sultry, still smelling of burnt leaves and dry grass, like a winter room long unaired. Abel stepped out into the street; there was just time to check with Robins at the General Store. He stopped, lifted his head in disbelief. A breeze!
He whirled to face the southeast. As he turned he could hear plainly the din of the crowd waiting at the jail. Shouting...Laughter...Breeze!

From miles away in the cloudless sky a gust of wind had found its way to the breathless afternoon over Denton. Again Abel felt it, saw the branches of a nearby oak tremble gratefully. He heard the crowd again, laughter again, raucous as the odor of the burnt day. And suddenly the breeze was constant! Unbelievably it was constant! A moment ago there had been nothing but the visible heat rising out of the dust beneath a colorless sky, and now it came, from somewhere south and east, from the same colorless sky, breathing life into the prostrate leaves, whispering music of a great fan. And it stayed...and sent powdered dust scurrying along the edges of the boardwalk. Abel turned his back on it reluctantly and walked to the store, noticing that the sun had emptied the square. The Davidsons had only ten minutes at the most before they faced their audience. Abel felt the breeze through his wet shirt, deliciously cool and steady against his sweating back. Someone yelled wildly down by the jail...Another yell followed, and following this was laughter, cacaphonous and savage. Abel hurried.

A child had been left in the care of Mrs. Robins at Gonnough's General Store, and the obliging Mrs. Robins rocked the dark little girl on her bony knee and whispered
pacifying words in her ear, but she could not quiet the screaming child. Abel went to her and touched the small, wet chin, smiled at her, and for a moment she stopped crying to stare at him, but the moment passed and again she screamed, and again Mrs. Robins tried bumping the child on her knee.

"Misses Rawlines young'n," Mrs. Robins told Abel. "Don't know why a body brings a child like this t' town on such a hot day! Never saw th' like o' people an' screamin' kiddoes."

"They have no place to leave them, I suppose," Abel murmured. He went behind the counter and took out the heavy ledger; a quick glance through it told him what he wanted to know.

"You'll find it full, I warrant," sighed Mrs. Robins. "Mister Robins an' me said to each other before noon, 'I jus' wonder where all th' people come from!' Been in here th' livelong day grabbin' an' handlin'. . . ."

"And buying, apparently," chuckled Abel, interrupting her.

"Whew!" she gasped. "I never saw th' like! I wonder where they get th' money? Spendin' like it grew on trees! Whew! I wish I knew where it grew!"

"Material for dresses left?" asked Abel.

"Whew! I reckon there might be enough left on one bolt o' Indian Head t' make a skimpy dress f'r a skinny child,"
gased Mrs. Robins, stifling a laugh over her little joke. "I told Mister Robins before noon, 'I never knew s' many people t' wear shoes!' And he said th' same. Whew! Tryin' on shoes is jest about enough t' kill a body like me." The child on her knee screamed, caught Mrs. Robin's attention. Up and down on her bony knee Mrs. Robins bounced the child as she talked. "Some o' those y' told us t' give credit to, Doctor," she said, frowning, "jest don't seem t' me like proper risks."

"They'll pay, Mrs. Robins," Abel assured the woman. "Well, whew! It's your goods," continued the woman, somewhat abashed, "but nice stuff like that goin' out f'r such little payment. . . ."

Abel smiled, took a stick of hard candy and handed it to the child. The little girl stopped screaming long enough to take the candy in her hand. Mrs. Robins thanked Abel and took the candy from the little girl. Before she gave it back to the child she carefully wiped it on her skirt.

"There now," she cooed. "There's a nice candy stick fr'm th' Doctor." At last the little girl stopped howling and licked the candy.

Abel did not need to stay long at the store; he had been by three times already, glancing at the ledger, counting the cash. The receipts so far had been what he expected; the store had had an unusually successful day, but there was little satisfaction in selling necessities. . . . Unless, of course, there was strong competition from
Judge Winters. He could afford to undersell Winters, sell on long-term credit, and he knew Winters could not afford these practices. In any month he could force Winters to close by employing a few dramatic, if drastic, measures, but he did not resent the old man. He actually rather enjoyed him; he at least represented a rival, and Abel needed a rival. Rivalry was amusing. He would let Judge Winters stay. ... Generous Doctor Gonnough would let the old judge stay. ... He had to hurry. ... The sun was touching the treetops in the west, and the expectant crowd waited, quieter now. He listened. Yes, the crowd was quieter now, but it was a sinister quiet, the quiet of a strange, dark room. Abel had to hurry if he wanted to see the execution. ... But he did not hurry; he did not especially want to see the hanging and he thought of going back to the saloon, but he knew he was expected. ... He made his way slowly down the deserted street in the direction of the setting sun, a blood-red ball balanced on the top twig of a distant oak tree; in five minutes it would melt into the thicket of trees it sat on.

Around the gallows the spectators sat, lay, leaned, squatted, knelt. ... an acre of calico, denim, sateen, cotton domestic, wide-bonneted and tall-batted. Some had been sitting in the sun for more than an hour, determined to see enough details to vividly relate the scene to those
less fortunates who were absent. The show was about to begin, but not soon enough for the impatient crowd. They laughed and muttered obscenities and laughed at what was muttered. Action! Shouts of approbation greeted Judge Winters as he walked solemnly at the head of the pitiful procession leaving the jail. Behind him walked Clem Davidson, taller, fairer than his brother Daniel following him.

"Goin' to a fun'ral, Jedge?" shouted a thick voice.

The crowd tittered.

"Hell, now," yelled another, "this here's gradiat'n day f'r th' Davidsons." Again the titter of the crowd.

The condemned men stared at the ground, following the black heels of Judge Winters' boots. At the end of the quartet walked Sheriff Clancey, who nodded to a few people but who did not let his eyes linger long on other eyes. Winters stopped at the edge of the platform, a foot higher than his head and boarded like a cage.

"Cage 'm up, Jedge!"

The condemned men would fall out of sight into the cagelike structure and writhe unseen. . . . Sheriff Clancey had personally supervised the construction of this unusual platform. . . . Judge Winters raised his hand as the two men, looking like awkward, repentant boys, mounted the short steps to stand on the platform. They had not yet looked at the crowd, but the crowd, twisting, turning,
straining upward, peeking around, had seen them. Saw the pallor where the brothers had been recently, closely shaved, their hair newly cut over the ears and close at the neck, probably the work of Sheriff Clancey, the fresh white shirts, narrow black string ties. Saw these, remembered these.

"Must be expectin' t' meet a gal in hell," giggled a drunk a few feet from the platform. Those who heard the remark roared in appreciation.

"Now ain't they jist purtied up fit t' kill," howled a man standing near him. And he howled again as his wife slapped him a resounding blow across the face. Laughter!

And they stood, the Davidsons, before the crowd, within arm's reach of it, yet as far from it as daylight is from darkness, as far from it as sound is from silence. . . .

Overture! Curtain — actors — cue — drama. God is the author! On with the show!

"Strang 'um up!" a whiskey-thick voice from the crowd screamed.

"Let 'um stretch, Judge!" the voice's companion hollered.

Judge Winters motioned to the crowd for silence.
"I've had a fair trial an' y've been found guilty Clem 'n Daniel Davidson," he began, reciting his speech like a child performing in a parlor, "an' it's th' duty o' th' court t' see that th' sentence imposed on you be carried
out at this here time 'n place." His voice was without expression, without emotion. "Have you, Clem Davidson, got somethin' t' say?"

Clem Davidson grunted, shook his head from side to side.

"Have you, Daniel Boone Davidson, got somethin' t' say?"

"No sir," replied Daniel Davidson, a groan.

"Then th' court instructs th' Sheriff o' this county t' carry out th' sentence at this time." Judge Winters itched. He scratched, shifting the Bible he carried to his left hand, still watching the prisoners.

"I got somethin' t' say, Judge," called a voice; Winters ignored the sound and nodded to Clancey.

A murmur swept through the crowd as heads went together in speculative meditation. The crowd expected one of the men to speak, to confirm or deny for the last time. They felt cheated. A moan of disappointment went through the crowd. A few men in the back of the crowd, fortified with whiskey, courageous in their intoxication, boohed. A profane oath from one of the men caused the crowd to chuckle, amused and embarrassed. Several of the men in the most drunken group made rude, splattering noises through their thick lips.

"Seems t' me like they'd say somethin'!"

"Too scairt t' make talk, I reckon."
"Hardened! That's what I say. . . .Hardened!"

"Maybe he'd like t' tell Sh'rtff Clancey t' 'just

that there knot t' fit Jedge Winterses head."

"Mis Satterfield's done turned greener'n pea. . .

She won't see nothin'."

"Damn fool wimmens shouldn't of came."

"Shhh!"

"Git on with th' show, Clancey!" Laughter.

"Don't make th' knot too tight, Sh'rtff!" Laughter

followed.

Sheriff Clancey tested the knot in the rope before

he slipped it over the taller brother's head, adjusted it
carefully, as if he wanted it to be comfortable. Clem

Davidson never raised his eyes from the floor of the

platform. The younger brother watched the adjustment out

of the corner of his eye, and his rigid body seemed to

move toward his brother.

"Don't git too clos't, Sheriff," called a loud voice

full of warning. "Y' might git wet on!' Some of the

crowd applauded, others shrieked with laughter. The show

was on. . . .

Sheriff Clancey finished with the man and took the

few steps to Daniel Davidson, slipped the rope over his

smoothly brushed fair hair, dislodging a long strand that

stayed pasted to his wet forehead. As the Sheriff's

fingers tested the rope Daniel Boone Davidson began to
tremble, and as the momentarily quiet, temporarily fascinated audience watched, his bottom lip began to shake with a whimper. His fresh white shirt was washed darkly by perspiration, and his sobs became louder and more frequent. His was the only sound. . . The sun settled noiselessly into the trees, and the audience quit breathing for the few seconds it took Sheriff Clancey to jump from the platform to the ropes that would pull the trap. A mother slipped one breast through the opening of her high-collared dress without taking her eyes off the platform; her child found the nipple and sucked greedily.

"Give it a jerk, Sheriff," bellowed an agitator from the rear of the crowd. His companions shouted loud approval.

"Easy does it, Clance," laughed someone.

Clancey, a rope in each hand, boot braced against the cage under the gallows, looked at Judge Winters. Winters scratched furiously at his groin and jerked the top of his head toward Clancey. Clancey pulled.

Silence. . . Sunset.

No creak. No sag in the strong pole spanning the distance of the platform. No noise except the soft crackle of the new ropes as they were stretched. The two men standing on the platform had disappeared before the eyes of the crowd. Disappeared. Those who blinked missed seeing the bodies shoot downward; only the faintly crackling, slightly turning yellow rope was what they saw.
The drunks who had been kibitzing giggled. One threw back his head and laughed. . . .

"Mis Satterfield's fainted colder'n winter lard!"
"My God!"
"I cain't move nothin'. . . ."
"Hurry!"
"I knowed she'd pass out. . . . Don't step on 'er!"
"I'd take a' oath in church he wet hisself!"

From every corner of the crowd the curious shoved and groaned forward, stumbling over obstacles of people, beating their way to the cage to peep through the slats at the men on the ends of the ropes. Sheriff Clancey grasped a child by the seat of the overalls and lifted him rudely away, sent him sprawling on the ground.

"Stand back, damn you'all! Stand back!" commanded Clancey. But voices made mute with horror, revived now, mumbled, whispered, cried, made a noise like driven animals, drowned out the voice of the sheriff. Darkness poised, ready to descend, ready to pull the curtain on the last scene of the last act, but the last act was not over; the audience was to appear in the last act. . . . Entrance!

"Stand back! Git back there!" yelled Sheriff Clancey, but his commands were ignored. Unsatiated with mere memories, the crowd rolled toward the gallows, pulling off splinters, yanking at the thin slats that barred them
from the hanging bodies. Souvenirs! Souvenirs! Come
and get a souvenir! And the gallows that had done its
duty quietly, with great dignity, was ripped apart,
shredded to splinters by a mob no longer a civilized
group of people but a pack of animals led by animal
sensations. Now it was over. . . . Only the uprights and
the cross pole remained, and the two bodies with heads
twisted crookedly askew. And as it had begun it ended,
suddenly, silently. The crowd moved away toward the stores,
toward the few lights that had been struck before it was
quite dark. Some hurried, looking a little guilty; some
sauntered, showing a superiority of will and nerve. . . .
The woman suckling the baby growled angrily as the infant
belched sour vomit over the front of her dress, brushed
violently at the soiled spot, hid her breast again. . . .
The loud man who had done most of the talking and his
companions were the last to leave. They held the bottle
in salute to the gallows and giggled as they wiped spilled
whiskey from their chins.

Judge Winters stood at a respectful distance as
Sheriff Clancy and his deputies carried away the remnants
of men and gallows. Abel found him there, looked at him
a moment without speaking.

"Goddamndest thang I ever seen!" Winters spat after a
moment of brow-wrinkling contemplation. "Bunch o' coyotes."
"Mob hysteria, Judge," Abel said calmly. "Get more than two excited people together and you have an irresponsible mob."

Judge Winters shook his head. "'S'fright'rin' a little." Judge Winters breathed noisily and added. "Damn rot-gut whiskey."

"Whiskey only makes a man what he wants to be, Judge," Abel said sarcastically. "If they don't buy from us they buy somewhere else."

Judge Winters shook his head, still frowning. "I don't know, Doc. I jes' don't know," he muttered, a little sadly Abel thought. "Reckon that display shook me a mite."

Abel shrugged his shoulders, letting the air in his lungs escape through his nose. He narrowed his eyes, looking about him in the now dim twilight. "This is a hard country, Winters," he said distinctly, his voice low, "and the people have to be just as hard... or leave."

Abel thought about his words, wondered if they were entirely true. Had he become hard? No... He had stayed—there was ample evidence that he had stayed, stayed to conquer the land, but had he become hard? No... Petit knew him as a gentle father, a sensitive father interpreting his son's moods, a patient father building for his son's future. No... The land could not make Abel Gonnough hard, for he was not the same cut as the prairie farmer living in a dugout of earth, nor was he the transient
without roots seeking vague riches. No... Abel Gonnough had roots—a son, cattle, businesses, a mansion, a son. And Abel Gonnough had beaten the land, taken its prizes, hidden its treasures, hidden them for his son. No... My son knows me... Ask my son!

Judge Winters had not replied. He stared at the dusk while his fingernails scraped at the material covering his legs.

"Reckon I'm gonna need t' pay you a profes'nal call, Doc," he said irritably. "This here heat's about t' rot away m' danged underneaths!"

Abel and Judge Winters walked back toward the square, enjoying the unexpected coolness after the heat of the day. All the colors of sundown had sunk below the western horizon, leaving the land blanketed in a twilight that was almost as thick as night, but it would not be night for several minutes... And cooler gusts of wind—from a faraway shower perhaps, or from as far away as the distant gulf—bore through the diminishing heat of the sinking day, brought smell of moisture if not moisture itself, and the sensation was that of stepping out of hot, sticky clothes. No clouds in the sky, only the ragged, faintly lighted stars that clung stubbornly to the fuzzy gray, waiting to light a deeper darkness.

"Turned off right nice," remarked the judge as they neared the streets and people at Elm and Oak.
"Yes," Abel agreed, but he was listening to the judge with half an ear. . . . Listening. . . . Music he had heard earlier in the day, the sleepy cowboy and his ill-tuned guitar, floated to them from across the wooded knoll, lamenting now, sobbing, yodeling his musical narrative to the night, and after a few more steps they could see the man, his hat cocked low over his face, his guitar balanced across his knee, sitting atop a camper's wagon. He sat between two lanterns that flickered shallow, yellow light on him each time he struck a chord, illuminating his drooping features. And at his feet were grouped men, women, children, attentive, spellbound by his musical magic. . . . He sang a tune familiar to all cowboys, but the lyrics had been changed. . . . He warbled an emotional tribute to the Davidsons, a starkly sentimental tune, full of tears and sobs.

"... Take heed all you young fellers
A' livin' now in sin,
Th' Davidsons has gone up there. . .
But He won't let 'em in.

Th' gole they stole has ruined their soul
They knowed it would, quite well
Their bodies 'r cold atop a pole
Their souls is bound f'r hell. . . ."

The two men stopped to listen, but the last stanza was over with a long, low chord and the prolonged vowel of the last word. The audience cheered, called for more, but the cowboy struck the guitar as if practicing, hummed to himself, waiting for another inspiration. Abel's
voice cut through the sounds, startling the crowd.

"Free drinks at Gonnough's Saloon, men!"

Judge Winters stared at Abel as a few of the men raced across the street. Others followed close behind, pushing aside whatever they were doing. "Got to encourage them a little, Judge," chuckled Abel. "Give 'em one drank 'n sell 'em five," he confided, imitating the thick dialect of the singer. He laughed loudly as Judge Winters shook his head, patted the judge affectionately on the back and leaned close to him. "Better send your wagon to Sand Town," said Abel with happy confidence. "Looks as if the boys might be whooping it up for quite a long while tonight."

"Yeah, I reckon," the judge replied, uncertainty in his voice. Abel touched him across the shoulders and started for his saloon.

"Goodnight, Judge Winters."

"G'night, Doc. . . . G'night."

Inside the saloon the singing cowboy found a seat on the end of the bar as he had done earlier in the day. Mister Smith started on the long journey down the bar with a bottle in each hand, filling the glasses. He had one eye on the door and saw Abel enter, wink at him across the backs of the men.

"Fill them up on the house, Mister Smith," Abel called. The drinkers cheered. "That means the glasses. . . not the men." Abel's joke brought loud guffaws from the
line of waiting men.

"Tell 'im, Doc!" one of the men called.

"Y' got a good remedy f'r whiskey pizenin', Doc?"

All the men laughed.

"Yeah!" a gruff voice boomed, "a piece o' th' mule's bladder that give it!" This comment caused the men to slap one another on the back and laugh hilariously.

"This here's a'nuff t' pizen th' mule that give it!" laughed another man, his voice unsteady with convulsions of laughter.

Abel regarded the men in genuine amusement. Happy men now, but tomorrow, or by Monday, they would be grim, silent men with little to laugh about, sweating behind plows in the broiling sun, tossing in beds of rawhide and corn shucks. Let them laugh tonight, drink for tonight, forget their fields for tonight... Tomorrow the problem of living would begin again... Inexplicable for some of them, it would begin again.

Abel looked up as Jasper Taylor pushed open the swinging doors of the saloon and stood holding the doors open with his hands. He saw Abel and turned his mouth upward in a crooked, forced smile. Abel acknowledged his presence with a quick nod without changing the expression on his face. Behind Taylor stood his brother Wendell and a man employed by undertaker Burris.

"Hear tell Doc Gonnough's treat'n th' town," Jasper
Taylor said insolently, forcing the corners of his mouth higher. He let go of the doors and walked into the saloon holding himself tall, letting his narrow hips sway from side to side in rhythm with his loud boots. His friend and brother followed, but with less swagger. "Don't want t' miss nothin' free," he sneered as he passed Abel. Wendell Taylor nodded timidly to Abel as he passed. Jasper reached the bar and pushed between two men without any word of apology.

Abel watched the man, the look of an alert cat in his blue eyes. Trouble had come through the door with Jasper Taylor he knew, and he did not want trouble. He wondered why they had come here. These men belonged at Winters' Saloon; they had no friends here. . . . Abel watched Taylor gulp his drink and toss a coin on the counter for another. Mister Smith filled the glasses of the two men with him before he poured another drink for Jasper Taylor.

"Kind o' quiet 'round here ain't it?" Taylor asked, no question in his voice. And now Abel knew. . . . This was the voice that had kept calling out at the execution. Of course, and now Abel recalled the terse words at Winters' office. . . . Of course. . . . Nigger hater, Yankee hater. . . . Here was a man exactly like Badger Ferris, and Abel had not thought of Badger Ferris for a long, long time. Abel still hated Badger Ferris.
"Don't none o' you men apprec'ate a friendly game o' cards?" Taylor asked the room, "'r does th' Doctor here frown at playin' cards in his establishment?"

Around Jasper Taylor some of the men laughed, but uneasily, sensing a slight insult in his words and tone, although they were words any man might say without malice. The smirk, the sneer, the pulled-to-his-full height attitude of the man made the words slightly insinuating, slightly offensive. The two men who had come with Taylor drank silently.

"We try to please our customers, Mister Taylor," Abel told him, a ready edge in his voice. "You'll find tables at the back... And I'm sure some of the men will oblige you with a game." Abel's eyes, blue ice, froze into the haughty black gaze of Jasper Taylor.

"You enjoy a game o' poker, Doc?" Taylor asked.

"Never had time to learn the game, Mister Taylor," Abel replied evenly. "Too old now to learn new tricks." A howl of laughter followed Abel's words, dying out with a few resolute chuckles from his friends who were obviously pleased by the retort.

Jasper Taylor leaned his elbows on the bar, pushing out his chest. "Too bad, Doc," he clucked sadly. "Poker's a game o' real skill."

"You are among a most skillful group," Abel said pleasantly, indicating the men around him with a gesture
of his hands. "I'm sure you will find worthy opponents among these gentlemen."

A group of the men started toward a table at the back of the saloon, and Jasper Taylor finished his drink. He drank deliberately, elbows resting his back against the bar, never taking his eyes off Abel. But whatever Jasper Taylor sought he did not find in the expression on Doctor Gonnough's face. The features were composed, unyielding and immobile. Taylor finished his drink, wiped his chin; giving a little snort of amusement he pulled himself from the bar and followed the men. Wendell Taylor and his friend stayed at the bar nursing the raw whiskey.

Relieved, but for a reason he did not entirely understand, Abel walked out of the saloon after a hushed word with Mister Smith. Smith nodded to Abel and let his eyes follow him out the door. When Abel was out of sight Mister Smith's eyes glanced in the direction of Jasper Taylor and his poker game. He watched. . . .

Abel did not have to go into Winters' Saloon to find the judge; the old man was standing in the night just outside the door of the building when Abel arrived. Abel stopped a few feet from the judge, startled to find him there, startled at his appearance, for the judge was just a shadow of the night. His face in the slit of light from the narrow saloon window was puffy and pale, and he was
staring into the dark with eyes that were not focused on anything. The judge was old. Abel felt a slight tinge of anger but could not explain the feeling to himself.

"Judge," Abel began tersely, "Jasper Taylor is at my place." He waited a moment while the judge recognized him. Whether in embarrassment or anger, Judge Winters began to stutter as he answered Abel.

"D-d-d-danged h-hardheaded cuss! I-I-I told 'im t' st-stay 'way fr'm there!"

"Get him out and keep him away," demanded Abel, a finality in his tone the judge could not ignore. "And keep your crowd down here, Judge." His last sentence was a warning. The judge looked imploringly at him.

"Who else is with 'im?"

"His brother and the man who works for Mister Burris."

Judge Winters moaned, gave a sigh of exasperation.

"Him an' Burris' helper been drinkin' all day. Devil's been pickin' fights with people Wendell ain't got no quarrel with. ... 'n he's dead set on stirrin' up trouble with th' niggers with all that war talk." The judge stopped, shook his head helplessly, stroked his chin. "What's he doin' at your place now?"

"He's in a poker game with some of the men," Abel told him. Winters' reaction was a curse and a spit.
"He ain't honest, that's f'r shore." Judge Winters let the air out of his lungs as he spoke, and the sound was the sound of a man defeated, deflated. "I don't want 'im t' make no trouble f'r you, Doc. Gi'mme ten minutes... I'll git 'im out o' y'r place."

"All right," Abel said curtly. "But have them gone by that time," he said flatly. "We don't want to spoil a good day, Winters," he added, his voice lighter, more amiable.

"Stay 'way from Jasper an' give me ten minutes..."

Abel nodded goodnight to the man and walked back to his saloon. Leaves swept down the dusty, dark streets in front of the wind, sang softly around the gray boards of buildings. A few campfires on the knoll twisted as the wind touched them, melted back into their bed after the breeze passed. Only a few fires, but unless they were watched they could be dangerous under the dry trees... Abel felt better when he noticed a few people grouped about each fire. If a blaze got out of control there were enough people around to put it out. He felt better now; his annoyance with Jasper Taylor and Judge Winters ebbed... Abel had magnified the dislike he felt for Taylor into a mountain, and he was a little ashamed of himself. In ten minutes the obstacle of Taylor would be removed, and the night would end as Abel had planned... Why was he so constantly removing obstacles? Why were obstacles such
evil necessities? he asked himself. Abel himself was not an obstacle, and he wanted no obstacles. You have ten minutes to remove Jasper Taylor, Judge Winters, ten minutes.

He heard the drink-thick voice of Jasper Taylor when he was a few feet from the door of the saloon, but the voice was not argumentative, he decided. It was just loud and uncontrolled, the voice of a man speaking to an unlistening crowd, the agitating voice at the hanging.

"... an' me an' you is gonna fight this here war, Buster," the voice was saying, "an' them that's got niggers is gonna sit on their backsides 'n wait 'til we lick th' damn Yankees." Abel's hand was on the door, but he waited until the voice started again before he stepped inside. "Th' rich 'uns'll git richer 'n us pore bastards'll git porer, an' we'll git s' damn porer we won't be no better than niggers 'rselfs." Taylor paused to taste his drink, looked up to see Abel enter. After a long look at Abel he turned his eyes to his cards; a deep line stretched from the corner of his nose to his mouth in a contemptuous sneer. And his voice when he spoke again was louder, more aggressive.

"I say we oughta' run niggers 'n nigger lovers out o' Denton 'fore they take hold 'n run out us whites."

A glance at the table showed Abel that Jasper Taylor was not winning. Most of the chips were pushed in front
of the man opposite him. Abel thought for a moment that he had overestimated this man Taylor, wanted to think that he was just a loud-mouthed bully made louder, braver with rot gut whiskey. He felt slightly relieved that Jasper Taylor was not ahead of the game. . . . But he wished him gone; Judge Winters still had about six minutes to get the man out. Abel started to the office without going by the table where the men were playing, but Jasper Taylor's words stopped him before he could reach the door.

"Ask th' Doctor here what he thanks about niggers," he said suggestively. "Reckon he's th' only man here'bouts that owns niggers."

Abel did not reply, but walked unhurriedly to the table, stood in back of the man opposite Taylor, his hands clenched behind his back. His eyes were glacier blue, narrow with cold fury as he looked at the would-be-conspirator Taylor, and when Abel spoke, his voice was as icy as his stare.

"I see you found players worthy of your skill, Mister Taylor," he said, his head making a quick movement in the direction of the man across from Taylor who had most of the chips stacked in front of him. Taylor bristled, rose a fraction of an inch off the chair, but in the next movement he relaxed, settled back in his seat.

"Th' game ain't over yet, Doctor," he smiled. "M' friends here - " he nodded toward the men playing—
"understands each other," he said insinuatingly. "Takes a little time t' git started, y' know."

At the table the men looked from their cards to Taylor and back at their cards, not certain of what his words meant but sensing an implication. Without a sound Taylor held up his glass requesting the bartender to bring him a drink, and Mister Smith, unimpressed, unannoyed, came from behind the bar without hurrying, poured the drink, looking not at the glass but at the man who had ordered the drink. Across the room Abel watched Wendell Taylor and the man with him seat themselves at a table in preparation for poker. His eyes went quickly back to Jasper, who was at the moment apparently absorbed in dealing the cards. He dealt five cards to each man and put down the rest of the deck. When he looked at his own hand he grunted, a grunt that could mean anything or nothing; his face was as impossible to read as the backs of the cards.

"One," the man on Taylor's left said. Taylor obliged.

"Take two," said the next. Two cards came off the deck.

"I'm standin' on these here," the last player said slowly, uncertainly. Taylor looked at the man a moment while the dirty nail of his thumb scraped across the edge of the undealt cards he held.
"Hmmm," he mumbled, "friend here must have a pow'rhouse." He forced a bent smile. "It ain't at all friendly t' stan' pat," he drawled, and as he spoke a card came off the deck and dropped beside his own cards. A chill spread up Abel's spine. Jasper Taylor had drawn from the bottom of the deck. Abel had seen it, and the man with the pat hand had seen it. Taylor tossed aside the top card of his hand and shuffled the card he had drawn into the four he held.

The man on the right pushed a pile of chips to the center of the table. Taylor chewed his bottom lip in contemplation and covered the bet, and without any change of expression he pushed out more chips.

"Too strong f'r my blood," said the first man, tossing in his hand. The man on his left shook his head, put down his cards.

"Reckon it's up t' you'n me, frien'," Taylor said, sounding a little surprised. The man opposite him pushed half his chips to the center of the table. Taylor's eyebrows twitched slightly, but the expression in his dull, dark eyes did not change. . . . Deliberate, sure, Taylor pushed all his chips in front of him with a smooth motion. His opponent counted the necessary number of chips to cover the bet and put them in the center, and without removing his finger from the top of the stack he had just pushed out, spread his cards face-up on the table.
A straight, king high. Both corners of Taylor's mouth went upward in a satisfied smile.

"Fraid I filled up," he drawled apologetically, spreading three jacks and two tens on the table. "First lucky draw I've made t'night." His hands went forward to pull in his winnings, but the man playing with him still held his finger across the stack of chips.

"First time you've drewed off th' bottom o' th' deck, too, ain't it Taylor?" he asked quietly, poised.

Your ten minutes is up, Judge Winters. You are too late.

Taylor glared at the man who had spoken; his sneer was back. "You accusin' me, frien'?" he asked threateningly, one eyebrow cocked ferociously, but his words suggested pity more than anger.

"And I'm accusing you, Mister Taylor," Abel interrupted before the man had time to answer. Every eye in the room swung to Abel Gonnough, every movement in the room stopped, unfinished. His words hung in the air. . . . Your ten minutes is up, Judge Winters, past.

"Them's strong words, Doctor," growled Taylor, uncoiling himself from the chair. Two spots of moisture had appeared directly beneath his partly closed eyes.

"My words, Mister Taylor," Abel answered slowly, enunciating each word, emphasizing the pronoun.

Jasper Taylor stood across the table from Abel now,
his chest raised, the tops of his shoulders heaving, balancing himself on the balls of his feet like a man with a knowledge of fighting. In Abel's body not a muscle moved. . . . In the long room the other men waited, inanimate as the glasses lined against the bar. . . . Waited. . . . Waited. . . . Wait.

Jasper Taylor put his left hand on the table and vaulted at Abel in a movement so fast the other men did not realize what had happened. His right fist clenched even as he sailed across the space of the table, and his blow caught Abel in the chest, sending him backward and half around with the impact. Abel stumbled against a chair, felt the corner of a table dig into his back, saw Jasper Taylor ready to spring again. . . . but this time he was ready, and Taylor's fist shot past his left ear as he jerked his head out of the path of the fist. Before Taylor had time to strike again Abel's fist smashed into his body just above the belly, and he felt the man's ribs split against his fist. Taylor fell under the blow, sprawled across the back of a chair to breathe. Then he whirled, clasping the chair in his hands, and the chair came sailing through the air toward Abel. . . . Abel dove, and as the chair swished through the air a few inches above his head his hands found Taylor's feet and pulled at them with all their strength. A boot toe thudded into Abel's temple. He groaned with pain but
lunged, from his position flat on the floor, and his hands closed around the ankle of Taylor's boot. He pulled again, hard, and this time he heard the surprised cry uttered by Taylor as his feet were jerked from under him. The backs of his shoulders and head bounced on the floor. . . . bounced. Abel heard the thud and felt the planks quiver against his stretched stomach as Taylor's body bumped like a stone into the floor.

Abel lay there, panting, filling his lungs for the next attack. Taylor moaned, pulled himself away from Abel by holding on to the foot rail of the bar and dragging his body across the floor. Before Abel could rise, Taylor braced himself against the side of the bar and hurled himself at him, using the bottom of the bar and his feet to give his lunge more force. The top of his head collided with Abel's stomach, shoving his breath up and out with a noise audible all over the room. . . . Abel felt his lungs explode, tried to shake off the rushing blackness that threatened to strangle him. He was blind, numb, suffocating, but slits of light crossed his eyes as air leaked back into his lungs, and the moment that seemed an eternity was over. . . . He saw again, breathed again, and as he pulled himself off the floor he used his precious breath to utter an oath. Now! He gasped for air, swallowed it, felt it cold and hard inside
his stomach and lungs. Now! With all his strength he closed his right fist and threw it at the bent, swaying form before him, caught the form where the head joined the body. . . . With his other fist he swung at the same spot, bringing it higher against the bottom of the chin before he drew it back. Again. . . . Again! His right fist ready, he drove it into Taylor's up-tilted chin, heard the crack of bone against bone, saw the chin fly crookedly. Now his fist was ready for the stomach, and it pounded into its mark once, twice, with enough power to rattle the glasses at the bar each time it hit. Taylor staggered, sagged against the bar, wilted into a heap on the floor. The battle was over. Abel swallowed air hungrily, feeling his strength rise with each mouthful. . . . Over. . . . Silence in the room, no movement in the room. No air. . . . Abel closed his eyes and walked unsteadily toward the door, leaning on it for support when he finally, unbelievably, reached it. Then he was outside, and his lungs sucked greedily at the night air. . . . They were beginning to fill. He leaned against the building for support, breathing, breathing, waiting for more breath. At last he wiped his palm across his face and through his hair, noticing as he did so that his hand was dripping blood. But there was no pain except the hot pain in the lining of his lungs. . . . The blood on his hand was Taylor's blood, violent, warm, polluted blood. . . . He scraped his
hand roughly across his trousers.

It was over, and Abel could breathe now, could feel once more the delicious coolness of oxygen in his body. Over, and Abel felt vaguely resentful, annoyed by his encounter with Jasper Taylor. Taylor had been beaten, Abel's pride was safe—even increased—but he was humiliated. ... To stand outside his building gasping for air, trying to steady his shaking hands! Yes. ... His trembling and lack of breath were caused from white, hot, violent anger toward the younger man he had fought, but there was more. ... More. What was it? Was it the impudence of the young man? His dishonesty? And suddenly he knew, suddenly he realized the reason for his resentment, his humiliation, his hatred toward Taylor. ... Jasper Taylor was a young intruder. An intruder! He had dared to wander into the sacred domain of Abel Gonnough and he had insisted on pitting his strength against the ruler—the aging ruler. Abel's blood flowed cold. When will you learn, you Jasper Taylors, that you are not strong enough to dethrone me? Try! I am an old man gasping for breath, leaning on the night for support, hiding in the darkness. ... but I am still strong enough for you! And you! Anyone! Everyone! All! And I, Abel Gonnough, will stay strong enough. ... The prairies of Texas have made me strong and I will stay strong, remain
to rule...There is no place in my Denton for you, Jasper Taylor. No palace for you here even though the King is aging. He wiped his bloody hand on his trousers once more. He felt better now, glanced at the orange glow of moonrise softening the eastern sky...He pushed open the doors and went back inside.

Only moments had passed, he realized when he was back inside. The man who had come with the Taylors was holding a bucket upside down over Jasper, lying drenched but still unconscious against the bar. Mister Smith filled glasses as usual and stepped over Taylor's body to supply the men at a nearby table with whiskey. Business as usual. Fights were common, and more than justified when a man cheated at cards. A few men glanced approvingly at Abel as he stepped back into the saloon, noticed his straight back, saw him run his bloody hand through his disheveled hair and straighten the knot of his tie. The Winner! The Hero! But Abel did not feel victorious...He even felt a slight contempt for the friends in his saloon.

Wendell Taylor was on his knees beside his brother, coaxing him to sit up, spilling a few drops of whiskey beneath his nose. Abel walked over to him, addressed the ministering brother.

"Get him out of here," he ordered.

Mister Smith appeared at Abel's elbow with a glass of whiskey and Abel emptied it, still looking at the two
men struggling with the unconscious Jasper.

"And unless he has some mighty important business here you’d better get him out of town," warned Abel, setting the glass on the counter. The saloon was noisy now, even more alive than before the fight. Combat seemed to have revived the crowd; the cowboy with the guitar strummed a few experimental chords of accompaniment and began to sing softly, so softly his words and tune did not carry across the crowded room.

Abel turned in the doorway of his office to see the boots of Jasper Taylor disappear through the swinging doors as he was dragged out by his brother and his friend. Mister Smith was watching Abel, and Abel managed a painful grin for him. Victory!

"Set 'em up, Mister Smith," he called, closing the door of the office. He wanted to be alone, wanted to think. He went to the small cupboard and took out a bottle of brandy. He was tired. He wanted to sit in the darkness of the office for a long, long time.

On the other side of the door Abel heard the sound of running boots and the scrape of chairs being moved as the men made for the bar and their free drinks, and he paused for a moment listening to the noise. The odor of the brandy was strong and restful; he started for his chair with the bottle. Someone shouted something he could not understand, and then many were shouting, and loud booted
feet began a stampede... Abel tensed; his hand reached for the door... The boots were running the length of the saloon, going out the door! He tore the door open, stared into the open mouth of Judge Winters. Abel faced him angrily. The judge's mouth worked open and shut several times before words came.

"There's a fight down by th' nigger shacks, Doctor," Winters cried brokenly, his voice climbing and dipping with emotion. "Some o' th' shacks is on fire!"

Abel stared at the man, trying to make sense out of the spilled words, wondering why Judge Winters' face was pale and why his voice faltered.

"Someone hurt?" asked Abel. The saloon was empty; Mister Smith was watching Abel for a signal.

"Fire's spread'nn to'ards th' town!" the judge cried, starting for the street. Abel pushed past him, stared out the door... Blood curdled in his veins! What he thought was the moon rising in the east was the glow from a fire south and east of town. The ruddy pink glow rose suddenly higher, wider against the black backdrop of the sky as Abel watched.

Abel tried to think... The fire must not get across Pecan Creek... If enough men got to the creek in time... If the wind calmed...

"Stay here, Mister Smith," snapped Abel. "Judge Winters, get all the men and all the buckets you can find,"
ordered Abel, "and come to the bridge on Locust Street!"

Abel was running now, calling as he ran. "We can stop it at the creek!"

He sped to the end of the boardwalk where a horse had been left tethered, and in seconds he had unsaddled the animal and was on its bare back, the saddle blanket tucked under his arm. As he kicked the horse and turned it south his gaze swept the deserted square, saw lighted, open buildings, locked buildings, lonely buildings dark in the summer night. All life in the town had raced to the scene of the fire; the town waited, suspended, for its return. Now the intermittent coral glow covered half the sky. . . . Abel urged his horse toward it, urged it faster, faster. . . . And in seconds he was riding through pallid ribbons of smoke, floating under the horse's belly.

Wind! Billowing smoke fresh from the fire, acrid gray ghosts mounted on the breezes of the night. . . . Ironically they had wished for wind throughout the long, still day, and now it blew, strong, cool, fanning the fire across shocks of sunburned grass, across the low limbs of scattered trees. Abel quickened the pace of the horse with a hard kick and a muttered oath. . . . Blinding smoke! Suddenly the heat of the fire like an oven door blown open. . . .

Blinded, terrified by the clouds of smoke, the horse whinnied and stopped long before they reached the creek.
Abel’s efforts to control the horse were futile, and he jumped off and raced in the direction of the screams and rolling smoke, blacker than the night, rolling at him like high waves from a stormy sea, acrid smoke of burning grass. He stumbled, ran, choked, ran more, not daring to breathe the stifling, poisonous black scent... Flame he could not see scorched and blistered his cheeks and lips.

Out of the direct path of the smoke at last, he held his eyes open long enough to survey the fire... With the speed and fury of undammed water the yellow jaws worked in a semi-circle as far as the pain in his eyes could see, devouring all before it, belching black nauseous smoke after the feast. Three hundred yards away from the creek and traveling with the speed of a galloping horse! Whipped by the wind... In three minutes it will be to the creek, spilling its gold and red flame over the bank like a weird cataract. Blankets! Water! He saw people now... Some across the creek beating at the ground, some huddled for protection in the creek bed.

Abel’s boots sank in mud, and he threw himself headlong into the water with the blanket before him... Dry! Sacks, quilts, blankets had soaked up all the water in the creek, leaving nothing but the oozing slime of mud. Abel raised himself to his knees, beat at the mud savagely with his dry blanket... Nothing any of them could do
could keep the fire from crawling across the north bank of the creek, and once across the creek. . . . Once across the creek it would spread unhindered, finding ready fuel in the dry thickets that spread all the way from the creek to Sycamore Street. . . . Sycamore Street! Something hotter than the licking tongues of the fire seared across his heart. . . . Sycamore Street! Petit. . . . Petit! Petit!

A howl fought its way out of his throat as he slung away the blanket and clawed his way up the bank of the creek. Petit! He flew back into the inky smother of smoke, leaped across an object but was caught, slammed into the ground. His head exploded and he floated through a myriad of colored objects, brushed at them, felt the sharp points sting into his face, arms, legs. He had to have air, but the sour smoke he swallowed outraged his stomach, and hot vomit spilled from his lips. He ripped free and was on his feet again, stumbling forward, beating at the air with his fists as he tumbled headlong out of the wall of smoke and lay gasping, commanding his legs to let him stand, let him run. Behind him the fire splashed into the creek and poured over the other side. . . . Sun-bright light illuminated the dusty street all the way to the square, silent and eerie. . . . abandoned.
Abel's scalded eyes looked west, burned the distance to the top of Sycamore Hill. Frustration and agony broke his baked lips with a pleading groan. . . .Petit! Yellow flame, writhing like a serpent, wriggled through the lowlands of the creek, past the cemetery and up the south side of the hill. Petit! In less time than he could get to the hill the fire would be there he knew, but he would run, run, run faster than the wind, faster than the flame. He raised himself from the ground with effort, torturing his legs to make them stand, beating them into a run. He no longer tried to see where he was going but ran blindly, guided west only by instinct and terror. Petit!

"Petit!" he cried frantically, but only the fire heard him before the smoke swallowed his words. A horse. He must get a horse. . . .But there was no horse. . . .He must run as fast as he could run! As far as he could run! Trees hit and scratched him as he bled through them, cursing them, hating them for delaying him.

Past the cemetery he ran, falling across a pile of stacked timbers near the edge. . . .The fire was still in front of him, going north faster than he could run, spreading greedily across the kindling of close branches. Now! Now he was close to the back of the house. . . .Now! Up the rise. . . .Another instant and he could see it. Now! But before he saw the house he heard the
scream. . . . The high wail of unendurable agony, more than physical pain.

"Petit!" he screamed, and he ran faster than he could run, slobbering with fear and exhaustion. He heard the scream again, closer this time, heard it as he topped the rise and saw the house. The house......

It stood vividly orange and yellow in the unearthly light, licked by forked tongues of flame that touched boards halfway to the second story.

A scream, followed by a shrill moan that pierced even the crackling noise of the fire. Abel was fifty yards away, only seconds from the house, running. . . . running. . . . Run!

"Petit!" he wailed. And he collided with the flabby hot body of Aunt Mattie.

"Petit!" screamed Abel, running from where the woman had fallen. Her screaming, incessant now, was aimed at the earth under her body.

Fire boiled in the doorway of the house, holding Abel back. He threw his arms across his eyes, then rammed through the blaze, butted his head into something that twisted him, sent him flying backward across the steps. He felt a thud as the back of his head met the hard ground, heard the deafening click of his teeth as they jarred together, and he was trying to rise. . . . trying.
to rise. . . . He screamed as the flaming apparition
of Jumbo fell out of the doorway with Petit clutched
against his chest, then he saw the bodies falling toward
him, against him, heard the moan from Jumbo's body as it
crashed face down to land across the steps.

Aunt Mattie screamed, and screamed again, and
screamed again.

Crushing Petit against him, Abel pulled himself
away from the wall of the house, working with his back
and feet, wriggling to safety across the biting rocks.
And then, with no more sound than a nail being pulled
from a board, the wall crumbled, sending a fountain
of tiny orange sparks high into the yellow glow. Abel
rolled his body across the body of his son and sank into
amnesty of darkness. . . .

He opened his eyes, heard the rise and fall of
sobbing, and was instantly aware, trying to shake the
film from his eyes, the tight, throbbing grayness from
his brain.

"Petit. . . .!" Sobbing, moaning, rise and fall
of sobs and moans. "Petit?" His eyes would not focus
and he tried to claw away the blindness. Opening now. .
. . Focusing now. . . Seeing now. . . . Aunt Mattie
bending backward and forward on the ground, moaning as
she bent up and down, up and down, sobbing to the ground
and to the sky.
"Petit!" gasped Abel, scraping his hands across the ground as if to find his son there. Legs of people like a fence around him, no sounds from the fence. His hands scraped the ground, came back empty. . . . Only the rise and fall of the moans coming from Aunt Mattie as her thick body folded and unfolded. He could rise! He could walk! Abel staggered to Aunt Mattie, saw her round black and white eyes rolling her wet face, looked from her face to her knees.

Petit. . . . His head pillowed against Aunt Mattie. Eyes closed. Hands flung loosely at his sides. Still, as still as the pebbles under Abel's hands. Petit.

Abel dropped his head, cried in silent protest beside Aunt Mattie's keening grief, cried for his son, to his son, for himself, to himself.

"Some o' th' people is hurt, Doc. . . . They need attention."

Abel looked up, searching for the pleading green eyes of Annette Mercier, found the round face of Judge Winters staring down at him.

"Some o' th' people is hurt, Doc. . . . They need attention."

Abel saw Annette's green eyes looking at him across the body of Charlotte, her hand on his shoulder waiting for him to answer.

". . . . too drunk t' know wh't they wuz doin', most o'
them," Judge Winters was saying. "Tried t' burn out th' niggers. . . . We got 'em here, Doc. Some's hurt purty bad'n all. . . ."


"Yes," Abel answered softly, tiredly. He stared without expression at the face of his dead son. Back and forth, Aunt Mattie, back and forth. . . . Abel bent gently, touched the closed eyes with his lips.

"Yes," he said to Judge Winters again.

Slowly he walked with Judge Winters down the lane at the side of the house where the people were waiting for him.

"Strikin' a match t' all them likkered up coyotes done this," Judge Winters said.

Abel did not reply. He stopped, looked over his shoulder at the house, then walked on toward the waiting people. And on the Texas hilltop, bright in the summer night, pointed fingers stabbing at heaven, burned the fire on Abel's altar.