The Woman's College of
The University of North Carolina
LIBRARY

CQ
no. 190

COLLEGE COLLECTION

Gift of
Jackson Burgess

IN A DRY SEASON

by

Jackson Burgess

5148

A Thesis submitted to
the Faculty of
the Consolidated University of North Carolina
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro

1955

Approved by

Advisor

Advisor

CHAPTER I

By day, the swamp is birds: birds that fish the dark channels, hunt the tangles, crow or sing in the tree tops. Wild canaries flit like green and yellow gnats among the vines, hell-divers and coots squabble and splash in the shallows, herons stalk solemnly through the reeds, egrets perch and preen on their junk-heap nests, woodpeckers rattle busily in the trees, scrub jays scream and limpkins moan. Always, overhead, sometimes nearly out of sight, turkey-buzzards soar. There are a pair of bald eagles, too, that nest in a dead cypress tree deep in the swamp and four or five families of fish-hawks. Song birds carol in the jungle and other birds scream or whistle or hoot. There's one that makes a clattering noise like a cracked bell.

The swamp is a wild, lonely, fearsome place. Great ancient cypress trees, pale and stark, stand in four inches of water and four feet of muck, draped with tangled vines and gray moss and bearing pallid orchids in their arms. Elephant-ear, duckweed and bladderwort flourish in the muddy shallows, and the sandy spits that rise here and there in the marsh are overgrown with snake-grass, poison-ivy and wild blackberries. Hyacinth and 'coontail choke the narrow channels that drain the swamp. In the warm gloom of the jungle floor, a fallen live-oak two feet through will rot

183708

to a heap of splintery humus in three years, the corpse decked with pale creepers and eaten by garish fungi.

There are still some black bear in the swamp, and a lot of deer. Panthers prowl the marshy islands, stalking the smaller furred animals that live in the brush-falls and thickets: raccoons, 'possums, skunks, muskrats and swamp rabbits. Otters fish the deep pools and channels. Squirrels build elaborate nests in the upper branches of the cypress. Wild razor-back hogs, that can swim as well as they can walk, prospect the islands for snakes, frogs and lizards. The alligator is the biggest, strongest, hungriest thing in the swamp, but for all his size and his appetite he is rarely seen. He travels mostly at night, but even then he is seldom more than a stirring in the underbrush, a noiseless ripple in a pool, the slither of two hundred scaly pounds across the warm mud. Sometimes at night though, the 'gator's reverberating grunt drowns the basso profundo love songs of a million bull frogs and the falsetto voices of the peepers in the trees.

The swamp lies in central Florida, in the land of lakes, of rolling sandy hills and vast wastes of palmetto and pine and blackjack oak. The Indians once had a Seminole name for it meaning "Where the Rivers are Born" for it is the headwater of both the Panomee River and the creek called Moccasin Branch. The Seminole word is out of use now and the

few Indians who still come to hunt and fish there call it by the name given by some white man: The Big Black Hole.

There are tales of men who lived in the swamp. If there ever were any such, they didn't live comfortably and they probably didn't live long. Trappers and 'gator hunters sometimes spend two or three days inside the Hole and some of the older Indians camp in it for as long as a week or two when the hunting's good. But it's no place for a man. It's a place where you can step on what looks like solid ground and go hip deep in a sucking mire. You can reach to pick a fragile white orchid and see -- too late -- the flash of a striking cottonmouth moccasin. A man who falls from his boat there may wind up seasoning in some 'gator's cache. Inside the swamp, one winding waterway looks just like another and tomorrow they may both look different.

The swamp is drained by a number of creeks. They emerge from the dark jungle along the south side. The Hole is bordered there by a half mile strip of saw-grass and this wilderness of shoulder high blades is threaded by fifteen or twenty little streams. Beyond the grass, the creeks empty into Moccasin Lake.

* * * * *

A bittern, dozing in the sawgrass, was startled by the sound of oars in the water and rose with an angry cackle to flop to another patch of reeds where it settled and waggled its dagger like bill indignantly. The fisherman in the boat, a young man with sunburned face and hands, smiled at the bird. He was fishing with a fly-rod along the very edge of the grass, now and then pulling at the oars just enough to keep the boat moving slowly parallel to the lake shore. His lure was a black moth made of deer-hair, and he cast it every five or ten feet along the sawgrass stalks, and up into each little cranny or patch of lilies. He fished conscientiously and he made good casts. In a hundred feet of the shoreline, four bass struck at the deer-hair moth and he hooked every one; but when he brought the fish to the boat, he released them. He'd caught eleven in an hour and let them all go. They were all small fish.

After the bittern broke his concentration, he laid down his rod and took off the light jacket he was wearing. It was still early, and it had been cool on the lake an hour earlier, but now the sun was up and burning off the morning mist that coiled and drifted above the water at the height of a man's head. It would be a hot day.

When he'd stowed his jacket under the seat, he tugged at the oars to set the boat drifting, and took up his rod. There was a clump of arrow leaf ahead, a little way out from the sawgrass. He flexed the rod, false-casting to get plently of line in the air, and then he brought it down, laying the moth on the water a foot from the arrow leaf stalks, with the line running perfectly straight from the lure to the rod tip. He leaned forward, pursing his lips, and with his eyes on the hair moth he counted quite slowly to twenty-five and then he gave a downward snap of his wrist that made the rod tip twitch upward just enough to move the moth. Just as the lure jerked, he saw the leaves of the plant stir gently as if something had pushed at the stalks underwater.

He started to count again and he was at ten when the water under the hair moth seemed to swell upward and the moth disappeared into the swirl. He struck, snapping the rod sideways, and felt the hook go in, but then the rod arched and the line hissed through the water and he felt more power at the other end of the line than he expected. He let out line and the bass, running deep, circled the boat, heading for the lake. It made a straight run out into deep water with the rod quivering, bent like a barrelhoop. It was a good rod, eight feet of split bamboo, but it could take only so much. The fisherman felt with one finger of his right hand

to see how much line was left on the reel. Not much. If the fish kept running this hard he'd have to lower the rod and let it snap the leader. The rod wouldn't take it.

But the rod did its work, keeping the pressure of its spring like a steady weight on the fish, and the bass angled back in toward the sawgrass. The fisherman took in ten feet of line and didn't try to fight the fish too hard, hoping it would wear itself out without using all its strength in one rush. But the bass went to the bottom and lay still, resting, and he had to put on some pressure to make it fight. The fish did two tight circles, with the line ripping through the water like a knife blade. It didn't put on a lot of jumping and splashing like a little fish would. The fisherman's wrist was tiring and his scalp prickled as he thought: This is a real fish, a fish to take home. He tried not to be rattled by the idea that it might be a ten pounder.

The bass made another hard run and he gave the line again. He saw the little patch of reeds the fish was heading for, but there was no stopping it. He'd already punished the rod too much. The bass went in among the reed stalks and the line quivered and went dead. It was all over.

He brought in his line and looked at where the leader had snapped, and now he was really shakey from how close he'd come to landing it. He had never come so close to taking a real big bass before.

The thought came to him that he might very well never again hook a bass like that. Letting the boat drift, he put down the rod and lit a cigarette. He stripped the first fifty feet of line from the reel and coiled it on the other seat where the sun would dry it in a few minutes. He cut off the leader, in case the fight had weakened it, and got another from his tackle box. He wished he had another of those deer-hair moths. Right now, that bass was probably back in the reeds somewhere trying to rub the moth out of his jaw. He might have gone twelve pounds or more.

The fisherman's name was Sam Trotter. Once, he had fished in this lake whenever he felt like it. That was when he was a boy. Now, this was the first time in three years and it had been, in all, nine years since he'd fished regularly. He sometimes thought that the fishing on Moccasin Lake would have been worth staying at home for, but, of course there would have been more to staying at home than just the fishing. There would have been his family and he had always thought his father was schoolteacherish and his mother a know-it-all, so he hadn't minded leaving them.

As long as it had been though, he could still cast a fly-line and he could still strike quickly when he saw that swirl in the water. That was one thing he was good at. And he could still tell, without knowing how he did it, where the fish would be. He looked at the grass where that big

bass was probably lying up, getting the hair moth out of his lip. It was Friday. A week from Monday he would have to be back at work twelve hundred miles away. That meant he'd have to leave a week from today.

When he'd finished his cigarette, he put the new leader on his line and tied on a red and white feather and cork bug. He fished along the grass for another twenty minutes and caught two small bass that he threw back. He fished past several small creeks emptying from the grass beds into the lake. At the mouth of one of the largest of them, he stopped. Cautiously, he stood up in the boat, craning to see over the grass. Fifty yards away were the first trees of the swamp, the pale, scaley cypresses. Beyond that first rank of tree trunks, there was only greenish darkness. He sat down, took up the oars and began to row into the little stream.

It was hard going, and once or twice he was afraid he was stuck in the mud. The channel closed in until he could not row and had to pole the boat with one oar. After ten minutes of sweating and grunting he shoved clear of the last clump of reeds and the boat slid onto a pool of perfectly smooth and unreflecting black water. Rafts of lily pads lay upon the pool like mosaic in a polished floor. The cypresses spread their branches overhead. He had been here before, a long time before. He had even been into the swamp a little

ways. Not far, though. As a boy, he had been fanatically proud of the swamp, thinking of it as <u>theirs</u>, as belonging to the people who lived in the town over on the far shore of the lake, and as marking them out. Sam had imagined himself exploring it, gliding down the endless, winding channels in a dugout, as silent and as knowing as an Indian. He had always thought that someday, when he was a man, he would really do it. He never had. Once, when he was sixteen, he had followed a blazed trail that led into the Hole, but he had turned back after half a mile. He thought of himself at sixteen. He'd been quite a woodsman. Then, he could pole a boat all day without grunting. Tanned and knotty, he'd known the woods and the lake and the palmetto prairie for miles around. By now, he thought, I'd be... what?

He was a thin, anxious-eyed young man with crinkly reddish hair. He had a habit, when he was with other people, of ducking his head and pulling in his chin, like a horse backing away from a halter, but here on the edge of the big swamp he sat with his head up and forward as if he were thrusting his face into all the sights and sounds and odors. Remembering that boy he had been, and thinking about the end of his vacation so near, gave him a sense of furious futility for just a moment. He was a very junior accountant in a tax accounting firm that had its offices in one of the grayest and rawest sections of Chicago. He was overpaid and rootless

and consequently often in trouble with women who thought he was wooing when he was simply spending money. All this, the dull firm, the lowly job, the gray streets, and the women, had made him, at twenty-eight, nervous and sometimes irritable. He was an enthusiastic and rather vain young man and he had been finding, lately, little in his life that was food for enthusiasm or vanity.

As the boat drifted on the black pool, the scent of the swamp came to him, heavy in the still, moist air: sweet and thick and alive.

Bending to his oars, Sam began to row along beside the swamp's wall of cypress trunks, down the narrow strip of water separating the sawgrass from the swamp. He rowed slowly and found himself trying to move as silently as possible. The swamp itself was still as it could be. From time to time he passed openings in the wall, channels that twisted back out of sight into the gloom. After passing four or five of these openings, Sam came to the one he had been looking for. He almost missed seeing the blazed tree that marked it, for he had forgotten just where to look. The sign was a big, square letter P cut into the trunk about three feet above the water. The letter stood for "Potts." Potts had been an old man, a queer old man whom Sam barely remembered from his boyhood. He had cut the marks all along a trail into the jungle. "Potts'

Highway," they called it, and the island to which it led, "Potts' Island," although the old trapper had never claimed the island, or anything else. He had been a little crazy, or so everyone had thought, and children were warned to stay away from him. A filthy old man.

He had a picture in his mind of old Potts. Sam had met him on some path once when he was just a child. He had pressed back into a thicket away from him, and the old man had glided past, dirty, watery-eyed, carrying a wet burlap sack over his shoulder. It had been blood. There had been blood gleaming on the burlap and blood had stained the old man's shoulder under the bag. There had been a scent, too, a hot, musky scent.

But one day old Potts had made one of his trips into the Hole and had come out snake-bit. He had made it as far as the dock over by the town, and there he had been found dead the next morning.

Sam turned the boat into the channel and began to row. Although he tried to make little noise, he went for five or six turnings of the trail before he saw any sign of life. Letting the oars trail, he sat motionless and waited. After five minutes a wild canary chirped and he glimpsed it fluttering through a clump of ferns. The brush rustled softly beside a hollow stump. At the sound of heavy wings beating the air, he looked up in time to see a curlew rise

from a leafless branch. Very quietly he began to row again, and now the forest was alive around him. He heard a thrush scolding back in the brush. A squirrel answered it peevishly. He saw a lot of turtles and once an otter surfaced ahead of the boat and slid under again, scarcely dimpling the water. A water snake watched Sam from a mossy log.

* * * * *

He had been rowing, he guessed, for more than an hour when he came at last to Potts' Island. He was surprised, and half disappointed, that there was someone there to meet him. Someone, sometime, had made a crude landing for the island by rolling five or six logs down the sloping bank. A long, slender double ended boat was pulled up to the logs. In the clearing just above, a man was squatting over the carcass of an alligator. Sam knew him. He was supposed to be a Frenchman of some kind. He said his name was Beau LaBeau, but he suffered the people over in the little town to call him Bobo. He was a woods tramp. A hunting guide and a trapper and, probably, a poacher. He was the only person Sam had ever heard of who'd come out to the lake and stayed by choice. Most of the people who were born there were leaving, these days.

As Sam's boat nosed the logs, the man stood up and scowled. There was a knife in his hand.

"Hello, Trotter," he said matter-of-factly. "What you doing in here?"

"Just looking around." Sam sprang out and made fast to the logs. When he turned back to Bobo, the hunter was carefully wiping his right hand on his trousers leg. When he finished, he looked at it closely before offering it to Sam. He was tall, cadaverously thin, and his eyes, under lush, black brows, popped in a way that made him look always surprised and confused. On his hands and forearms, and where his shirt was open at the throat, he displayed a lot of wiry black hair.

"You fishing?" he said.

"Sightseeing, mostly." Sam looked at the alligator on the ground behind Bobo. There was a bloody, gaping wound in the top of its head. "Where'd you get that?" he asked.

Bobo waved vaguely at the swamp. "Back there," he said. "Got three."

"How'd you kill him?"

"Ax. Whopped him on the head."

"I'll say you did. You sneak up on them in your boat?"

"No. Find 'em in their holes and spook 'em out. When they come out, you whop 'em."

"What do you do with them?"

"Sell the hides," said Bobo in a tone of outrage, waggling his black brows. "That fella's worth twenty dollars."

"That's a nice morning's work."

"I been out since yesterday morning."

"In here? You spend the night in your boat?"

"No. Find an island and sleep."

"My God!"

Bobo laughed. Bending over the alligator, he made a swipe at its belly with his knife. "This island," he said, "has about five--six acres. Some pretty good fishing over the other side. Couple deep pools."

He had a way of blurting out everything he said as if he'd held it in as long as he could. Along with his popeyed, incredulous face, it gave him the air of a man who's not sure what's expected of him.

"Can' walk across?" Sam asked.

"Better go 'round. That way." He had opened the hide of the alligator and now he rolled the carcass on one side and began working the skin loose, leaving the heavy, ridged hide on the back. "You back livin' with your daddy now?" he asked.

"No. Just on vacation."

Bobo looked up from his work and gave Sam a sour smile. "You gonna die young, man," he said.

"How's that?"

"City. The God-damn' city. I worked up there a couple times. In the war, I worked at Detroit one time. Jesus! You smile! So. I know. You'll die young." He slit the underside of the alligator's foreleg and peeled off the skin like turning a glove inside out. He went on. "You know how guys in the city get run over by cars? You'd think anybody could watch his step and not get hit by a car. But you guys got things eatin' you all the time. You're worried. You're late someplace all the time. You work someplace with a lot of guys you don't like. You don't pick nothin'." He rolled the dead 'gator and started on the other side. "You worry so you get sick or a car hits you."

"You've got no worries?" Sam smiled.

The hunter poked the alligator with his knife. "I gotta watch out one of these fellas don't fool me someday. I gotta watch out a snake don't bite me, maybe. But I give it my whole mind, because I got no piddling worries. Know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

"Why don't you settle down here, man? Your folks got a nice place, and you got that big orange grove and all. You got it made. Fish and hunt all you want. You can go down Miami any time you want a little fun. Good life, hunh?"

"Sounds good. I guess I'll go try the fishing around on the other side."

* * * * *

The pools on the far side of the island were reached by a narrow, boggy path along the water's edge. It was good water, from the looks of it, deep and dark but not muddy. He decided that if he caught any more fish he'd better keep them. He'd told his parents he'd bring back three for lunch.

As he fished, he thought about how bravely and excitedly he'd pushed his way into the impenetrable jungle and then met that popeyed, workaday hunter skinning out his day's work. It seemed that to satisfy the boy Sam he would have to go a lot farther into the Black Hole than any blazed trail would lead. But nobody could ever go far enough to satisfy the boy he was, although there might, he thought, be something in trying. Let's see, he reflected, if I were to forge onward now, into the deepest, darkest swamp, plunging through the jungle, I guess I'd come out in Bushnell, Florida, which would disillusion any boy.

In twenty minutes he caught three bass. They were stronger than the lake bass, and two shades darker in color, a sort of coppery black shot with green. With the rod in

one hand and the fish string in the other, he set out for the landing.

It was rough walking in the mucky ground and he slipped often on slimy, exposed tree roots. Consequently he was watching his footing and a splash on the path ahead of him and a startled grunt surprised him so that he nearly lost his balance on a root and fell. It was a pig, an old razor-back sow, thin and coarse bristled, followed by two boney sucklings. She stood in the path and watched him. He waited a moment, then picked up a stick and waved it at her. He knew that they could be dangerous with little ones. Finally he tossed the stick clattering into the brush near her and she woofed and wheeled off with her pitiful brood behind her. He started on again, hearing more grunting and wheezing in the brush. A whole pack of them, from the sound of it. Rounding a sharp turn he came upon five more pigs rooting in the matted leaf mold. "Hi! Shoo!" he shouted, advancing on them. They scampered in confusion, then found holes in the brush and disappeared. All but one. A black, snake headed boar turned, instead of running, faced Sam and gave a soft grunt. "Shoo!" Sam shouted. The pig twitched his ears, walked a few deliberate steps toward Sam, shook his head and charged.

Sam fled headlong back the path for twenty yards before he thought to drop his rod and the fish and dodge behind a tree. The pig skidded past and while it recovered and turned Sam made for another tree trunk, looking frantically for one he could climb. Doubling and dodging, he led the squealing hog up through the brush to a grove of oaks. With his last reserve of strength he swung himself to a limb, ripping skin from his palms and shredding his shirt. He clambered to a limb still higher before settling himself. Clinging with both arms and panting, he looked down. The boar stood directly below him, motionless, and watched him with little, red, unwinking eyes.

For a moment they looked at one another, then the pig put its nose to the ground and snuffled noisily. It backed from the tree, looked up at him again, then wandered aimlessly in a circle before coming back to attention. In the black bristles of its snout shone the ivory white of tusks that curled up on each side. Sam took his eyes from the pig to orient himself. His tree was one of a large clump and stood some thirty yards from the water. He could see his fly rod in the grass at the edge of the path. He was not sure how far he might be from the landing. He thought of Bobo and of trying to call to him, but as his breath

returned, his dignity came with it. After all, the hog would hardly camp out under the tree all day. It was already getting bored and, in fact, seemed to have forgotten Sam. It ambled in circles, drifting away from the tree. Something down by the water caught its attention and it made off at a brisk trot. In the path it stopped and rooted at the ground, snuffling. It was eating his fish. He shifted his weight and reached with his foot for the lower limb, but he stopped when the pig lifted its head and glared. Slowly and deliberately, it ate the three bass. It returned to the tree. Sam made himself comfortable and secure.

The hog watched him for a few minutes, motionless, then backed off a few steps and nosed absently at the leaves. Its attention seemed to be straying already. Slowly and pointlessly the pig meandered about below the oak, stopping now and then to examine some root or bush, but drifting again away from the tree. Coming to the path it sniffed at the remains of the fish, inspected the fly rod, then turned and trotted off toward the brush. Sam sat motionless still.

He waited what he thought must have been ten or fifteen minutes before cautiously swinging himself down to the branch below. There he sat listening. He heard the bird sounds of the swamp, nothing more. He dropped to the ground.

He landed in a squat and before he could straighten up the pig came out of the brush at a run, head down and

little tail straight up. It hit the base of the tree just as Sam tucked his feet out of reach. He scrambled all the way back up before stopping, then sat clutching the trunk. The cold, murderous ferocity of the boar's trick frightened him more than the actual danger. It wasn't possible, he tried to insist to himself, that the damned thing had laid a trap for him. He looked down at the watching eyes. The pig lowered its head, grunted and calmly slashed twice at the trunk of the tree with its tusks, scoring deep cuts in the bark. It turned and trotted back into the bushes.

Sam sat in the tree for some time before deciding to call Bobo. He simply could not bring himself to climb down again. If this were another trick, he might not be so lucky. He might slip jumping for the tree, or twist his ankle in the drop. He called. He called four times at the top of his voice, then listened. No answer. He yelled again. He yelled, howled, yodeled and bellowed, and at last he heard an answering shout from the thickets behind him.

"Look out, Bobo!" he called. "Look out for the pig." He heard running footsteps fade away, but in a moment the little man came crashing back through the brush, an ax in his hand. "It's a big razor back, Bobo! He's got me treed."

The pig was gone. By the time Bobo reached his tree, after beating through the tangles with his ax, Sam was on the

ground trying to restore circulation in his legs. His palms were raw and bloody. The Frenchman stopped before him, spread his arms and shrugged. He grinned. "Gone now. He make you hop, eh?"

"Don't be too sure he's gone. He hid in the bushes once and waited for me to come down. Damn' near got me, too."

"Pretty smart, pigs. Jesus! You really jump, eh?" He slapped his leg and chuckled. "This pig chase you, an old sow with little ones?"

"It was a little runty boar."

"A black boar hog? Big tushes and a long nose?" When Sam nodded Bobo rolled his eyes and twirled the ax. "Jesus! I know that boy. That's a mean one. He been around here two--three months now. He's in the gardens over Moccasin Branch all the time. He's kill about four--five dogs. He got mine two weeks ago. Ripped 'im all up."

"Somebody oughta shoot him."

"Yeah, but somebody oughta get a shot at him first. Maybe we'll get us up a little hunt for that boy. Plenty of people are mad about how he gets in the gardens." He waved the ax and started back to the path. "I like to kill that pig," he said, "but better I like to cut him and pen him up so he makes some bacon." Sam picked up the stringer with the fragments of two fish heads on it and Bobo howled with

laughter. The rod wasn't damaged. They set out for the landing with Bobo carrying on about how he would catch the boar and make him into bacon. As he talked he gestured wildly with the ax.

At the landing, Bobo calmly went back to work on his hides. Two were hanging on a little cypress and he was just fleshing out the third. He said no more about the pig or Sam's tree climbing. At first Sam had felt a little sheepish about it, but now he wanted them to go on talking about it and about the boar and all. He looked down at the raw palms of his hands. The blood oozed through the ragged flesh and it felt as though he was holding a hot coal in each hand.

Bobo came over and looked down at his hands and said: "You still got some rowing to do, ain't you? I tell you what. We'll tie my boat to yours and tow it out. You take off your shoes and socks and I'll show you something. "Take off your shirt, too. You got undershirt? Take it off."

Bobo made mittens of the socks and padded the palms of Sam's hands with the torn up undershirt. Then he went to his boat and returned with a bottle of whisky. He poured a little into each of the mittens and chuckled when Sam howled. Then they each had a drink.

"That was close for you," Bobo said. "That pig could kill you." He tapped his temple with his forefinger. "You

gotta be watching out all the time. You gotta give it all your mind. See what I mean?"

Bobo turned back to his work. Sam sat on a log and watched the knife free the skin from the gleaming, blue white flesh. He forgot for a while, with the whisky searing his raw palms, all about his vacation running out so soon.

"Mind if I take another swallow of that stuff?" he asked.

"Help yourself."

"I'd sure as hell like to see you kill one of those things. How do you go about it?"

"I'll take you along and show you, sometime," Bobo answered. He finished with the hide and folded it neatly. Then he sliced a thick section of that blue white meat from the alligator's tail. "Good eats," he said. "You fry it."

CHAPTER II

Moccasin Lake is almost triangular in shape. The long side is to the north, where the swamp borders the lake. At the east end, where the lake tapers to a narrow point, is Panomee Creek. At the angle opposite the swamp is a larger creek called Moccasin Branch, the outlet from the lake into the Withlacoochee River, seven miles away. A hundred yards from the lake, the Branch bends around a sandy ridge. There is a bridge there, and on that ridge is the town of Moccasin Branch. The town's two dozen houses are almost hidden in huge live oaks and spanish moss, and on the lake side are bounded by marshy ground that gives the whole town a sweetish odor of leaf mold and lush vegetation. The main street, a very secondary county highway, is paved--or was once. Roads of oyster shell and crushed cochina rock cut the jungly woods along the ridge into five or six "blocks." Eleven small white frame houses stand along the paved road and others are tucked away in the trees.

Right beside the old tarred beam bridge, on the town side, is a bright, unpainted one room building of rosiny new pine, with a gasoline pump beside the door and a hand lettered BOATS-BAIT-GUIDES sign above. Across the road, below the bridge, is a dock as rosiny new as the building, where four boats swing at tether. Looking upstream from the bridge you

can see the lake, and downstream, on the town side still, is the cluster of houses where the town's dozen Negro families live, huddled in a marshy thicket. On the far side of the branch, a dirt road parallels the stream and a sign tells that it leads to the Moccasin Branch Community Church. Beyond the church and the cemetery, the branch bends and is the boundary of the orange groves owned by Sam Trotter's father.

Just above the bridge and the new pine building, at the crest of the sandy bank, a combination general store-post office heads the main street of the town: a building of weathered pine, bleakly gray in the brassy sunlight, the porch sagging a little despite the pine blocks chocking it up. A sign, guyed precariously to the roof ridge, advertises Coca Cola in dazzling red and white and, in smaller black letters across the top: A. L. Tracy, Gen'l. Merchandise. Next door is a yellow stucco building, a perfect little cube with a flat asphalt roof. Its label is City Hall. Next is a newer cube of white-washed cinder block, a garage.

Beyond the garage are the houses, scattered on either side of a shady tunnel of moss draped oaks. Where the oaks end, begin the pine woods and the palmetto prairies. The palmettoes--scrubby, hardy little palms growing in solid thickets as high as a man's shoulder--cover most of the

higher land around the lake, broken by marshy savannahs and clumps of oak, all of it drably swathed in gray moss.

* * * * *

Up into the palmetto wastes, in the still, viscous heat of the morning, walked General Frederick Abel (retired) and his daughter. The General led the way, a stumpy, short legged man in fresh khakis, leather puttees and a sun helmet. He set a steady but sedate pace, and they stopped often. Whenever he felt a few drops of sweat on his temples, which was often, he would halt, in shade, if he could find it, and they would stand looking around them or at one another, while he breathed very slowly and deeply as if he had his mind on it. After a bit he would growl in his throat and set out again with the girl behind him. Margaret was taller than her father, and she was young--younger than she looked to a first glance. She was a thin, rather angular girl, with reddish blonde hair worn in braids wound above her ears. She wore riding britches and a light blouse and was carrying a target rifle over her arm. When they rested, she had a placid, almost torpid look about her, as if she could not, by herself, find anything to do or say or think. She watched her father the way a bird dog might, alert, but seeming quite incurious.

After three of those silent rest stops, they came to the place. There was a pine stump and, a few yards from it, a level spot that had been spread thickly with pine needles. Some forty-five or fifty yards away was a thick log. The General went directly to the stump and perched upon it with his feet dangling six inches short of the ground.

"Let's fire one target prone," he said, "one sitting, and one standing."

The girl laid the rifle carefully on the bed of pine needles. From the pocket of her slacks she took a roll of rifle targets. She flattened three of them and walked to the log, where she pinned them a few feet apart. Then she came back, took up the rifle and went down on her stomach in the needles. She rolled to her side to reach her pocket, bringing out a box of cartridges. She opened the box and loaded the rifle without haste. She aimed taking a very careful position: left elbow well under the rifle, chin in. She fired ten shots very slowly.

Behind her, the General permitted himself to smile at her, a curious, turned down, narrow eyed smile that seemed to show as much calculation as pleasure. What a thing she is, he thought. What a damned beautiful thing!

She reloaded and shifted to a sitting position for ten more shots. She is damned beautiful, he thought, but more than that she is competent. She is clean limbed and

clean moving. She is as cool and controlled as... he thought... as a gun! Built like a shotgun, like a sleek Belgian Browning: straight and hard and delicately turned, with no foolishness or awkwardness or frill, competent and usable and beautiful.

She reloaded and fired from the standing position. When she'd fired the last shot she opened the action of the rifle and left it at the firing point as she went to get the targets. She gave her father the targets and sat down at his feet as he examined them. He grunted.

"About time to run the distance up on you," he said. "Try another target standing, and get your right arm higher this time."

She set up another target, fired, and brought it to him. He grunted once more, and nodded. When he looked up she smiled at him, smiled that same turned down way that was peculiar to the two of them. The General snorted.

"We'll shoot at a longer range tomorrow. And you can start using that Savage. I'll teach you something about sighting-in."

The General hopped off the stump and Margaret, after picking up the rifle, fell in beside him as he started off at his sedate gait through the brittle grass. There was discipline in the brace of her shoulders, cool confidence in

the angle of her chin, and something very like arrogance in her flowing, unselfconscious walk.

"You oughta be wearing a hat," said General Abel. "It's hot."

"I've got lots of hair," she answered coolly.

"I know. Why the hell don't you get it cut?"

"Anne says no."

"Why?"

Mag shrugged as if to suggest that there was simply no understanding her mother, but she said in a mincing voice: "'Mag, it's so sweet. Leave it a few years.'"

"To which you said what?" her father demanded.

"To which I said nothing. Nothing at all. I'll wear the damned mop if it makes her happy."

"You look like a Valkyrie."

"Anne thinks it keeps me girlish. And sweet."

"Any woman's ambition, to keep her daughter girlish. A way of keeping her out of competition. And, of course, the younger you are, the younger she is, by implication."

Coming down into a little clump of pines, the General made another of his regular stops. As he stood in the shade he did not look at his daughter. He was full of his delight in her and he had an idea that he'd been nursing for several days. He was very confident, but still he had to think for a bit. He had to think about his wife, too, but the simple

joy of seeing Mag here before him seemed to push Anne out of his mind. She's more of a woman now, he thought, than her mother was at twenty, and by the time Mag's twenty she'll be more than her mother can be in her whole life. She isn't stupid, she isn't hysterical and she isn't afraid. That's what I've taught her.

"You remember Sam Trotter?" he asked. The girl nodded. "He's home now, you know. I talked to him at the store yesterday. He'll be around here for a week yet. He's coming over for dinner with us tonight." They walked on in silence, but when they came in sight of the house General Abel stopped and reached into his pocket. He brought out a handful of crumpled money. "Here's five dollars," he said. "Go into Panomee after lunch and get that goddamn' hair cut. That's an order."

The girl took the bill and folded it into her pocket. Neither of them spoke, but they smiled at each other their own private, knowing smile.

* * * * *

Although they had lived in it for fifteen years, the Abel home was still known to Moccasin Branch as "the Whiteside house." It was a great, crumbling mansion of white stucco, surrounded by a stand of royal palms and banked about with hibiscus. One of those orphans of the

Florida real estate boom that dot all the state, it was in the favored style of that period--a Spanish colonial theme bent to the 1925 conception of architectural modernity and the boom time standard of construction. Hundreds upon hundreds of them stand proudly in overgrown backwoods plots or grandiose real estate developments which shall lie forever undeveloped: flaking under the sun, melting under the rains, shaken by autumn hurricanes and mined by termites.

The Abels had moved into the house upon the General's decision that the old family homestead nearer town was a hopeless, archaic wreck. He had been right about that, but he had also admitted to himself that the new home appealed to his taste for the outre. It was such a monster, to his thinking, that living in it was a mark of distinction. This opinion had apparently been shared, with a difference, by the original owner. It had been, this hideous house, the dream and the symbol of a Cleveland industrialist who had believed drawings laid before him by promoters, worked for the day when business could be laid aside for his Florida retirement and then fled in humiliation after his first look at the huge, gleaming, red tiled palazzo standing in the palmetto wilderness.

But although the Clevelander's house had never sheltered him for a single night, his name had stayed with it. The villagers used the phrase "the Whiteside house" with

a special emphasis, as if it were a standing joke, but a mysterious one. Indeed, they were genuinely mystified by everything about the place: its atmosphere of aimless bravado, its sumptuous grotesqueness, its pathetic, heart broken owner to whom "Florida" had meant something other than palmettos, scrub oak, sand roads, unrelenting heat, festering humidity and loneliness. The Abels, after fifteen years, were well along toward becoming "the people who live in the Whiteside house," while a mouldering ruin by the mouth of the branch, untenanted in all that while, remained "the Abel house."

The house's pitiful attempt at Latin warmth and charm was utterly betrayed by its interior, for its builders had seen fit to finish it in the style of a Medieval Norman castle: walls scored in imitation of stone work, rough hewn beams criss-crossing the ceilings, the few windows set deep into the walls and cavernous fireplaces in most of the rooms, with massive, wrought iron fire dogs. All this Teutonic-baronial splendor and gloom, however, embraced a tiled patio with a pink plaster fountain and a Venetian loggia.

The Abels had a light lunch in the main dining hall, the three of them seated together at one end of the long, heavy table. The room and its furnishings quite overpowered them, and rendered the flowered place mats ridiculously effete, for it was a room where fur clad giants should have been

rioting with horns of ale. Instead of a whole roast boar, there was potato salad and cold cuts.

They ate in silence broken occasionally by tentative remarks from Mrs. Abel, brusque declarations from the General or terse, studiously assertive comments by Mag. After trying half a dozen lines of conversation which failed to draw interest from her husband, Anne Abel at last succeeded with: "How was your shooting?"

"All right," said the General. "She's getting just about good enough to hit a bull in the ass with a baseball bat."

Anne winced, but managed a smile. "When does she get her diploma?"

Lunging with his fork as if it were a rapier, the General speared a cold sausage. "Tomorrow she's going to start using that Savage I bought for you."

"Well, she must be getting good. You'd never let me use it."

"Hunh! You handled it like you thought it might explode."

"You never gave me a chance to get used to it," Anne cried indignantly; then, with a glance at Mag: "After all, until we were married I had never even shot a gun."

General Abel smiled at Mag and shrugged. He turned patiently to his wife. "A <u>rifle</u>," he said. "A gun is a

thing hauled around by trucks. It shoots explosive shells about ten miles."

"Oh, you know what I mean," she said, essaying archness.

"Yes," Abel nodded solemnly. He turned again to his daughter. "Next fall, you're going to do some hunting. We'll find someone to take you out when the quail season opens. Wing shooting! That's real hunting."

"Then," said Anne, "you can get a nice job as a game warden or something."

They ignored her and turned again to the cold cuts. The General passed his cup for a second coffee, but then excused himself and left the room with the cup in his hand, stalking purposefully down the long room. He crossed the living room, with its big oak and leather furniture and its musty paintings lowering from great gilt frames, and descended three steps into his own room. It was a room unlike the rest of the house, for it had originally been a sort of conservatory and was walled on three sides with glass. Abel had torn out the planting boxes and installed a sofa, broad mahogany desk and swivel chair. The desk was bare except for a dagger, a delicate _misericorde_ with a handle of blue enamel and a chased silver guard. A locked case beside the door contained the General's collection of hunting weapons: three shotguns,

five rifles and two revolvers. In racks on the wall above this case were several fishing rods.

General Abel placed his cup of coffee on the desk top with ritualistic precision, then sat down and opened one of the side drawers of the desk. Taking out a large, leather bound notebook, he opened it carefully before him. Alone, the General's manner and bearing remained austere and angry. This severity of his often led people to think General Abel stupid. In fact, when he was a young man at the Military Academy, his physics instructor had described him as "a body of negligible mass but considerable density." Perhaps the instructor was not simply being cruel, for there was a certain density, in the literal sense, about General Abel: his physical presence was always solid and indisputable and the stuff he was made of mentally and emotionally seemed coiled, compressed and wadded together into a knotty, impenetrable lump.

He thumbed through the notebook until he came to a half blank page. From the top drawer of the desk he took a fountain pen. First sipping thoughtfully of his coffee, he began portentously to write.

General Frederick Abel's Journal

The Moccasin Branch year has turned. Sunday we are to hold our annual cemetery cleaning and picnic--the ushering in of Spring. Our Mardi-Gras. No, that's hardly it. Our Walpurgisnacht, our Day of the Dead. All of us here will

troop dutifully to the Sacred Grove to pay our respects to our forebears, to cultivate the roots of our family trees.

I doubt if it is any sense of shame or of debt that sends us back to the scene of the crime to tip our hats to those we had to kill if we were to live. There is another key to the difference between Moccasin Branch and the world out there. We still own up to our dead. In fact, we make a town holiday of it. Ancestor worship as a cult of murder? That's not too far fetched. What of the Chinese, who long to become ancestors? The death wish, or a sense of compensation? But will that turn out to be the Chinese weakness? Fifty years may tell. Meanwhile, we would be safer if more Americans would face the facts of murder as blandly as we in Moccasin Branch. After all, there is no other way out, even though most of our national energy seems to be devoted to believing there is one.

The General paused and stared intently at the dagger lying before him. He was thinking of his father. He had never really known the old man, for he had died in Mexico when Abel was twenty and before that most of the son's years had been spent in military schools and most of the father's in far off assignments. The few memories there were came from childhood, early childhood, and were not to be trusted. There was a meaningless picture in his mind, for instance, of looking down through the banister of the stairs onto his father in a full dress uniform coming into the hallway below with another officer (they wore the old style dress uniform, with epaulets) and his father saying: "They're terrors, God damn it, terrors. One of them cut our adjutant to bloody ribbons after he'd been hit at least three times. Killed him." That was all, just his tall, straight father standing

There with a cigar clamped in his teeth as he said "...bloody ribbons... killed him..." What terrors had he been talking about?

The General began again to write:

> The ancients killed their god every spring, so that he would never grow old. In our time the custom has degenerated into the practice of mourning the dead Christ, and if guilt comes into it at all we blame Pontius Pilate or the wicked Jews. And our god grows feeble. Moccasin Branch has not forgotten, though. We still go back once a year and stand up to our blood guilt. I know a lot of the family secrets hereabouts, but even I don't know what knives must turn in some of their hearts while they tend the graves of their people. But they don't run, or forget, or claim someone else did it. They stand up and take it.

Once again General Abel laid aside his pen. He drank a little coffee, rolling it in his mouth. He thought briefly about people in Moccasin Branch, and about their secrets. He thought of the Trotter family. Nothing specific, he reflected.

> They know, we all know, that we are supposed to feel shame; but the pride of the flesh rises through it, traces of triumph color our Good Friday grief, and despite our hypocrisies we all claim our guilt in the end, we who can, for it's the only defense we have against the knowledge that the comers, the young bulls, will get us soon enough.
>
> And speaking of young bulls, we have a visitor. Young Sam Trotter is mooning about the town for a couple of weeks, looking wistful and peeling under the tropic sun. He left here years ago, a rather sensitive and serious boy. I talked with him down at the bridge yesterday. A curious thing. I believe he wants his birth-right... but who has he ever killed? For a young bull, he is a little short horned and long eared, but he reminds me of his uncle, Walker, who was a man. Looks like him, talks like him a bit. I think that he is one who has lost it. He is a first generation degenerate. He has half a god--his children will have none. He very cautiously strikes the

attitudes of a man, although the heart of it is not in him, and he knows it. He wonders why, I think. Perhaps he shall find out. I'm having him over for dinner tonight. When a man my age has a daughter Mag's age, he begins to take an interest in the young bulls. This bull calf may be the right one for a novice matador to work with--a good looking bull with plenty of fire but not too much horn.

The General read over this last paragraph and smiled very slightly despite himself. No doubt about it, the young fellow would fit the part.

* * * * *

In the great dining hall, Mag and Anne finished their meal in a stream of the sort of conversation that marks isolation more pointedly than any silence. Mag made no effort. Anne kept at it, introducing a subject and pursuing it with bright, deadly, smiling persistence until it dropped exhausted and she must scout up another. She kept some kind of talk going, around and over the dam of Mag's indifference, with a dogged and desperate intent, as if one moment of mutual silence would confirm for good the distance between them.

It was always this way, and Anne had acquired an ability which was almost a habit in artificial conversation. So automatically did it come to her that she need not even follow her own words, and often as she talked or listened her thoughts would wander. Most often in these desperate scenes she found herself turning to look back and seek how

and why and when the gulf had opened between them. She could not remember when she had first sensed loss. One day, at a breakfast or a lunch or over tea, she had found herself striving to fill with words a void of feeling, and she had striven since. She could not have said why it was that this was almost the only form her struggle took, why there was no more she could do than try to fend off the silence.

Anne Abel was lonely a great deal of the time, but she had a religious faith in the power of love that kept her from realizing fully just how lonely she was. She had been plumped down in Moccasin Branch, a nineteen-year-old wife with a baby daughter, an ordinary, proper St. Louis girl. She had never yet found anyone there to talk to. She had won a curious sort of place in the town, simply by her earnestness. She was the personal emissary of Charity. She had advanced views on Race and Religion and Politics and Art. She was so earnest that she was almost impossible to talk to, for most of the Branchers, so that they supposed there was no answering her, and agreed. Almost anyone in town would admit that she was "better" than they--in the abstract. She was a public morality.

Certainties were Anne's mental coin. She knew, as passionately and singlemindedly as she knew good from bad, that her husband was a good, an honorable man. She knew that her daughter was a proper sort of daughter: sensitive,

loving, a little brash and sometimes irreverent, but a tender and "caring" person. It was easy for Anne to know that, for she seemed to remember that girls were like that. And yet, with these massive certainties for support, she found she had built no family. Perhaps she had failed the General, she thought sometimes, at the time of his great hurt. Perhaps she had been too wrapped up in other things at some time when Mag had needed her. She had tried to talk about it, to face up to things in the way that had worked before, but it had been too late and now she simply talked. She sat at the head of the long table in the overpowering immensity of General Abel's oak beamed great hall, facing her slender daughter, and said: "Really, this room does need something to relieve it. Tapestry things, maybe, for the walls. Something sort of bright."

* * * * *

Mag, unsmiling, nodded abstractedly over her coffee. She was not even attempting to follow her mother's chatter. She had learned to resign herself to the hum of Anne's voice as a background for her private thoughts. A word or phrase filtered in, sufficient to cue her now and then to a nod, a murmured "I suppose," a raised eyebrow. The phrase: "Something sort of bright," now caught her notice. Oh, how true to her mother, that idea of brightening. The woman seemed

actually to be terrified of things plain, things severe and clean, things pure; she wanted nothing felt or seen or heard in its naked essence, but always softened, relieved, brightened. Mag did not, however, dwell upon this thought. It was standard and habitual. Much of Mag's thinking was of that sort. She was not, strictly speaking, very intelligent. She didn't command, or feel the need of, any great capacity for analysis, and she was totally without curiosity. She knew what to think about everything.

Her attention was caught suddenly, not by anything Anne was saying, but by a sudden silence. When she looked up she was startled to meet her mother's eyes on her with a peculiar, thoughtful, excited light. She seemed to be looking at her, seeing her, but seeing more, too; and slowly she smiled as if in sudden understanding or recollection. She must have realized that they were staring at each other, for she turned that strange, secret smile down to her plate and began making a great fuss with her silverware. For a moment Mag waited for something to come of this odd scene, but her mother appeared absorbed in her thoughts. For a bit they ate in silence, and Mag's thoughts went to the afternoon's shooting. The girl was very sensitive to her father's moods and thoughts, and she could tell he had been expansive and merry, inside himself, out there today.

One thing that he had said--his words about Sam Trotter--almost stirred something behind her complacence. She was almost, for a moment, curious and a little tremulous at what it was to be with her and this Sam Trotter. But that feeling did not quite come through. She would know, after all, in good time. Meanwhile, she dismissed frivolities and studied the problems of rifle marksmanship. She conscientiously marshalled up the General's axioms and rules. In imagination, she cradled the rifle against her cheek and sighted, deliberately evoking the physical sensations and striving to recall the proper flexions and tensions of muscles, the placement of each bone and joint, the balance and alignment of perfect form.

"Do you remember Sam Trotter?" her mother suddenly said, liltingly.

For a moment, Margaret was confused. Then she shrugged and answered: "A little."

"Fred tells me he's visiting his father. We're going to have him over tonight."

"Are we really?"

"Yes. He's a very nice boy. You'll like him."

"Will I now?"

CHAPTER III

"You haven't changed," Sam's father said. "When you were little you were forever coming in with cuts and scrapes you got out in the woods. How many times did you break that right arm?"

"Three times," said Sam. "Broke each bone in the arm once."

It was late afternoon and the Trotters were sitting on their front porch, where they had come at the first hint of the evening breeze. Sam sat upon the top step, looking down across half a dozen neat ranks of orange trees to the oak thickets beyond the road and the silver green platter of Moccasin Lake beyond the trees, and, in the distance, but quite clear in the hard, unwavering sunlight, the cypress tops of the Big Black Hole. He was already dressed for his visit to the Abels, and his neat, freshly pressed suit and shirt were matched by impeccable white bandages upon both his hands.

His mother, in a rocking chair with an afghan in construction across her knees, gave a ladylike sniff. "You'd think," she said, "that broken bones were medals. I was the one that had to nurse you and fret about it when you banged yourself up. Your father went around bragging about what a real boy you were."

"Hold on, now," his father retorted. "It worried me, too. I was afraid you were simple or something, the way you kept falling out of trees. You were the damnedest boy for falling out of trees that I ever heard of." He was a thick chunk of a man with white hair and a white mustache that he stroked from time to time with his stubby forefinger as he talked.

"I'm glad I didn't fall out of that one today," Sam said.

"Well, you got out of some work, anyway. You won't be much use tomorrow with your hands like that."

"That's right. Tomorrow's the cemetery cleaning, isn't it?"

"You're not supposed to work," said his mother. "Amos and I will clean up the lot while you visit with people. It'll be a good chance for you to say hello to a few people. It's supposed to be a holiday, in the first place."

"It used to be a holiday," said Amos. "When I was young, we'd tidy up the lots in a few minutes and spend the rest of the day eating and singing hymns and playing ball and listening to preaching. Nowadays, there's a lot of work to it." He smoothed his white mustaches in a gesture, almost, of pride. "There are seven graves in that lot of ours now," he said. Amos Trotter was a man secretly in awe of the size and number and extent of things. He respected

the number of the trees in the forest, the height of the mountains, the breadth of the ocean and the number of miles to China.

Sam's mother shrugged off that line of talk and began to relate to Sam a recent skirmish in her intermittent warfare with the post master's wife. There was nothing in Gwyneth Trotter of awe or of secrets. To her, all was self evident, even though others might, to her pleasure, be baffled sometimes. Sam listened politely to the latest row with Mrs. Tracy, a waspish old woman universally suspected of reading other people's mail. The story involved some complicated chicanery during the last election. Gwyneth was sure that Mrs. Tracy, who was city election judge, had connived at some ballot stuffing. She never hesitated at charging the most serious crimes to those she disliked. She rarely talked of her friends, which was understandable, for her enemies were clearly a lot more interesting: a devious pack of cut-throats, from Mrs. Tracy right on down to the president of the Ladies' Aid.

From that, they drifted into anecdotes about people of Moccasin Branch and Sam's father took over the talk. He told stories about his father, one of the three men who came to the lake in the nineties and built the settlement that became Moccasin Branch. He talked a lot about his brother, who died when Sam was a boy, and about the early days. He

"He came to the mill and he walked up and cut off the donkey engine. 'Whitaker,' he says, 'you're always talking about how you carry that pistol because somebody's after you. Well, you're right, there's somebody after you, and it's me.' Whitaker pulled out his gun and Walker said, 'If you try to shoot me, I'll most likely kill you. If you lay it down, you'll just get a whipping.' While Whitaker was thinking that over Walker jumped him and grabbed the pistol out of hid hand. Whitaker commenced to run and Walker caught him out in the road and whipped the tar out of him. He whipped him all the way through town from the sawmill to the bridge. Whitaker would run and Walker would catch him and knock him winding and then Whitaker would get loose and run again. It was like a parade. Everybody in town lined up along the street and watched. Walker got so tickled at the way Whitaker was trying to run away that he finally got winded from laughing and sat down on the bridge and just watched Whitaker light out up the road.

"Then he went down to the Abel place and went in and said to Fields: 'Your job's open now.'" Amos chuckled. "Mrs. Abel never had liked Whitaker. And after that she and your Uncle Walker were pretty thick. They went partners on some land deals and such as that. They were two of a kind.

"That's the way it was around here, though. I'm not saying it was good. Sometimes the man that can lick the

other man isn't the one that's in the right. But that's the way it was, and somehow most things seemed to turn out funny, in the end."

"That old lady was General Abel's mother?" Sam asked.

"That's right, but she wasn't an old lady, then. She was still middling young. I suppose that all happened about the time Fred was going to West Point."

Gwyneth gave another of her delicate sniffs of distaste. She did not like Sam's new acquaintance, General Abel.

"What's Abel's wife like?" he asked his father.

"Very nice."

His mother amplified. "She gets plenty done," she said, "that certain other prople are too prissy to muss their hands with. She's done a lot for the colored. She's from Missouri, though, you know, and sometimes she doesn't make allowances for Moccasin Branch. She and your father had a run-in."

"She wanted me to put gloves on all the pickers," Amos mused.

Gwyneth went on. "Some of the men caught some kind of itch from the insect dust on the trees. Of course, the niggers would have lost the gloves the first day, but try to tell her! If they'd just learn to wash their hands when they get done, it would be all right anyway. Amos wouldn't come out and say that, though."

was an amusing story teller, with an old fashioned elegance of speech and a voice full of wonder.

"I doubt if you'd remember old Mrs. Jane Abel," he said. "She ran the sawmill after her husband went off to be a soldier. Once, she hired a foreman named Whitaker. He was from Atlanta and he counted himself a tough man. Always wore a pistol and he went around talking about how there was people out to get him, but they'd have a fight on their hands.

"Your Uncle Walker was building this house right then, and he was over at the sawmill quite a lot, getting lumber." Amos almost always called his brother "your Uncle Walker" when he was talking to Sam. "One day him and this Whitaker had a run-in over something or other and Walker left and went right up to see Mrs. Abel. 'Jane,' he says, 'how high do you value your foreman?' 'He knows his job,' she says, 'And I'd be hard put to find a good foreman around here.'

"Well, Walker left town by himself and was gone about three days. When he came back he had a stranger in the car with him. He went up to the Abel house and took this stranger in to meet Mrs. Abel. 'This is Jack Fields,' he says, 'he's from Jacksonville and he's a first-rate sawmill foreman. I told him there'd be a job for him here.' Mrs. Abel says, 'What are you up to, Walker?' but Walker just told her to talk to Jack Fields while he went down to the sawmill.

"I don't argue with ladies."

"Oh, I know how you felt. She's such a good soul you can't argue with her. Personally, I'd be just as happy if you and Walker had never brought niggers to this town in the first place. There's enough white men to do the work."

"I had nothing to say about it. That was Walker and Mrs. Abel, as usual."

"Mrs. Abel," said Sam, "I mean this one now, sounds like a funny wife for the General."

Gwyneth's weighty knowledgeability surfaced like a spouting whale. "Funny!" she cried. "There's nothing funny about it. There are marriages, Sam, and then there are things that look like marriages."

Sam perversely refused to draw her out. "How old's this daughter?" he asked.

"Just a child. They worship her. Only child, you know." After a pause she added darkly, squinting down at her crotchet hook: "There's nearly twenty years' difference in their ages."

After a bit Gwyneth had to go inside to start dinner and Sam and Amos remained sitting on the porch. As the day cooled, Amos' old liver and white coon dog, Buck, came out from under the steps, moving with pompous dignity despite his boniness. Sam clucked and the dog paused to glance up at him before trotting down to the trees and an evening

dust bath. The new hound, one Amos had bought just a few weeks before, wriggled out from the steps. He was big, for a hound, but gracefully shaped, and he moved firmly and deliberately, as if he wouldn't stand for any nonsense. There was still something puppyish about him, though. Sam clucked at him, too, and he went stiff legged. His hackles rippled thoughtfully and deep wrinkles formed across his muzzle.

"Get on!" Sam commanded. "Show your damn' teeth at me and I'll kick 'em down your throat."

"Hold on, now," said Amos. "I figure those teeth would run you about three dollars apiece. That's eighty dollars worth of trail hound."

"He doesn't like me."

"He's still not used to the place." Amos went down the steps and scratched the dog's head. "What's the matter with you, Mustard?" He called the hound "Mustard" for its dirty yellow brown color. "Ugly as hell," he said, "but a real trailer, and he's got a voice like a golden trumpet. He'll run old Buck bow-legged in a morning's work."

The hound sniffed Amos' shoe and trotted off to join Buck. Amos came up the steps and sat beside Sam.

"After the cemetery cleaning tomorrow," he said, "there's going to be some cock fights down at the point. Care to go over there?"

"I'd like to."

"Good. Your mother isn't a lover of the sport, you know. I wouldn't say anything about it. She'll know where we're going, of course, and she'll look down her nose at us, but she won't come right out and lay down the law as long as we pretend it's a secret. Isn't a woman the damnedest thing?" He stretched his arms and clasped his hands before him. "It's good to have you with us again, Sam. Sometimes we get to wondering if you've forgot where we live."

"Well, you know how it is. You get tied up and there's so many things to do every year but only one vacation."

"Oh, I know. I wasn't fussing at you. About time for you to be on your way, isn't it? I'm not going out again. Take either the car or the pickup. If you come in late, latch the door." He stood up. "Pay my respects to the Abels. Used to see a lot of them, but not any more. Fred's not very social since he's been sick."

"Is he sick?"

"He had an attack or a stroke or something three years ago. He's not the kind to take that well. It made him mad. Give him my best."

* * * * *

Dusk had fallen when Sam came to General Abel's huge white box of a house. The great, iron bound door opened to his knock and from the shadows a hand was thrust. "Come in, Trotter," the General commanded from the darkness. Sam shook the hand with the tips of his fingers, which protruded two inches from his bandages, then groped into the dim hallway following Abel's brisk footsteps. "Light!" snapped the General, and there was light, dazzling light from electric bulbs set along the wall of the entry way in plaster torches. Pursuing General Abel's retreating voice while trying at the same time to take in the tapestries, tiles and torches of the entrance, Sam very nearly impaled himself upon the curling point of a wrought iron stair rail.

"The women will be out shortly," the General was saying. "But there's no need to wait for them before you get a drink." At the click of a switch, another set of lights blazed up. Sam paused at the doorway of the living room and glanced up at the light. No torches this time. An enormous iron candelabra hung from a thick chain in the center of the ceiling. The room smelled, very faintly, like an old boot. As he advanced into it his heels thumped on the tiles with a hollow sound. From a liquor cabinet beside the fireplace, General Abel demanded to know what he wished to drink. Sam managed to tear himself from the spectacle of the room long

enough to specify Bourbon. The General brought him a highball. For himself, he had a drink that looked like neat whisky. It was a large drink. Sam sipped at his, still staring around him. Through high, recessed windows shone pale twilight, but the corners of the room were dark even with the candelabra ablaze. Abel interrupted his inspection. "C'mon," he said, "out here."

Sam followed him out a door, down a couple of steps and into a sort of sun porch, glassed in. He was astounded to see the out-of-doors still quite light. The General pulled a swivel chair from behind a great desk, seated himself and waved Sam to a couch.

"Quite a spectacle, eh?" he growled, inclining his head to indicate the house.

There was no mistaking his meaning, but Sam was momentarily confused. General Abel, as a matter of fact, with his dark, angry eyes and his abrupt, impatient way of talking, always made Sam uneasy at first. They had met only a few days before when the General had accosted Sam peremptorily at the bridge, striding up to him with the snarled accusation: "You're young Sam Trotter!" They had talked, standing on the bridge, of Moccasin Branch and the lake, and fishing--a topic given them by the rod Sam had been carrying. The General had wanted to know where Sam had been the last few years and why he was in Moccasin Branch and what he thought

of the place and what he was doing on his vacation. He'd been very brusque and wrathy and had first amazed and then annoyed Sam.

They'd met again at the branch a day or two later, when Sam was carrying a shotgun and two rabbits he'd killed up in the pines. That time, the General had been more affable. He had seemed, in fact, to like Sam--although there was really no difference in his angry, dogmatic way of talking--and Sam had supposed it was because he liked hunting and fishing, which was what he kept talking about; but when Sam had asked him, Abel had answered without comment: "I don't fish or hunt." Then he'd asked Sam to come to dinner with him Saturday night. "Meet my family," he'd commanded. "I have a wife and a daughter."

But the General's strange, underlying anger was still hard for Sam to deal with, so when the General said: "Quite a spectacle, eh?" Sam drew in his chin and murmured: "What's that?"

"The house! Ever see such a damned thing? I'll show you the rest of it later. I can't decide which is funnier, the inside or the outside."

"This is the first time I've seen the inside. It does seem a little out of character."

"Ha! I like the damned place. Got it dirt cheap, too. No one else would touch it." He scowled at Sam. "What happened to your hands?"

"I was treed by a mad razor back this morning and cut myself up climbing a tree."

"That so?" said the General, with surprising agitation in his voice. "Where'd all this happen?"

"Back in the swamp."

"The big swamp?"

"Yes sir."

"And what were you doing in there?"

"Just prowling around."

"I see. Tell me about it."

The General was a good listener as Sam recounted his brush with the pig, which was a little surprising, since he'd shown no interest at their other meetings when Sam tried to tell about his hunting or fishing. He gave just the right reactions now, though, nodding, pursing his lips, laughing just enough at times. At the end he said: "They can be very nasty."

"The worst of it," Sam said, "was that he ate my fish. I had one nice one."

"Where'd you get it?"

So they talked about fishing. It was puzzling. There was no doubt that the General knew what he was talking about. He seemed acquainted with every weed bed and pot hole in Moccasin Lake.

"I thought you didn't fish," Sam laughed.

The General, who had been talking briskly, did not immediately answer. He leaned back in his chair and sipped his drink. The twilight outside had faded and now only the glow from the doorway illuminated the little room. Its glass walls reflected the scene within in three hazy reproductions. Sam's words seemed to have stirred the General to deep thought. Although his face was in a deep shadow, he seemed to be studying Sam appraisingly. Suddenly he leaned forward, gave a quick shake of his head and said: "No, I never fish."

He paused and went on. "I haven't fished in nearly three years, Trotter. I'm sort of an invalid. Work is forbidden me and most forms of play. My goddamned heart. A little blood clot. I don't fish, I don't hunt. I don't walk far or fast. I don't climb stairs. I'm thinking of taking up fern collecting," he snarled. He bent and thrust his glowering face at Sam. "You understand?" he demanded. "I'm just supposed to sit on my rump until I rot. I can't even take an honest drink of liquor!" he exclaimed, lifting

the glass in his hand. He pointed at it and said derisively, "Wine and soda!"

Abel's voice was bitter, but there was nothing in it of whining, or even of complaint. Rather, he seemed enraged, and the force of his anger, its very vitality, raised him above pity. Still, there was nothing to say to his words, and Sam sat uncomfortably waiting for him to continue. Abel sipped his wine and soda, set the glass on his desk and turned to look out at the dusk. From Sam's position, he seemed to be studying his own reflection in the glass, facing his own dark, wrathful eyes; giving himself back glare for glare; trying to scowl down his own ghostly, blurred image. It was as if there in the glass he found an antagonist worthy of his monumental and futile ire. Without looking about, he began again to talk, but now in a soft, almost subdued tone.

"You know," he said, "there is no reason at all for the town of Moccasin Branch. Economically, politically, and so forth, it has no reason. Three men came here and built it, one of them my father. You know about all that. This town is an act of faith. It still exists on that original act of faith. It has a municipal vitality all its own.

"In most of this country, there is no taste to anything, no guts. It is more and more difficult for a man to know that he is alive... to feel the sweat on his back now

and then, and the sun on his head and dust in his mouth. You were in the swamp today. There, a man can tell if he is alive.

"What is it you do in Chicago?" he demanded unexpectedly.

"I'm an accountant with a tax firm."

"Ummm." The General reflected, without expression, before continuing. "A great deal of energy," he said, "is devoted to taking the edge off of life. Here, around this town, things are still different, still specific and fractious. And I can still watch, if nothing else."

Footsteps clattered in the big room within, and the General rose briskly. "The ladies," he said. "After you."

The two women who awaited the General and his guest in the great hall were a slender, nervous, dark haired woman and a slender, composed, light haired woman only slightly, Sam thought, younger. After introductions, he was enthroned in a massive oak armchair and Abel brought him another drink. Mrs. Abel remarked immediately on his bandages. "Tell 'em about your scrape, Trotter," urged the General. Sam tried to pass it off with a brief explanation. After the talk with the General, he didn't feel like making a big thing of it. But Abel insisted, and almost supervised as he retold the whole story. Mrs. Abel, bright in printed silk, sat primly in the embrace of a chair matching and

facing his, nodding and making little faces of awe and terror as he talked. The crop haired daughter, crisp in cotton, had flung herself half across a footstool on the floor, and listened with a reserved and judicial expression that was a little unsettling.

They were neither of them what he'd expected. He was very impressed with Mrs. Abel, and his mother's description--a "good soul"--struck him as ridiculous. She had the air of a great lady. She seemed to fit the monstrous room and bring it into focus. The daughter was older than he expected. There was nothing girlish about her. In fact, he decided, she was distinctly blasé.

When he'd finished, and told them how Bobo had come to his rescue with the ax, Sam said: "He offered to take me along on his next 'gator hunt. I think I'll take him up on it."

"Aren't they quite dangerous?" breathed Mrs. Abel.

Mag, propping her shoulders against the ottoman and smoothing her wide skirt over her outstretched knees, gave Anne a smile of tolerant amusement. "That's the idea," she murmured. The words were an accolade in themselves, but with them she turned upon Sam a look of such forthright and uncompromising acceptance that he fairly squirmed in his throne. Immediately, he began to think better of her.

"Make the trip, by all means," rapped the General. "Everybody ought to see Bobo in action. It's a real thing."

The girl nodded.

"Have you seen him do it, sir?" Sam asked, and instantly could have throttled himself.

"No, I haven't," Abel answered blandly. "I did see him go under a house after a rabid dog once, though. Didn't have a damned thing in his hand but a frog spear. Killed the dog, too."

Anne drew her shoulders together in an elaborate shudder and Sam smiled, understanding now that Mrs. Abel's distaste for these matters was to be treated as an open joke.

"That was a close brush you had, you know," the General went on. "A mad razor back is a deadly damned thing. If it really was the one that killed Bobo's dog, we've been hearing a lot about him. Regular rogue, it seems. If he's not killed before long, he's going to slash somebody up."

"Couldn't we talk about something besides bloodshed?" Mrs. Abel pleaded. They turned upon her three identical, indulgent smiles.

The dinner table conversation was monopolized by General Abel. The telling of Sam's adventure seemed to open a vein of impassioned nostalgia beneath the General's anger, for he talked of younger days, of the days of his strength and vigor. He talked calmly but intensely, and with grace,

of hunts and kills; of strong men and fierce animals; of places and times and ways of living which breathed with hard, clean virility. It seemed as he went on almost as if he were deliberately and cruelly turning the knife of remembrance in his own secret heart, for as he spoke his loss was just behind every word. Even Mrs. Abel, Sam saw, had left off her prettily affected squeamishness and wore and expression of nervous anxiety, and he realized what all that squemishness really was: her wish to spare the General just this self-torture. Sam swelled with indignation at Gwyneth's judgment of these people.

It went on almost through the meal, the General's voice growing ever more terribly, tightly disciplined as he chanted his valedictory. Mag listened, Sam noticed, as if listening for something behind or beneath the words. She hung on every syllable, seemed hungrily to wait the unrolling of each sentence and then to grasp it as if she'd committed it to memory.

But as the General continued, Sam heard less and less. He felt that he was understanding his home for the first time. What Moccasin Branch meant to the General! And he had lost it. Sam sensed the perfection and the beauty of Abel's constant, futile anger. He, who understood, who knew how to take life in his hands, was forbidden to touch it. And others, who did not know... Sam thought of the gray

streets, and the gray, drab life, and the petty office bickering and the gray, dull women, and the days upon days of his life that he felt nothing more than sullen irritations and thin amusements.

He realized that the room was silent. They were looking at him. He saw that Mrs. Abel seemed to be awaiting his answer to some question. He guessed that she had somehow managed to put an end, a merciful end, to the General's ordeal. She had interrupted, somehow, with a question to Sam, and was waiting, pleading, for him to save them all.

"I'm sorry," he said, "What is it?"

"I said: 'How long do you plan to be in Moccasin Branch?'" she answered.

"I've decided to stay," he said, "for good."

"Oh? How very nice. How nice for your parents."

General Abel stopped in the act of pouring cream into a cup of coffee. For a moment, he seemed quite confused. Then a scowl came over his face as he looked up at Sam.

"Staying?" he barked.

"Yes sir."

"Just like that?"

"I decided today," Sam said lamely. He was a little trembly, for everything was suddenly ordinary once more, except for the General's sharp eyes upon him.

"I see," the General murmured. His scowl slowly dissolved, replaced by a thin and enigmatic smile. He nodded vigorously. "Home is the native," he chuckled.

"That's about it."

"What do you plan to do here?"

For a moment the question had no meaning for Sam. The question was inane. "Oh," he said at last, "I'm going to help Dad handle the groves."

"Yes. I suppose Amos can use the services of a good accountant. And what about your job up north?"

"I'm going to wire them right away."

Abel put his elbows on the table and stared at Sam. "And why?" he asked.

Sam opened his mouth and caught himself as he began to say: "I don't know." That wouldn't do. General Abel was serious. It seemed to Sam that there was a sort of hopeful challenge in the General's "why", as if he thought that Sam might, just possibly, give the right answer.

"The things I really like are here," Sam said.

"You think you're a Brancher at leart?"

"Fred," said Mrs. Abel, "don't be so sarcastic. You'll have Sam thinking you mean it."

"I do mean it."

Sam hesitated. "I'm not sure I know what you mean by 'a Brancher', sir."

"Well, you'll find out, perhaps." And to Sam's surprise the General laughed.

After dessert they returned to the living room. The talk was less formal, now, and the General was amusing, in an offhand way. Everything seemed brighter. Anne was quite lively and Mag dropped her precious restraint to the point of repeatedly interrupting the General. Once or twice Sam noticed Abel glancing at him in a peculairly interested and questioning way. He wondered if he had said the right thing there at the table. He decided that he had.

Just as he was thinking he should leave, Margaret began to tease her father to take them all in to Panomee to the moving-picture. Abel gave a scathing opinion of movie going. Mag sniffed at him and Anne sided with Margaret, but the General dismissed the subject. "Not a bit of it," he declared. "You young people go if you want to, but not me."

Margaret looked at Sam.

"I think it's a fine idea," he said.

*　　*　　*　　*　　*

When they had seen Mag and Sam out the porte-cochere door, the Abels retired through the big house, switching out lights, and into the kitchen. There Anne made coffee for the General and set it on the table before him. It was not really coffee, but a prepared powder to which she added hot

water. She knew he detested it. He had detested it from the day the doctor had recommended it as a substitute for coffee; but he drank it, sullenly. Tonight, however, he was not sullen at all. He held the steaming cup before him, smacked his lips and growled: "Ah! You know, if you don't taste it or smell it, it's just exactly like coffee!" and then he chuckled and slapped her on the hip as she walked past the table. He seemed very relaxed and marvelously good humored, and Anne drew water for the dishes with a catch of happiness in her throat. It had been such a nice evening and everything had gone wonderfully, and, best of all, the General had enjoyed it.

"He's really a very nice young man, Fred," she said.

"A pretty good boy."

"How old is he?"

"Dunno. Twenty-three or four, I suppose."

"If he was gone so long, he must be older than that."

"Maybe."

That's not anything to fret about, she thought. Mag was quite sophisticated for her age. Sam was a young man. He seemed to like Mag. Excitedly, she dried her hands on the dish cloth and went to sit across from her husband. "It makes me feel high schoolish myself," she said, and Abel smiled softly, nodding. "I'm so glad he's going to be staying. There just isn't anyone around here that Mag...

Well, you know. Most of these boys are nice boys, but not very..." The blanks were filled by parental pride, and she could tell that Fred understood and agreed. It was a warm and comfortable feeling. Oh! a precious thing! to sit there with him in their big kitchen and find that they could still feel together. She had been sure, during the dinner, that it wouldn't be like this at all. She had been sure that he would have something scathing to say about the young man as soon as the door was closed upon him. Worst of all she had been sure that he would ridicule the boy in front of Mag. She knew that, to the General, Sam was vulnerable just because he was friendly and charming and youthfully eager to please and sympathize. She saw how Sam's simple warmth might be twisted into something absurd by a deftly sarcastic comment. But now her fears seemed shamefully unjust and she felt that she had caught herself in a destructive habit of antagonism. They could still share things, she and Fred, and her own doubts could be more dangerous than any real difference. She must not forget.

"I want things to be good for Mag," she exclaimed. "I really do, Fred. You know. I want her to find out how to enjoy life."

"I think that's a good idea, myself," he replied, but he wasn't making fun of her. He understood.

"Living out here, she's out of things in a way."

"We agreed she couldn't stay away at school. We could still leave Moccasin Branch, you know."

"You'd be lost anywhere else," she said.

"I like it here, yes. Even though..." he shrugged.

"We'll stay. But maybe Mag's old enough now to go off to school. You know, she never talks about the children she meets at that high school in Panomee. She doesn't seem to make any friends."

"Mag's all right," he said. "She's a little out of her milieu at Panomee High School, I suppose, but I don't think she's lonely."

"Fred, I just don't want her to get a habit of despising things. Do you know what I mean?"

"I know."

"Is it good for her to spend so much time with us?"

"The time is coming when she'll spend much less time with us," he smiled.

"I'm afraid so," she said, but she shyly returned his smile.

He stayed in the kitchen while she washed the dishes and then he helped her dry and put them up. They did not talk much. The General seemed thoughtful, perhaps sad at the idea of Mag growing up, and Anne was simply too full of happiness to speak. It was not that she believed everything, somehow, to have come completely right in the course of a day; but

having caught herself in that unthinking and unfair suspicion of Fred, she felt the grace that goes with discovery of a sin to which unhappiness can be attributed. Her world of punishment and reward, into which nothing bad could come unbidden, was righting itself. Then too, from the moment that morning that she had told Margaret about Sam Trotter, she had been settling into the conviction that once the girl began to be a woman, began to exist especially as a woman, there would spring up between them a bond to replace the one they'd lost. Quite simply, Anne felt that Mag would soon find herself needing her mother. She imagined the two of them sitting together in Mag's room, late at night with the house conspiratorially hushed, when Mag had just come in, say, from a dance. There would be laughter and shared excitement and confidences--girl-talk. There would be closeness. At first Fred did not appear in the picture, but now she saw that the coming dawn would shed a mellowing light on him, too.

When the dishes were done, they walked together, in silent companionship, to the bedroom they shared, the room that had once been the second parlor. They'd closed off the upstairs rooms when Fred could no longer climb the stairs. The room was small and close, and the General sometimes preferred to sleep on the couch in his den.

As Anne began to get ready for bed, the General sat upon a divan at the window and looked thoughtfully out at the night. He was so quiet, and not angrily, that she wondered if he might be thinking the same things as she. She began to think that having that boy with them at dinner, perhaps something Sam had said or done, had hit the General just so and helped somehow to lighten his load of rage.

When she came back from the bathroom he had not moved, and he turned to look at her over his shoulder, smiling in a new way as if to seal a bond between them. When he turned back to the window she went to him with a confidence that she had not felt in years and bent to watch with him. The moon was not in their sight, but its light silvered the palms and cast soft, dark-on-dark shadows across the lawn. Nothing moved in the yard or on the road or in the pines beyond.

"Young people..." she began softly. That was all she said, but General Abel nodded.

They remained together at the window for a moment before she sighed and turned to her dressing table. She was halfway across the room when she was startled by Abel's sudden footsteps behind her. She started to turn, but his arm went around her waist, tightly, and she was lifted and turned and thrown sprawling across the bed. The fall knocked the breath out of her. She gasped and squeaked and

tried to sit up, but Fred threw himself violently upon her and she fell flat again. The violent and unexpected onslaught, without a word, frightened her to the edge of panic. She struggled and he grappled with her, trying to get hold of her wrists and pin her underneath him. They were so close that she could not see his face. His deadly silence as they thrashed together, and his breath in her ear, rasping and quick, added to her bewildered terror. He threw his whole weight on her and pressed her back, clamping her arms to her sides. For a fleeting hysterical instant she thought of shrieking, but then she simply relaxed, going limp. His knee was pressing sharply into her thigh and she tried to free her leg. As if in response, he gripped the leg between his knees and squeezed. Pain shot from her hip to her knee. She bit her lip, but did not move. For a moment they lay completely still although his grip on her did not relax. The house was very quiet and she could hear the tick tock of the bed table clock as a background to his thin breathing. She waited and in a moment she felt his hands loosen their hold slightly. She did not move, barely daring to breath. He shifted his weight a little still not lifting his face for her to see. Gradually she felt the tension go out of him until he simply lay slack against her. Then she lifted her hand and put it on his back. Her leg was beginning to cramp, but she did not try to free it. She ran her

hand down his shoulder, feeling the muscles sag beneath his shirt. Trembling, she felt the quick thump-thump of his heart-beat.

"Fred?" she said softly. He turned and lifted his head. His eyes were quite expressionless. "You frightened me," she said.

"That was the idea."

"I wish..." she began passionately, but he shook his head.

"Wish!" he exclaimed. "Things are one way and that's the way they are. I owe you an apology for a display of spirit which could have resulted, at best in my untimely and very unseemly demise. At best," he repeated dryly.

"Fred, don't talk about it right now."

He rolled over and sat up on the edge of the bed. He seemed to be all right. "If I joined a monastery," he said, "I could at least get public credit for my celibacy."

"It's mine, too."

"Let's not talk about that, either."

"I didn't mean it that way, Fred."

"As I said, I'm sorry. But sometimes I find myself wondering what would be the most rewarding death. Should I go hunting and keel over from the excitement of seeing a deer fall? Should I take a long walk and pass out from the exertion of jumping over a log? Should I lay my wife--or at

least die trying? Or should I have one, last, fast game of bean bag?"

"Dr. Reinhard said rest might repair things."

"Reinhard said what he tells people who might otherwise have sense enough to take a graceful exit from a graceless life."

Anne sat up, straightening her hair. Apparently the exertion had not hurt him, and now he seemed to be talking out the pressure that had brought it on. Best to keep him talking, she thought.

"Those blood clots do dissolve," was the best she could manage. "He said it happens quite often."

"I'm sure it does. Very seriously, I believe that. That's just the interesting part of it. I believe the old quack, just because I have to. I believe him, but I'm a little amused at myself for it."

"When are you supposed to see him again?"

"June, or thereabouts. He said about six months." The General abruptly stood up and put his hands on his hips. He seemed now quite self-possessed, but a little nervous. He glanced around the room, looked down at Anne and frowned distractedly. "A cold bath," he said.

When he had gone into the bathroom Anne remained sitting on the bed until she heard the sound of running water. Then she went into the hall and called to him through

the closed door: "I'm not sleepy, Fred. I'm going to sit up and read for a bit." He grunted in answer. She got her slippers and robe and hurried out through the dark house. When she reached the living room she was crying. She did not turn on the lights, but sat in the dark room, huddled in a great armchair, and sobbed. She did not cry joylessly or desperately, but in the wrenching, bitter-sweet flush of love and compassion, in the terrible, lonely joy found beyond grief.

Sam and Mag had left the house at eight o'clock. At eleven Anne folded up her magazine and turned out the light in the living room She sat for some while in the darkness, perhaps half an hour, before she heard the sound of an automobile on the road and saw its lights flash in front of the house. As the car drew up under the porte-cochere, she went to the kitchen and stood silently beside the hall door. She listened to the sound of the car door opening and slamming, and to the faint sound of voices. Mag's laughter came clearly to her ears and she put her clenched fist to her breast in a gesture of mute excitement. When the front door had opened and closed, she waited until Mag's footsteps had crossed the house and entered her room, then Anne, suddenly bashful, went to the kitchen table and sat down for a moment in the darkness. At last she rose and went to the front hall.

The door of Mag's bedroom was cracked. She knocked softly and pushed it open. At first she saw only Mag, standing in the center of the bright room. She seemed to be smiling at her dressing table mirror. "Margaret," Anne breathed, "did you have a nice time?"

The girl turned to her with a little start, and the sweet happiness in her eyes seemed to enclose Anne in an embrace too wonderful for bearing. "Yes, of course," Mag laughed. Anne stepped into the room. "Was it...?" she began, but stopped. General Abel, in his pajamas, sat upon the bench of the dressing table. Margaret had not been smiling at her mirror at all. "Oh," Anne murmured, "I thought you were asleep, Fred." The General shook his head, an expression of quizzical amusement in his eyes. She turned back to Mag, but she, too, was watching her mother with that challenging half smile, gone now all her radiance. Anne stood a moment between their two sets of amused, barely interested eyes before she fled.

She lay awake for some time after she went to bed, hearing through the open door the subdued voices of Margaret and her father, talking into the hushed night, sharing laughter and confidences. Man-talk.

CHAPTER IV

Barefoot children laughed and shouted, playing among the graves. In the shade beside the church some of the young people had gathered to listen to a guitar player, the hairy, black browed Bobo, who sang melancholy words to bright and jaunty airs. Most of the Branchers, though, the heads of families, the pillars of the church, the makers and builders, were at work in the graveyard. They were raking from the burial plots the matted fallen leaves of the winter, cutting the smutweed and sandspurs that grew hardy and rank on the graves, cleaning and straightening headstones and boards. They worked without hurry and there was a lot of visiting between families, a lot of laughter and good humored talk. Beneath the vaulted branches of a huge live oak at the far end of the cemetery, the older women were unpacking the lunch baskets and spreading long trestle tables for the picnic, taking their time about it, gossiping. Back in the deepest shadows of the oak sat the very oldest men, hidden away from the sun and the work and the singing and laughter. They watched, through the critical eyes of the past, the women and the playing children and the singer and the working men. Solemnly, they talked among themselves in the calm, forlorn companionship of the aged.

The lots nearest the church were the oldest ones, the burying places of the earliest settlers, and they were the largest. Gwyneth had gone to help the ladies with the lunch, and Sam and Amos were finishing up in the Trotter lot, Sam wielding a hoe despite his bandaged hands. Friends and neighbors of Amos came over from time to time to speak to Sam. Most of them didn't remember anything about him, about where he'd gone or what had become of him, but, after all, he was Amos' son. A few of them had heard, apparently from Bobo, about his adventure with the boar, so that gave them something to talk about. Mostly, they kidded him about it, in a good natured way.

The guitar player stopped his singing, struck a chord, and began to thump out a reel. Two girls from the crowd around him joined hands and started to step off the figures, and in a minute a couple of boys nerved themselves to join them. Bobo, hunched over his guitar, called: "Salute your partner!" Then others sprang to form the square and the black browed man thumped his guitar even louder and bent closer over it as if he didn't even see the dancers, shouting his calls down at the ringing strings.

"Now that's the kind of thing," said Amos, "that made Bobo public enemy number one as far as the women are concerned. Your mother isn't going to like this. But who's going to say they can't dance here? And why not? It does

seem a little strange to me, but I'm an old coot now. And if Bobo didn't play for them, somebody else would."

Sam shook his head, resting on his hoe. "Gwyneth's right. They shouldn't be dancing. Nothing wrong with dancing, but it isn't part of the custom. I've always been impressed with this business of cleaning the graves in the spring. But these kids will grow up remembering it all wrong. They should feel they're doing it the way it's always been done."

"That's a strange thing for a young man to say."

"I just want it to be the way I remember it from when I was little. I've always thought it was so fitting, remembering the dead and everybody going to to clean up the cemetery together."

"You don't really remember it, Sam. Customs change right along, but people in Moccasin Branch were never more pious than they are now. Which isn't saying much. Take the people that built the town up." Amos stroked his mustache. "My father called himself a free thinker, but he went to church because he believed it was good for most people and he ought to set an example. Old Bill Tracy was an Irish Catholic by birth, but he blamed the priests for Ireland's troubles and he wouldn't let any member of his family follow the religion. He went to church here just to have something to do Sundays. Marshall Abel was just an out-and-out

atheist. Those three built the town. Then you take those that came after. Your Uncle Walker had no religion in the ordinary way, 'though he was a great Bible reader. Mrs. Jane Abel was godless. Once she was mad at me and called me a 'Christer.' I guess it was the worst she could think of. Al Tracy claims to be a Baptist, but that's just because you've got to be a Baptist to get along in county politics."

"What about you?"

"That seems an awful thing, Sam," Amos answered with a sigh, "That you should have to ask your father his faith. I'm a Christian, Sam. I believe in God, and the Redemption through Christ. Didn't you know that?"

"I wasn't sure. As for your father and his two friends; maybe they didn't need... you know."

"Natural piety? No, they were all embittered men. They'd all three been driven away from someplace else. Hard-luck men, they were. I don't judge them, but I don't think there was any kind of piety in them, natural or formal."

"They built the town and had families and worked at building things up."

"Ah," said Amos with a smile, "they just wanted to get even with the bankers that had done them in before. That was what they had in common. All three of them were deathly

afraid of bankers and hated them like sin. That's why they came back here into the swamps.

"I think we've done about as much as we can manage," he said. "I see the ladies are putting out the lunch. I want to go speak to Emory Castle. Why don't we go get first in line?"

"Okay."

But when Amos went off to look for his foreman, Sam remained in the Trotter burial lot, looking around him at the people of Moccasin Branch. His father was too close to them, he felt, and his father had never lived anywhere else. General Abel had called the town, "an act of faith", and Sam liked that phrase. The place had a seriousness and vitality to it that defied, in Sam's mind, Amos' view of it. Since his sudden announcement to the Abels that he would stay in Moccasin Branch, the idea had taken on great importance. He had not yet said anything to his parents. He had not developed doubts--vanity prevented that--but he was at a loss for his own reasons. The General, he thought, had stated them; but he found it hard this morning to get hard hold of what the General had said about Moccasin Branch and the Branchers and about faith. Amos had not helped. The only thing Sam could think of now was that in Moccasin Branch he could fish as much as he liked.

The drive to Panomee and back with Mag Abel had given him a chance to talk about it unreservedly--with the General he had had a feeling of something mystic expected of him. She was less demanding. She was almost, in fact, the reverse. All that he had said about the hated gray life in Chicago and the hot, vivid life in Moccasin Branch had been confirmed, understood and approved by the thin, thoughtful girl, with just the right degree of detachment. But she had ended by confusing him further with that air of yea-saying.

He was nostalgic, he was lonely, he did not like his life. These were the things he knew. But when he tried to think what else he knew of himself, he was frighteningly at a loss.

He turned and looked down at the grave of his grandfather, Cyrus Trotter, one of those builders. So he thought others should go to church, did he? Sam looked around him at the graves. Just at his foot was a concrete block set in the ground. There was no grave mound, just the block, with a brass plaque on its face reading: "Captain Amos Trotter, Jr., United States Army Air Corps, 1920-1944." That was new. So they had given Amby up. Well, it was time. Nearly eight years now since he'd got into his airplane one day and flown off from an island in the Pacific. Sam had been in North Africa then, and Amos had written him a letter, surprisingly cool, to say that Amby was missing. Sam remembered how he

had read that letter, forming a picture in his mind: a vast and empty sea, sparkling and calm, with a vast sky, heading outward. That was the memory of Amby that Sam was stuck with, just because his brother had happened to die when Sam was an adolescent, and a war was on.

Next to Amby's plaque was the grave of Walker Trotter, Amos' older brother, the dates, and his epitaph: His Love Was the Measure of His Fear. That was the same way. Walker had died when Sam was fifteen and would always be nine feet tall and the wisest man in the world. It was fitting, because Sam was sure that Walker would have wished to be remembered as a boy's ideal of hardbitten manliness. But what must he have been like, really? He must have been some part, at least, of the family legend he'd become. Wasn't there, Sam thought, one of these graves to link him to his family and to his home? Was there any real thing tying him to them, anything more than a picture from a recruiting poster or a boy's memory of a boy's hero?

Sam started and nearly jumped at the sound of a voice close beside him rapping out the name: "Walker Trotter!" He turned and met the round, angry face of General Abel, glowering malignly at him from across the grave. "I knew your uncle well," he said in a voice that was almost a snarl. He seemed even more wrathy than usual today. He wheeled and glared down at Walker Trotter's grave as if he thought it

might spring at him. After a brief silence he nodded his head vigorously as if one of them had said something very, very true. Then he turned his eyes again upon Sam with a truculent scowl.

"I remember," Sam said. "You and Uncle Walker used to go hunting together when I was just a kid."

"We used to, yes. Hunting and fishing and drinking and hell-raising. He was a capable man in all respects."

"I liked him."

"All kids like their uncles."

"I guess everyone liked Walker."

To Sam's amazement, the General thrust forward his head and gave a rasping bark of laughter. "You mean every-one was afraid of him," he growled. "Everyone except me and your father, and I never understood why Amos wasn't."

"Scared of him? Who was scared of him?"

"People he looked after. Which was everyone around here except my mother--he respected her--and maybe me. I don't know about myself, of course, for sure, but I don't believe he ever looked after me."

Sam thought about that for a moment. "What sort of man was he?" he asked.

The General did not seem interested in the question. "He was a man," he scowled. "That's rare enough. I'll go

farther. He was a brave man and he was an honest man. Consequently, he went to an early grave. Are you going to the cock fights?"

"Yes."

"I'll see you there. Give my regards to your mother." He turned smartly on his heel and walked away. Following him with his eyes, Sam saw him go to a plot farther back in the cemetery where his wife and daughter were at work with rake and hoe. He wanted to go over and speak to them, but he did not. He didn't want to talk to the General any more just then.

The Trotters ate seated on a table cloth spread on the grass under the oak. The food was good, but there was far too much and, of course, you had to take something from every one of the baskets or risk hurting someone's feelings. They talked at random and Sam still could not quite bring himself to say anything about coming home. It occured to him that one of the Abels might come up and mention it at any time, which wouldn't do, but still he said nothing. He could still change his mind.

He waited until the lunch was over and Gwyneth had rushed off to help the ladies clean up before he said to his father: "I was talking to General Abel a minute ago. He says he was a great friend of Walker's."

"I suppose he was. Yes, they were pretty thick the last couple of years of Walker's life."

"When I was over there," Sam continued, "I was noticing the marker on Walker's grave. What does that epitaph mean?"

"'His Love Was the Measure of His Fear'. It was that way in Walker's will, so I had it put on the stone. It's from the Bible, somewhere. It's something about a man loving his fellow man as he fears God. That's the general idea. I've tried to find the exact quotation, but I can't locate it." He sighed. "You were pretty fond of Walker, weren't you, Sam?"

"Sure."

"And he loved you. He once told me that the only envy in his life was that he envied me you. It was sort of funny, the way he took to you."

Sam knew that his father meant "...and not to Amby."

"I always wanted to ask him about when he ran away," Sam said, "but I never did. I was afraid to. How old was he when he left?" Sam knew well enough how old Walker Trotter was when he ran away, but he wanted Amos to talk about it.

"He was eighteen," Amos said. That was all he said, but when Sam remained silent he went on. "And after nine years he came back. He walked into the house one evening

at supper time. That was when we lived down at the mouth of the branch. Walker came in looking as sick and and sorry and ragged as you can imagine. My mother cried over him and we all asked where he'd been, but he just laughed and asked if we would treat a poor tramp to a meal. He sat down to dinner with us.

"About halfway through the meal, my father lit into Walker. He told him he'd known all along that Walker would come crawling back someday. Walker gave him a look, and then he commenced taking wads of money out of a belt he had under his shirt, and throwing it at my father. There was money all over the room. In the food and on the floor and everywhere. We gathered it up and counted it--my mother and sister and I--and put it in stacks on the table. And Walker and my father sat and watched us count. There was over thirty thousand dollars in all. When we were through counting Walker said: 'I thought it would come to more than that.'"

"What did grandpa say?"

"What could he say?" Amos answered, and it seemed that his voice was shot with surprising bitterness. "He didn't have two dimes to rub together in those days."

"Didn't anyone ever get any idea where the money came from?"

"Not as far as I know. I don't think Walker ever told a living soul anything about it. He never even mentioned

it again, unless somebody else brought it up. And the family didn't talk about it much after a while."

"Why not?"

"Walker could be awfully ugly when he thought somebody was prying at him." Amos frowned. Here in the cemetery, with the Branchers all about them and the murmur of voices, the story did not seem as light hearted and affectionately reminiscent as it might have over a chess game. Or perhaps it was the way Amos told it. This was not one of his stories that "somehow came out funny in the end", even though he had smiled as he described the money flying across the table; and Sam realized that this might be more of the real Walker and less of the legend. Amos went on: "We were all afraid that there might be something wrong with the money, too. Anyway, it was the beginning of the Trotters. Remember that.

"We had the house and a start on a farm and we had about two dozen orange trees. My father had already sold out his share in the sawmill. Walker bought the groves and put in the trees and built the house we live in now. He did a lot for the town, too. He took an interest. He was a good man, Sam. When he died there wasn't room in that church there for his mourners. Everybody came. Even the niggers from down at the quarters lined up outside to see his casket go past."

Sam remembered that funeral. It had been a cold, wet day and in the church he had tried hard not to sniffle, although his nose was running a stream. They had sat all in a pious row, the members of the family, with their heads bowed. Sam had sniffled until he felt his mother's hand on his knee, patting it comfortingly, and realized that she thought he was crying.

* * * * *

Almost every weekend during the winter and spring, there were cock fights in the woods near Moccasin Branch, and most of the men in town watched them. Some of the ladies disapproved, like Gwyneth, as a matter of form, but the fights had been going on for years and almost every man in town kept a pen of fighting chickens from time to time. The betting was small but fierce.

The cock pit stood in a grove of pines just at the tip of a shaley promontory into the lake called Reed's Point. It had a fine view, although its builders may not have taken that into account. When Amos and Sam arrived, a little groggy with the big picnic in the cemetery, there were half a dozen cars parked in the weeds below the grove and a fat Negro was raking the sandin the pit. Mr. Daniels, the town marshal, was setting up a scales on the tail-gate of his truck, fussily elbowing aside a couple of advisors. He was

a busy, pompous, grub of a man, always eager to manage something or other. Besides being marshal he was the town engineer, fire chief and water manager and claimed to be a plumber and electrician. The mayor was there, Mr. Keith Kennon, old and plump and ruddy, rolling his great, round, undertaker's eyes. He kept a good sized flock of chickens, but his son handled them for him. From ventilated boxes on the ground around Daniels' truck, roosters were crowing defiance at each other and scratching to get out. Old Man Jeff Corey (he must be ninety! Sam thought) was sitting on the running board of his car with a cock clamped between his knees. With an enormous pair of shears, he was nearsightedly trying to clip its hackles, cursing it spectacularly for its wriggling. "Don't let him throw you, Jeff," called Amos, and the old man shouted an absentminded obscenity.

While his father chatted with Daniels, Sam walked up into the trees to see the pit. It was an eight sided board enclosure about two feet high, with white sand sprinkled inside. Rough benches ran all around and just outside the ring, at opposite sides of it, stood two board tables. Sam stopped beside the pit and stood there with the scent of the pines strong and moist in his nose, remembering. He'd come to the cock pit once a long time before, and alone. Prowling the woods as a boy he had found this place. He had known what

it was, even though he'd never been allowed at the fights, and he had known that it was not talked about at home. He'd thought of the cock fights, then, as something like a secret club, something like church, where the men went every Sunday with his Uncle Walker as leader. He had come upon the pit on just such a day as this, when the woods were cool and dry so that the odor of rosin stung in the nostrils. He had stood at the edge of the trees, looking, and then, fearfully, he had walked on the soundless mat of pine needles to the nearest table. With the silent grove watchful around him, he had put his hand upon the stained surface of the table. Blood stains.

From below came the sound of voices raised in argument. Three or four more cars had arrived and now a knot of men clustered around the marshal's scales. There was a lot of bickering as Daniels weighed the entries and he huffed and puffed and turned red, trying to maintain a judicial air above all this. Jeff Corey's chicken, a hefty red, was fretful on the scales and just as the marshal settled the balance the cock flew for him in a whirling fury of feathers. Daniels danced backward, batting at the chicken and howling. Mr. Corey whooped "Go it, Red!" and the crowd cheered. Amos caught the cock. Its spurs were trimmed, but the blunt stumps had left two angry scratches on the marshal's neck.

He roared at the old man, but Corey was bent double with laughter, wheezing like a kettle.

The arrival of the Tracy family got them back to business, even though Mr. Corey had first to give them an impersonation of Daniels with the red cock climbing his shirt. He wound up showering endearments on the chicken he had been cursing so heatedly a few minutes before. The Tracys, however, were dour and intent. They were a hard faced lot, and the old man, Al, was the hardest of them all. He was so crippled by arthritis that he seldom got out of the back seat of his automobile. One of his boys drove him where he wanted to go, and those he had business with were called to the car to talk to him. You could tell, somehow, that he was once a big, active man, now shrunken and enfeebled. The leadership of the clan was passing to the oldest boy, Stan, a burly, thick armed man a little older than Sam. The other two, Dale and Pat, were the same sort; knotty, expressionless and tanned to walnut brown. They spoke as little as possible, softly, without moving their mouths. Al watched from the car as the chickens were weighed, and the youngest boy, Dale, stood by him in attendence. Sam noticed that the old man spoke or nodded to a very few of the Branchers. One of them was Amos.

The Tracys brought more chickens than anyone else, but the weighing went fast, for they had never a comment or

and argument as the weights were announced and posted. As Daniels matched off the fights it began to seem that the Tracy family was taking on the rest of the town, for they had a chicken in nearly every fight. When Daniels posted the pairings, eight matches had been made and there were at least thirty men gathered around the ring.

As Sam joined Amos on one of the benches, he saw General Abel sitting directly across from them. The General nodded to Sam and called a greeting to Amos.

"This is the first time you've seen the fights, isn't it, Sam?" his father asked.

"That's right."

"I'd have brought you to see it, but your mother would have gone through the roof. A funny thing, though, you know, there's women that come down to watch the fights right often."

The crowd came to attention as Daniels stepped into the ring, a large, nickel plated watch in his hand. Solemnly, he wound it, held it to his ear, stared at it. Then he addressed the spectators.

Amos tugged at Sam's sleeve and murmured, "Be careful about taking any bets. There's a lot more to it than you might think."

"We got eight fights today," Daniels announced. "The first fight matches two four-ten stags. Keith Kennon is

pitting a warhorse cross, handled by his son, Dave. Stan Tracy will be handling his daddy's gray. Bill the chickens."

There were hoots and cheers, teasing the marshal, and someone shouted: "Go it, Red!"

Daniels went to a corner while Kennon and Tracy came to the center of the ring, each with a cock cradled in his arms. They stood a foot apart and brought the chickens' heads together. The red and the gray hackles rose, the cocks fenced with their beaks and struggled to get free.

"Ready!" bawled Daniels. The crowd fell silent as the men returned to their corners. The marshal produced a stick and ruled parallel lines in the sand about six feet apart. The handlers brought their chickens to the marks, dandling them in careful hands. The cocks eyed each other across the ring.

"Go!"

The gray trotted a few mincing steps into the ring, then stopped to await the stiff legged charge of the red. At the instant of collision they rose together as if they were climbing opposite sides of a hanging rope. A whoop went up from the crowd, the red and the gray feathers flashed, then the cocks were on the ground, facing each other with outstretched necks. Before Sam had time to wonder what had happened in that first fly, the cocks rose together again and the gray had a grip with his beak in the red's breast

feathers. Sam saw the steel spurs flash and heard them click together and someone yelled: "Got 'im!" and they were on the ground again. Nothing seemed to have happened at all. There was no blood. The steel gaffs were still gleaming and clean.

They rose together again, rolled on the ground, and the referee shouted: "Handle."

Kennon and Tracy separated the chickens and each took his fighter to his corner, turning so that the cock couldn't see the ring or his opponent.

"What happened?" Sam asked.

"They were hung. The red had his spur into the gray."

"I couldn't see a damned thing."

"Watch close. Keep your eyes on the gaffs. They'll start to slow up pretty soon, anyway."

"Ready," Daniels cried, "Pit!"

Again the gray stolidly waited that awful, purposeful, stiff legged charge. They flew together and this time Sam thought he saw it. The red went a little higher than the gray and struck for the neck. It seemed the full inch and a half of steel gaff sank in, but they came down and flew again, and tumbled and flew again, and neither seemed hurt. They fell in a heap and the handlers sprang to them.

"The red's getting to him," Amos said.

"The other one looks all right."

"He's taking some knocks, just the same."

The gray came out again to the ground he seemed to have chosen for his stand. This time he wheeled at the moment of contact and ducked under the charge so that for an instant he was behind the red; in that instant he struck, flailing with both spurs, and the red was bowled over on his head. They flopped and fluttered together. "Handle!"

The next pitting, the gray tried the same thing, but it didn't work. He wasn't fast enough ducking and the red caught him four or five fast blows on the head. It seemed to Sam, from the flash of the steel and the staccato thumps as it hit, that the gray's head must be cut to ribbons, but it counter-attacked and the cocks tangled, the red's spur hung in the wing of the gray. As they were separated Sam saw that there was blood darkening the gray's head, and flecks of red down the sleek breast.

For two more pittings the red mauled the gray, and on the third the gray came out with a peculiar, sidling walk. "Blinked," said Amos. "Blind in one eye."

Instead of facing his foe, the gray seemed to watch a spot just to one side of him. The red flew, flailing with quick, clawing movements, and the gray simply reeled away. Someone, it was old Jeff Corey, hooted: "That's all." The

red flew again, but this time the gray met him and as they collided he rolled sideways, fanning both wings for balance as he hit.

The gray came out of that round with more blood on his head. Stan Tracy cleaned its eyes and beak with his fingers and pulled a pinch of down from its breast to press against the cut and clot the blood.

When they were pitted again, both seemed tired. They stood in their places for a moment, then the red took a few, slow steps. As if that were his signal, the gray charged in a crazy, drunken, sidewise gallop. There was a flurry of feathers and then the gray was standing dazed with blood dripping from its beak and the red lay on its side, breathing slowly with its bill open, and glaring up at the gray. The gray seemed to study its fallen foe for a moment, then with heavy, reeling steps it started toward the red. Halfway, it stopped and teetered agonizingly, as if it could not lift its feet. "Go it!" pleaded Tracy. "Hit him!" Sam found himself standing and ridiculously beating his clenched fists together. The gray cock shook its head. He took slow, tottering steps to the red, paused in front of it, then very deliberately, in a motion that seemed to call up all it had left of life, opened his wings, leaped and struck. He stepped back and looked, shaking his bloody head. Painfully, the red lifted its head. It opened its bill and stretched

its neck toward the gray, snapping, trying to get at him. The gray gathered itself and flew again. Red feathers flapped convulsively and the red wings beat the sand in a flutter that slowed and then ended in a gentle folding in. The gray stood over, watching with his one eye, the blood falling drip drip drip from his bill.

As Tracy scooped up the victorious gray, the crowd closed in and surged over the ring, laughing, shouting, demanding payment on bets. Amos drew Sam back into the trees.

"What do you think of it?" he asked, smiling.

"Damn!" Sam said, shaking his shoulders, "something. I thought I'd rupture myself trying to help that gray chicken half across the ring. Lord! Seemed like neither one had sense enough to know when he was beat."

"Sense? It's not a matter of sense. Put your ordinary barnyard cock in there and you'd see that chickens have got enough sense to know when to run. No, it's just that the game cock won't run. They're bred to keep fighting just as long as they draw breath. You don't tell them by their color or their shape. You tell them by their heart. Let's go down and see if the gray's all right."

Along with a dozen others, they watched respectfully as Stan Tracy cut the gray cock out of its gaffs, bathed its bloody head, let it drink and lay it in its box. Sam said to

Amos: "If he's blind, he's through fighting, isn't he?" Amos shook his head. "Not a bit of it. He just gets a four ounce weight allowance against a sound bird." Pat Tracy was already arming another chicken, binding the gaffs to its heels while the youngest Tracy held it motionless. It was another gray. They trooped behind Stan to the ring and Sam was surprised to see that the other cock, the foe, being exercised by Bobo. It was a chunky white chicken with streaks of yellow and flecks of black.

Amos murmured in Sam's ear: "Bet on that white. It's Jerry Cole's, and I notice he's backing it up good. Bet on it."

While the cocks were billing, Sam took a five dollar bet with Pat Tracy. He noted that the boy ran immediately to old Al, who was sitting back at the handling table. The old man bent over the table and wrote the bet in a dirty notebook.

Sam went to his place by the pit and as the handlers took their places he felt himself tense in anticipation of the signal. His nails dug into his palms and a dry, internal gasp suddenly stopped his breath. He had a wild impulse to ask them to stop, to wait until he was ready. It wasn't revulsion, it was pure trembling awe for that first instant when the two cocks would charge; for the perfection of blind, pointless courage; for the deadly intensity of the birds; for

the murder glinting in the round little eyes; for the death twinkling at the steel gaffs with every step.

"Pit!"

The white was blindingly fast, and on the first fly of the third pitting he killed the gray with a clean brain thrust. While Sam was still gasping at the suddenness of it, someone pushed something into his hand and Pat Tracy was grunting at his shoulder, saying something about the next fight. A bet. He nodded, listened, folded the bill into his pocket; but he was still seeing the graceful white cock poised in the air on straining, outspread wings, caught by a camera in Sam's brain at the moment of killing.

There were two more fights before they took a break. Old Man Corey's big red cock fought everything in sight: the spectators, the referee, his handler, the other cock, and was killed by one of the Tracy grays.

In the next fight the Mayor's fine red cock ran from the steel, leaving his opponent strutting in the empty ring. Dave Kennon, crimson, pitted him again and he ran again. The third time he jumped the barrier Daniels pointed to Tracy's chicken and shouted: "The winner!" Kennon argued, but was shouted down by the ringside. Sheepishly, his chicken under his arm, Kennon started out of the ring.

"Kill that cock!" someone bellowed. It was General Abel. He was sitting quietly at his place by the pit, staring coldly at Kennon. "Goddamnit, kill him!" he ordered.

The crowd opened to let the Mayor himself reach the ring. He stepped up beside his son and smiled at General Abel. "Take it easy, Fred," he chuckled. "That chicken's just off his feed."

"For Christ' sake, man! Kill that yellow cock."

A few of the men around them nodded and muttered. Without another word, the Mayor turned away, shrugging. Davis Kennon, his eyes on Abel, put his hand over the chicken's head, threw it to arm's length and snapped his wrist. He dropped it flopping in the ring and followed his father. When the cock lay still, one of the bystanders picked it up by the legs and tossed it into the weeds.

After that, the two younger Tracy boys went up to the store for beer, and the fights had to wait for them. Amos went over to the table and sat with Al. For a few minutes, Sam sat by the ring and listened to the men around him refighting the battles. The Negro spread clean sand in the pit and raked it smooth. Sam walked out to the bluff over the lake. There was no one there, so he sat down and lit a cigarette. He didn't think about the fights--he didn't seem to think about anything at all--but he felt very alive and alert and he kept seeing that white cock in the air.

"May I join you?" rasped General Abel's voice, and the little man eased himself down beside Sam. "I can tell this is your first fights," he said with a smile.

"That's right."

"I'm surprised. You did grow up here. Your mother, I'd guess. I was sitting across from you there, and I noticed that you seemed very interested."

"Interested isn't the word. It's quite a thing."

"Ummm. 'Quite a thing.' A real thing, my friend. Namely guts. Namely heart."

"You know," Sam said eagerly, "there's a peculiar feeling I got about it. I don't think it would be worth a damn to watch those fights except that they don't mean one damned thing. I mean..."

"I know what you mean. The thing for its own sake is rare. You're right." He bobbed his head in that emphatic way he had. "But I'm really surprised you'd never seen the fights before. Your Uncle Walker was a great lover of the sport and he bred some fine chickens. He built this pit, you know."

"No, I didn't know." Sam seemed to run into Walker whereever he turned. "He must have built most of Moccasin Branch." He nodded down at the water of the lake, eight feet below them. "The water's low."

"Very. No rain since December twenty-ninth. We'd better be getting back. They'll be pitting them soon."

"I wanted to ask you why you made them kill that chicken."

"Protect the breed," said General Abel sharply. "The only way to have good chickens is to kill all the bad ones. It's an old game pit custom."

CHAPTER V

Dressed in dungarees and an old pair of high top shoes, Sam strode down from the Trotter house, through the orange trees to the road, and turned toward Moccasin Branch. As he walked, it seemed that the very world around him the glistening orange trees, the hammocks and the thickets, mirrored and confirmed a new sense of direction and decision. The colors were forthright and vivid, the trees stood firm and uncompromising in their native earth, the clouds marched intently across an even blue sky, the birds in the warm air seemed eagerly and confidently to wing to their appointed destinies.

All the doubts and confusions of the day before, the day of the cock fights, were gone, dismissed as pettifoggery. Those doubts, in fact, were part of the substance of this new conviction of purpose. After the cock fights he had gone with Amos for a tour of the orange groves. They'd driven up through the groves behind the house, section by section, with the dust billowing from the wheels and the sharp, oily odor of the foliage all around. The trees seemed in need of clearing, the branches were crowded and dead wood showed in a lot of them. At a dozen places they'd seen sections of half cylinder tile pipe stacked between the rows, overgrown by weeds. It was, Amos had explained,

"a little irrigation project." On the high ground north of the plant they'd passed a round water tank atop a spindly tower of pipe.

Then they'd gone through the big, corrugated steel building where the fruit was processed and packed. After a look at the sprays and driers and the grading tables, they'd gone into Amos's office, where, after plowing in the dust for a bit, he'd found the plans of the irrigation system and spread them out for Sam to see. It seemed an elaborate project.

Sam had thought about all that dust up in the groves and had said: "I guess the dry season is on you, isn't it?"

"God, Sam! If you knew the cost of labor, and how hard it is to get any work out of these niggers!" Some of the dust he'd stirred up had settled on his mustache.

Then they'd walked down to the bank of the branch, across the road from the plant, and looked at the pump house Amos had built and the engine and the pump. It was all brand new and spotless, but it was the only thing they'd seen that way. All the rest of it had looked so run down and the trees so poor and ill cared for that suddenly both of them had been embarrassed and chilled, realizing that Amos was not up to it, that he did not really have the will or the strength of purpose to push it through, and that he was getting old.

But in the end, that moment of embarrassment and fright had seemed the key to the question Sam had asked himself in the graveyard, the question of what tie there could be between him and the Trotter dead. What Amos now had lost, he thought, was the simple power of decision. His own doubt about coming home was the same sort of thing. And it was unconscious lack of that power that had moved him to vague admiration in thinking of his Uncle Walker and of the three men who came to build the town. They had had it. Whatever Amos might say of their faith, they had had the power of doing. And that, too, must be what General Abel saw dying in the world: the will to make a decision, rather than to let it be made by whatever accident might happen, or by anyone who brought the least force of will to bear. How easily, Sam thought, he had let go! And how pathetically he had tried to escape this one, clear cut decision! And without willing it, a man could not be or do anything, he realized. It was as simple as that--and that he saw as part of the bond that tied him to Cyrus Trotter, and to Walker and Amby, and to his father.

At the dinner table, he had told his parents his decision. Gwyneth had been a little piqued--and still was. She resented surprises. He would make it up to her, though, with a little mother and son talk. In a few days she would have taken the whole thing over, anyway. Amos' reaction

had been a little puzzling. He'd seemed touched, delighted, surprised, but curiously unnerved, as if there were now something difficult put up to him. After dinner, Sam had gone upstairs to write a letter to Chicago. The office manager of his firm was a sort of friend. He'd been to his house quite often and called him by his first name. He couldn't simply give him the bald fact that he wasn't coming back.

He wrote:

Dear Harry,

I've been doing some hard thinking, and I've come up with a decision that is going to be kind of a surprise. I've decided to settle down here at home in Moccasin Branch and go to work for my old man in his orange grove business. This isn't as sudden as it may seem. I've never said much about it, but I've thought a lot, off and on, about getting out of Chicago and out of the tax game. In the last week I've figured out that this is the place for me.

It's not just homesickness, Harry. But up there I always felt like a stranger and I guess I always would. It seemed like everybody that knew me thought of me first of all as a Southerner. Down here, I am what I am. On top of that, my old man isn't as young as he was and he could use some help in the business. As you know, I'm all there is left of his family, except for my mother.

I'm writing to my landlady about shipping me all my clothes and stuff. I'd appreciate it if you'd go by my place (I'll tell her to let you in if you come by) and pack up my books and my personal stuff and take my record player and sell it for me. As a commission, you can take any of my records that you'd like to have, and sell the rest of them. I don't want to make the trip up there and back again, if I can help it. But just say the word (I mean it) and I'll come on up and work out a regular two weeks' notice for you, if you think this is going to put you in a bind. I'd rather just stay here and save the travel money, and frankly, the sooner I can buckle down and give Dad a hand, the better it'll be.

Write and tell me what you think of this.

He read the letter over and was disgusted with himself. He crumpled it and began another. He left the first paragraph as it was, and the part about disposing of his belongings. Then he wrote:

Up there, Harry, I wasn't in touch with anything. Nothing mattered to me. You could probably tell that from my work. Here, I've got a stake in things in more ways than one. My people came out here and built this town out of palmettoes and muck. Most of them are buried here. This place has got some guts, too. Things aren't supplied

ready-to-wear--I mean what you do and who you see and what you say and how you feel. There's not much here, but what there is we got or we built.

He left off the part about Harry writing him. If Harry wanted to write, fine. In the morning, he woke after Amos had left for the groves. His mother was warring with a near sighted old Negro laundress who didn't like the electric washing machine, so their talk would have to wait. He put his letter in his pocket and left the house. At the bridge, he stopped and talked to a couple of boys who were fishing from the rail. They were nice looking boys, brown and stringy with eyes already crinkled from squinting into the sun and hair bleached to the color of raw cotton. They spoke to him only guardedly. He was still a stranger as far as they were concerned. He climbed the slope to Tracy's. There was a big automobile with Ohio license plates parked in front of the store and a young man with rimless glasses and thinning hair sat at the wheel. He nodded and smiled as Sam strolled up. "Good morning," he said.

"Howdy," Sam answered. Instead of entering the store, he glanced casually each way and then sat on the edge of the porch with his legs stretched and crossed before him. In a moment the young man in the car cleared his throat and asked: "Say, buddy, is there any fishing in that river down there?"

Sam nodded slowly and thoughtfully and said: "Bass. Bream. Speckled perch. Catfish." Then he paused before adding, with the faintest tone of reproach, "That's Moccasin Branch."

"Oh, I see." There was another pause while Sam blandly surveyed the scene and the young man in the car whistled thinly. "Pretty wild out here," he said at length. "There much hunting?"

"Over around the swamp, mostly."

"Deer?"

"Some. Bear. Panther."

"No kidding? Bear and panther, hunh? That's really something. Many people live around here?"

"Couple hundred, I guess."

"Sure is wild country."

Sam did not deign to comment. He smiled. The young man flushed deeply and cleared his throat again, but the door of the store opened and a girl in slacks and a bandana came out and around the car to get in beside him. She tossed a couple of parcels to the back seat. "Say, honey," the young man said, "this fella tells me they've got bears and panthers out in these woods." The girl smiled very briefly and then slumped with her head on the back of the seat, her eyes closed, and an expression of imperfect resignation on her features.

Sam said: "Of an evening, you can hear the panthers yowling out there. Sounds like a woman screaming."

The girl's eyes opened, but Sam was already rising and turning to enter the store. The car started up behind him as he opened the screen door.

The store was cool and dark and smelt richly of meal and bacon and cheese, of canvas and new leather, of kerosene and chicken feed. Stan Tracy was alone in the store, slumped in a rickety chair behind the mail counter, his feet on a nail keg. He cocked his head around at Sam, nodded, but did not rise.

"'Lo, Trotter. What can we do for you?" he grumbled.

"An air mail stamp and a coke."

Laboriously, Stan rose, opened the drink box, extracted a bottle, uncapped it and set it on the counter. He found the stamp in a jumbled drawer and took Sam's letter. All this seemed to exhaust him, and he flopped back into his chair, grunting softly in affected world-weariness. Sam took a swallow of his drink and said: "You did all right at the fights."

"Won our share."

"You won most of Kennon's share, too."

Stan managed to convey, with the slightest movement of his head and one eyebrow, the effect of a conspiratorial confidence. Reaching to a shelf behind him, he selected a cigar,

unwrapped it, placed it in his mouth as carefully as if it were dynamite, and lit it with furious puffings. Through a pall of blue smoke he muttered: "Folks from Ohio state just through."

"I saw them."

"Heading for a fishing camp over by Panomee." He shook his head. "No better fishing in the state of Florida than right out yonder in Moccasin Lake."

"I believe it."

"A man that built a camp here could evermore clean up."

"I guess he could."

"I been keeping them boats across the road for eight months, and me and old Bobo been guiding on the lake, but you got to have a camp, put you up some cabins where folks can stay for a week if they want. We're too far out in the woods for anybody to want to come just for one day's fishing."

"Why don't you give it a try?" Sam asked.

"No land for it. You need a place right on the water with room for a dock and a mess of cabins."

"There's plenty of land for sale around here, I guess."

"You think your daddy would sell that piece he's got out there at the branch mouth?"

"I don't see why not."

"I'll make him a decent price on it."

"If you want, I'll tell him you're interested."

"Why don't you do that? We haven't got much cash money, but we'd make him a damn' fair square proposition."

The dim coolness of the store, the mixed rich scents and Stan's deep, slow monotone, were almost hypnotic. Time seemed gravely to suspend itself as the two men exchanged their carefully spaced remarks.

"Stan," Sam said, "I'm thinking about settling down."

"Is that the truth? Whereabouts?"

"Right here in Moccasin Branch."

"Now you're getting smart, my friend. Now you're talking." Stan gesticulated with his cigar. "I wouldn't live anywhere else. And I'll tell you why. There's a depression coming just as sure as worms wiggle. If it ain't next year it'll be year after. And around here, ain't nobody gonna starve. Not as long as the woods are full of game, they ain't. A man can plant a few hills of red potatoes and a patch of beans and count on the game for meat. We won't go hungry."

There was a long, unembarrassed silence.

"Those grays of yours," Sam said, "are mighty good chickens."

"Madigan stock," Stan replied. "The best there is. My daddy made that cross and he's been working on them for four or five years. He gave me a hatch of 'em last year and I been winning two for one."

"Is that so?"

"Gospel," Stan said. He struggled up out of his chair. "Come out here and I'll show you something."

Sam followed him through the store, through a storeroom full of cartons and sacks, and out into the sunlight. Under the trees behind the store stood three chicken boxes of lath and wire. In them were three of the grays: two stags and a hen. Stan and Sam squatted beside one box and Tracy put his hand, palm out, up to the wire. The stag eyed it curiously, ruffling his hackles.

"Pretty little things, ain't they?" Stan murmured, lost in admiration.

"They certainly are."

"I surely do hate to let 'em go."

"Let them go?"

"Selling 'em."

"To who?"

"Don't know. I'm gonna ask around." Stan sighed lugubriously. "Can't sell 'em to anybody around here, of course. We didn't breed these just to come up against them ourselves. I surely do hate to let 'em go." To Sam's questioning look he said: "Need some money. I figure these three should bring about what I need." Again he sighed. "First I ever sold."

"Why can't you sell them around here?"

"Liable to come up against my own chickens in the ring some day. No sir! If I let any of these babies out of my hands it's gonna be to somebody far away from Moccasin Branch. 'Course, I'd sell to somebody I knew I could trust, you understand, with the agreement he wouldn't pit them against me or sell any of the line."

The stag shuffled in his box, arched his sleek neck and crowed hoarsely. The other stalked to the nearest corner of his box and answered, ruffling his wings and shaking his head angrily.

"Don't they love to fight?" Sam whooped. "Wouldn't them two just love to tangle? And wouldn't they throw some steel?"

He rose and Sam followed him back into the store. Sam's unfinished drink was on the counter and while Stan resettled himself he thoughtfully drank the rest of it.

"How much you gonna ask for those chickens?" he inquired.

"Fifty dollars for the lot of them."

Sam nodded as if to say that seemed a fair price. As a matter of fact, he was shocked. "They ever fought?" he asked.

"Never a lick, except a little sparring. But they're ready to. I mean, they're right on edge. I was figuring on pitting them Sunday. And now I gotta sell them."

As Sam started to speak, the door creaked open and a tiny Negro boy, barefoot, entered swinging a two gallon jug. He hoisted it to the counter and said: "Jug of coal oil, Mr. Tracy."

As Stan filled the jug at the tank by the front door, the boy stood at the counter digging his toe into a crack in the floor and Sam wandered along the dusty shelves reading the labels on work gloves, boxes of shotgun shells, spools of cord and wire, all sorts of useful, competent, unadorned tools. When the boy had gone with his kerosene, Stan returned to his chair, Sam to his place by the counter.

"I might be interested in those chickens," he said.

Stan's eyebrows arched thoughtfully and he puffed a blue smoke screen. "Well," he said. "You want to fight them?"

"I sure do." That, Sam realized, was far too emphatic. "But," he said, "fifty dollars is a lot of money."

"That's how much I need. If it wasn't that I just needed that much, why I couldn't even put a price on them chickens. That's the truth." Sam tried to think of a way of backing up a little. Stan went on. "And you know what I said about the conditions."

"Oh, I understand that, all right." Through his mind flitted the thought that the Tracys were probably the most dangerous foes a cock fighter might come up against in

Moccasin Branch. There was nothing wrong with agreeing not to fight against them. "I'd be willing to agree to that," he said.

"All I ask," said Stan unctuously, "is a gentleman's word."

He offered his hand across the counter, and Sam took it. "How's your hands?" Stan asked heartily as he rose. Gwyneth had changed the dressings the night before, and the bandages were now only pads on his palms. The scrapes were already healing. "Oh, they're okay now," Sam said as he followed Stan once again through the back of the store. "It wasn't much."

"You're lucky that pig didn't get aholt of you. It was a good thing you're plenty fast."

"I got fast in a hurry when he went for me."

Sam remembered, only after Stan had offered to give him a lift home with the chickens, what Amos had told him about his mother's view of cock fighting. He decided, though, that that could be taken care of. He and Stan loaded the three boxes into the back of Stan's car and they drove up to the plant. Sam saw Emory Castle, the plant foreman, at work on the grading line, but Amos was not around. They drove around in back and unloaded the chickens and set them in the shade of a stand of lemon trees just above the plant. Stan brought a paper sack from the car.

"Here's a little grain for them. Better get some cans or something for water. They oughta have pens just as quick as you can get them built. Not good for them to be cramped up like this. You'll need a separate house for each stag, you know."

"Sure. We've got a lot of lumber and stuff around here. I can get to work on it this afternoon."

Stan offered his hand. "Well, sir," he said, "you've got yourself some real chickens there. I just ask you to keep our agreement in mind. When it comes fight time, you and me steer clear of each other. And you won't sell eggs or birds to anybody within fifty miles of Moccasin Branch, right?"

"Right."

When Stan had left, Sam remained beside the boxes for some time, admiring his chickens. They were lovely things, with their gleaming, graceful tails and their creamy shawls, stepping so fastidiously and so precisely, turning their shining eyes so frankly and curiously upon their new owner. When the hen seemed to be searching her box for something, Sam walked down to the packing house to find them some water pans. The Negroes unloading boxes of oranges from the truck grinned and nodded to him and he returned them a grave seigneurial salute. When he had supplied the chickens with

water in tin cans, he returned to the plant and interrupted the foreman at his work.

"Hello, Mr. Castle," he said. "I just want to ask you where I can get some spare lumber and some nails and a hammer and so forth. I want to build some chicken pens."

"Chicken pens?" croaked Castle. He was a slat-thin little Cracker with a long, ropy neck and expression of a fish.

"I just bought me some chickens. Games."

"_Game_ chickens?"

"That's right. Come take a look."

Castle followed him up to the lemon trees and gawked at the three chickens. "I'll be dogged," he said. He stooped and clucked at one of the stags. "You plan to take these up North with you?"

"I'm going to be staying here, Emory."

"Is that so? I'm glad to hear that. You gonna be around the groves?"

"That's what I planned on."

"They're nice looking," the foreman croaked. "You ever kept game chickens before?"

"No."

"Who you got to feed them for you?"

"Feed them? I can feed them."

"No, I mean <u>train</u> them, manage them. They take a lot of special treatment."

"I don't know. I haven't thought about it."

"Well, there's plenty of fellas around here that'd be glad to feed for you." He scratched his stringy neck. "Amos could do it, of course. Him and Walker kept some fine cocks long ago. What kind are they?"

"Madigan cross."

"Tracy's birds?"

"That's right."

"Old Man Tracy sell 'em to you?"

"No. Stan. He said he needed some money."

"I never heard of the Tracys selling any cocks. How much did you give him?"

"Fifty dollars. Too much?"

"It's hard to put a price on game chickens. Fifty ain't too much, if they're any good at all."

"I promised I wouldn't pit them against his chickens or sell any of them or their chicks or eggs." Sam liked the thought of him and Amos going together on the chickens. "I guess I'd better get started on those pens. Have we got any wire around the plant?"

"Why don't you let me take care of it? I'll put a couple of the men to work and I'll send down for a roll of wire."

"Have you got the men to spare?"

"I'll put a couple of packers on it. The fruit isn't coming in too fast today."

"Good enough. Where's Dad?"

"Don't know. He left here an hour ago. Didn't say when to look for him back."

Gwyneth, Sam thought, was probably still battling the laundress. Perhaps Mag Abel would be home. The pickup truck was by the plant office. He told Castle to let Amos know that he had taken it.

The Abel house was somehow less impressive in sharp daylight than in dusk. Mrs. Abel let him in and led him to the big living room. Following her, Sam thought that she was the sort of woman who wore clothes well. There was a fine flair to her, actually, that you didn't notice at first. She didn't have much of a figure, but she dressed right.

"I just dropped by," he said. "I thought Mag might be home."

Anne suffered a momentary confusion. The thought of telling Sam that Margaret was at school struck her as unthinkable, as if it would be a kind of informing on the girl.

"Margaret doesn't come home for lunch, Sam," she said. "But won't you sit down for a minute?"

"Oh, I just dropped by," he repeated, suddenly embarrassed. "I bought some chickens, and I though she might like to ride over and take a look at them."

"I'm sure she would. I hope you'll give her another chance. Are you already settling down to farming?"

With a smile, Sam took the chair she indicated. "Not exactly farming," he said. "I just bought three game chickens."

"Oh, you are going native, aren't you?"

"Is that the local vice?"

"That depends on whom you ask. Everyone expects me to be opposed to it, because they think I'm such an awful goody-goody, but I think there are some evils that take priority over rooster fighting."

Anne's playful self-deprecation, with its reference to the previous evening when Sam, Abel and Mag had laughed at her pretty squeamishness, relaxed them both. They settled a little more easily into the big leather chairs they had taken, facing one another across the cavernous fireplaces with its guardian gargoyles, and smiled.

The passing of that momentary tension gave Anne a chance to study Sam more thoughtfully than she had the night before. He was an attractive young man, she thought. Not the thin, talky sort at all, as she had thought at first, but quite open and earnest looking. He showed the kind of

superficial poise that Anne associated with young men who had never been jostled by the world.

"I didn't know," he said, "that Moccasin Branch offered any vices more serious than the cock pit."

"I'd better change the subject. I've learned better than to talk about the vices of Moccasin Branch. I'm still a foreigner, you know."

"I know what you mean."

"Well, that's one of the vices. I really resent being still a foreigner. It's my home now, and I've gotten to like it. But it seems I'm still the Yankee girl."

"Yes, it's funny," Sam said, "you've probably lived here more than I have, but I was born here so they'll let me back in without a question."

"That's the whole point," she exclaimed, fussing excitedly with some stray hairs on the back of her neck. "It's a family matter. The whole town acts like a family that resents outsiders."

"My mother wasn't born here either, you know."

"Then ask her how she got accepted, will you?"

Sam's instant thought was that his mother was "the type" and that Anne was not, and it piqued him that this thought was complimentary to Anne but not to Moccasin Branch. As he studied it, in fact, that was a disturbing idea.

"How long have you been here now?" he asked.

"Oh, Lord," she sighed. "Years and years. Don't make me figure up how old I am."

"Do you really like it here?"

"Yes, I really do. It's subjective, I suppose. This is where I spent my happiest years, when Margaret was little. That's how a woman thinks of those things, Sam. A woman treasures her children's childhood the way a man treasures his own childhood."

Sam nodded. That struck him as a very acute thought. "Well," he said, "this is where I spent my childhood."

"I remember you," she said. "I suddenly remember you. You used to come mow our lawn. You were brown as an Indian and I was always worried that you'd have a heat stroke, the way you went at your work. You must have been about fourteen."

"That was me," he said. "Always the hard worker."

"When did you leave?"

"Well, I went to the university when I was seventeen and at the end of the year I was drafted."

"And you didn't come home?"

"No for long. I went to business school after that."

"Where?"

"The University of Illinois."

"Why in the world did you go up there?"

"I had an Army buddy who'd been there and was going back. His descriptions of the wild campus life decided me, so I went up there and then after a year I went to the University of Chicago to finish."

"And what made you pick that one?"

"Oh, I heard about the big intellectual life up there. And I wanted to be in the city, too."

"I've heard that Chicago is a wonderful school."

"I guess so. After Illinois, it was pretty tough. I didn't take much part, I'm afraid. There were all those intellectuals, all right, but I was sort of self conscious. I was sort of high horse about everything. I'd go to these parties, for instance, and there was something about being with a lot of kids talking Liberal politics that made me take the other side. I took up for the Republicans, sort of as a joke, and when they all took it so seriously, I got mad. You know what I mean?" Thinking of his college days, Sam knew that his insincerity had been of a graver sort than he was admitting now. He'd lost so much, and missed so much then. "I guess," he continued, "I was just an ornery Moccasin Branch kid."

"What did you do when you graduated?"

"Accounting. I went with a tax firm. Pretty dull stuff."

The dullness of accountancy, with axiomatic stature, stood obstinately between them for a moment.

"Sometimes I wish I could get away to a city for a while," Anne said. "I'd like to go to a concert now and then, or see a play. Even a visit to St. Louis is welcome, but all my relatives have moved away from there now, and I have no excuse for a trip." She was touched to discern a subtle change in Sam since he'd talked of his college. He leaned back, pulling down his chin in a self effacing way, and seemed to retreat regretfully into the arms of his chair.

"And now," she said firmly, "you're going to change everything."

"No, I'm just going to do the things I like to do. I'm going to be able to go fishing when I want to, and go hunting, and own a dog."

"And fighting chickens."

"That's right." He smiled proudly. "And pretty good ones, I think."

"Wonderful. I hope all your roosters win."

"Thank you, Ma'am," he answered with a bow of his head. "And now I think I'll be getting along."

"Why don't you have lunch with us?"

"Oh, I couldn't do that," he said as he rose. "I'd really better go."

"There's plenty for three, and Fred will be in soon."

As a matter of fact, General Abel came into the house as they stood in the hall, his topee in his hand, and growled a second to the invitation. Sam called his mother and told her he wouldn't be home for lunch.

They ate at the kitchen table, with many apologies from Anne and gruff demands from the General that they have lunch without a lot of fuss. It was a pleasant meal. The General was in a high good humor. He'd been to Oaks to talk to a man about a lumber contract. He'd bullied the contractor into signing, and all the way back he'd thought about Margaret and Sam with dry satisfaction. After his talk with Mag in her room the night before, he felt that, without either of them saying it, they'd agreed on this young man as Mag's first. The General was a man who preferred things unsaid, for things said had a way of becoming messy, and he believed that, after all, there was seldom anything to be said between people who kept themselves unmessy. One either felt things truly and simply or one did not, in which case there was no use talking at all.

To Anne and Sam he said, as he spooned his soup hungrily: "Counted eleven rabbits dead in the road between Oaks and the turn-off. It's the dry weather. They're thirsty and the usual water holes are dried up. They're

looking for water, and eleven of them at least, ran across the highway to look."

"Fred!"

"It can become serious, you know. Your father's irrigating, isn't he?"

"Not all of the groves," Sam said. "But he's got a good start."

"I'll bet Tracy's vegetables don't amount to much this year. He'll be lucky to break even." The General cocked his head at Sam in a curious, squint-eyed way. "Are you still a Brancher?" he growled.

"I guess so. What do you mean?"

"Just wondered if you'd had any second thoughts."

"No so far. As a matter of fact, I bought a few chickens this morning."

"Chickens?"

"Game chickens. Madigans. Two stags and a hen."

"Did you?" murmured the General, and that peculiar down turned smile flickered. "Who's handling them for you?"

"My father."

"That's right. Amos used to keep some chickens, with his brother." The General reflected. "As I remember, they did very well with them. Amos kept them and Walker pitted them. They had Albanys. Where'd you get these chickens of yours?"

"I bought them from Stan Tracy. He needed some quick money."

The General laughed sourly. "His sons are all grown men, and Al Tracy still keeps them on allowances. That's why they're all such workers. They're trying to grub up some money of their own."

"He said he was bringing these stags up to fight next time. They're in good shape."

"Stan knows how to train his chickens, all right." The General was increasingly amused. This whole business of Sam's deciding to be a Brancher struck him as a fine comedy of impertinence. It was that which put the final edge on his selection as a sacrifice to Mag. Even as the General went on making talk, that comedy played itself out in his mind, though only in the vaguest terms, for even with himself the General preserved that aversion to things said. He knew--he _felt_--how it would go. Sam would pursue Mag, all glowing with his desperate virility, and in the winning of her, or what would seem the winning, he would know the crucial difference between his poor desperation and the real thing. Because, the General felt, Sam would think, true to his kind and his day, of love without tears, love as a gentle yielding. For the truth was not in him. Abel did not despise Sam, for all this, nor did he pity him. Sam would teach Mag something. She would see, at its most

intimate, the pathetic emptiness of a soft soul. For her to see inside, they must cut it open. The General fancied he had taught his daughter a great deal. Sam, ironically, would teach her more. He would teach her the power that was in her. He would prove to her what her father had tried to make her understand: the strength that lies in loving reality at its barest and simplest. So the General listened, and was pleased, as Sam talked of fighting cocks and hounds, of hunting and fishing, of the pine woods and the swamps--parading his needs and his vulnerability.

Anne took little part in the conversation. It seemed to her that this kind of talk was a sort of male equivalent of female gossip, an institution far beside the point of life, a pastime. She knew her husband well. All through lunch she kept thinking that he was just about to bait the eager, earnest young man, and if that happened she stood ready to try to spare them both. The General, she knew, was forever despising and degrading all things simple and candid and earnest. She decided there at lunch, for the first time in her life daring to judge him, that it was not fair.

When Sam returned to the plant, Amos' car was still not there. He went in through the front office and in the processing room he found Castle, smeared with grease to his elbows, working on a dismantled gear box under the conveyor.

"Howdy, Emory," he called. "What's the trouble?"

"Bearings on these belt wheels," the little red necked man said hoarsely. "The chases are worn. We throw a belt about twice a day. Your dad still ain't been in." He kicked the shaft housing. "Shot," he declared. "You can only run one of these rigs for so long."

"How old is it?"

"Far as I know, it's been here since the groves started bearing. Thirty-five or forty years, maybe."

"Have you talked to Amos about it?"

Castle did not immediately reply, and when he looked up from his jumble of gears and parts, Sam was startled at the angry, screwed up face the foreman showed him. He looked as if he might burst into tears. "Amos knows," he said. His voice almost squeaked. But he turned back to his work and began assembling the gear box.

There was something wrong. Castle's pathetic, defenseless anger jarred Sam's expansive mood. He hesitated.

"What's the matter?" he asked softly.

"I can fix it."

"I don't mean with that thing."

Castle shook his head and made a gulping sound. Sam glanced around. The Negro girls at the culling tables were watching him curiously. With the line stopped, there was

nothing for them to do. Sam squatted beside Castle and watched him work for a moment.

"You and Dad have some kind of falling out?" he asked with an indulgent smile.

"No! We ain't had no falling out."

"Little difference of opinion about running things?"

Castle continued his work. Then he put down his wrench and reached up to tap the slack power belt with one finger. "All new belts two years ago," he said. "Some new kind of rubber and fabric stuff. Fancy." He pointed to the grading tables where the silent girls sat watching them. "New mats on the grader. Cork. Lots of stuff like that."

"And you," Sam smiled, "think he ought to put the money into the transmission system. Right?"

"Maybe."

Sam was afraid he had handled this all wrong. Castle was no longer frustrated and whining. He had turned wily and dignified, pursing his thin, dry lips like a school teacher.

"Well," Sam said, "I guess this irrigation system has taken up a lot of Amos' time lately."

"What irrigation system?" Castle squealed. "What irrigation system have we got, I'd like to know? That god-damned rig hasn't delivered five thousand gallons of water

so far. Until them tiles is laid it won't. And dry weather's here. Are we laying tile? No, we ain't." His eyes watered and his red face went a shade darker. They both knew instantly that he had betrayed himself into Sam's hands. Sam could put him in his place now, or make him spit it all out. He hesitated. If there was some quarrel, he could hear it from Amos; and this was too much like prying. But he thought of that trip he'd taken through the groves with Amos, of how poor and run down everything had seemed. And there was something about Castle, too, that made him hesitate, a tone of familiar and ever futile argument. And perhaps, too, something was left in him from that moment he had stood with Amos at the pump house, feeling two feet taller than his father.

"Can you spare a few minutes, Emory?" he asked.

"I reckon so." Castle had the air of relief that a man shows when he's sentenced after a long and humiliating trial. He finished up, bolted the housing into place and scrubbed his hands with waste. Then he went to the wall nearby and threw a switch. The engines started. He came back and released the clutch and with a clink and rattle the processing line started up. The belts hummed, the fruit tumbled along the new cork grading tables and the girls in their bright bandanas bent once again to the job of culling.

so far. Until them tiles is laid it won't. And dry weather's here. Are we laying tile? No, we ain't." His eyes watered and his red face went a shade darker. They both knew instantly that he had betrayed himself into Sam's hands. Sam could put him in his place now, or make him spit it all out. He hesitated. If there was some quarrel, he could hear it from Amos; and this was too much like prying. But he thought of that trip he'd taken through the groves with Amos, of how poor and run down everything had seemed. And there was something about Castle, too, that made him hesitate, a tone of familiar and ever futile argument. And perhaps, too, something was left in him from that moment he had stood with Amos at the pump house, feeling two feet taller than his father.

"Can you spare a few minutes, Emory?" he asked.

"I reckon so." Castle had the air of relief that a man shows when he's sentenced after a long and humiliating trial. He finished up, bolted the housing into place and scrubbed his hands with waste. Then he went to the wall nearby and threw a switch. The engines started. He came back and released the clutch and with a clink and rattle the processing line started up. The belts hummed, the fruit tumbled along the new cork grading tables and the girls in their bright bandanas bent once again to the job of culling.

Castle trudged past Sam, who followed him to the front and into Amos' dusty office. There Castle turned and waited like a schoolboy in the principal's office.

"Tell me about this irrigation system," Sam said.

"All right." Castle went to a table behind Amos' desk and found a roll of blueprint. With it under his arm, he got his hat from the rack and led Sam out into the road. He pointed down at the pump house.

"Yonder's the pump house," he said.

"I've seen it."

"Then you've seen that Diesel engine we got. You think we need a Diesel? A damned model-A motor would run all the pump we need. But we got a heavy pump. We can fill our tank in fifteen minutes. We've got no need to, but we can. Come down here." At the bank of the branch, Castle leaned out and pointed in under the pump house. "The pump draws its water out of that sump down there. It's a concrete sump with a screen filter to keep trash out of the pump. You can see the screen there. You know what's gonna happen if the branch drops another six inches? That pump's gonna start sucking air."

He motioned for Sam to follow him and went back up beside the plant. He pointed up to the water tower. "Yonder is a twenty-two hundred gallon tank. We need a ten thousand gallon tank. In fact, this plan calls for two of them; one

here and one up at the head of the land. But if we had them tanks, they wouldn't be no use, 'cause the tiles ain't laid. Look here." He unrolled the blueprint and held it before Sam. "Here's the plan Amos had drawn up for the whole business. Pretty. All figured out in acre inches and lines of fall and inches of head and everything. Five and a half miles of tiled ditch with twenty-two control gates. How much of it have we got? The expensive part."

"Why?"

"You tell me."

Sam took the plans. He could make out what it represented, but the figures meant nothing to him. "How much have we spent so far?" he asked.

"I don't know," Castle croaked. Then he changed his mind. "The survey and these plans cost a hundred and fifty dollars, alone. The pump and the diesel come to about four hundred, after the sump and the house was built. The tank was eighty-five dollars. The steel tower for it was about fifty, I'd say. I guess the water pipe cost another hundred, maybe less. Then there's all that tile we got lying out there in the groves. I don't know about that. There's five and a half miles of it at about forty cents a foot."

The figures performed automatically in Sam's head, but he rejected them instantly. Then he did the multiplication again, slowly.

"That's not possible," he said sickly.

"What do you make it?" asked Castle nervously.

"That comes to more than ten thousand dollars," Sam said.

"That's what I figure."

"Is it paid for?"

"I don't know. I don't look at the books."

"Where does Amos keep his books? Does he take care of them himself?"

"They're in the safe," Castle answered. He wet his lips. "It ain't generally locked, though."

That, Sam thought, is something I can understand. Castle might be making a row over nothing. He might just be scared because things had gotten too big for him. But the books would tell.

"What else is there?" Sam asked.

Castle shrugged. "Well, there's the wiers."

"What's that?"

"Well, they're not really wiers, exactly. They're control gates for the water. They're sort of little dams that lead the water into the rows. As far as I know, they ain't even been ordered. This plan calls for twenty-two of them. If we had the whole business going otherwise, what would we do to spread the water? Put niggers up there with

buckets? Listen, Sam, I just don't understand it. It ain't my place to be talking about all this, but you said you're going to be around here a while."

"That's right."

"Well, I don't understand Amos. We got this plan and all, and paid for it. And then Amos makes changes where changes won't do. Then he leaves out the parts that make the system work. All we've done is spent money. So far we ain't moved more than five thousand gallons."

"You've talked to Amos about this, haven't you?"

"I sure have."

"Then you're not talking out of turn. You've got the right to your say, and I'm in on it now. If there's anything else on your mind, why don't we talk about it all right now?"

Castle heaved a sigh like a death rattle. Sam's assurances had helped him little. He was frightened, but he'd gone too far. Sam said: "It's confidential, of course."

"There's trees, then," Castle said grimly. "We've got all those Temples. Your Temple's a fine orange, and it fetches a good price. But they're thin skinned. They gotta be handled like eggs. We're losing ten per cent in spoilage because we don't handle them right. We ain't got the men or the machines to handle them right. You scratch one of them oranges and the mold gets to it in a minute.

We've got some Parson Browns, of course, but they're not too hardy and they grade small. Our lemons are off the same old stock they were growing fifty years ago. Tough as leather. We oughta move with the times and put in some of these new strains. Some of our trees are beginning to taper off on their bearing. We ain't got the stock started to replace them.

"I don't know how much you know about this business, Sam, but I've been in it a long time. So's Amos. He knows what you've got to do. He knows the trees need clearing. He knows there's new fertilizers on the market. And you take cover crops. You can't cover your young trees with just any kind of weeds or grass, but Amos..."

"But Amos" was the refrain of a plaint which took nearly two hours as Sam walked beside the foreman up through the groves, among the tangled, uncleared trees and past the dusty stacks of clay tile. It came to this: The groves were losing money and Amos was wasting capital. Toward the end, Sam almost stopped listening. He couldn't understand most of it, anyway, or not enough to know if Castle were right. There was no use bothering about the details. He had to see the books. He was no citrus expert, no irrigation engineer, but he was an accountant.

Going back down to the plant, they came to the grove of lemons where two Negroes were finishing up the pens for

Sam's new chickens. "Just about ready," one of them reported. Sam and Castle watched them fit the hinged roofs to the two pens. Castle sent one of them down to the plant for a couple of strips of tar paper to put over the roofs. Then he and Sam caught the birds and dropped them into their new homes. The chickens began immediately to purr and scratch in the grass. After a moment the lone stag saw the others in their pen and gave them an indignant stare.

"That there boy without no girl friend oughta fight good," said the Negro.

"He's got something to fight for, ain't he?" Castle said, and the Negro laughed.

Watching those fine, proud, angry stags stalking their pens, Sam's feelings were lifted a bit. He and Castle went down to the plant and the foreman returned to his work. For a few minutes, Sam wandered about the processing room, inspecting the equipment. He ate an orange from the grading tables. For a while, he watched the packers filling the boxes and wiring them tight with dextrous twists. A boy with a dripping brush pasted a label to each box: Moccasin Branch Groves, with a picture of a smiling Seminole girl holding a basket of golden oranges. Next he went outside and stood where the trucks were unloaded as they came in from the groves. The men that handled them worked stripped to the waist, running with sweat and caked with dust. As

they swung the heavy boxes, the muscles knotted and rolled under their black skins. He went around to the front. Amos' car was still not there. He went into the front office and closed the door to the processing room. The safe was open. He cleared Amos' desk and laid the ledgers and account books before him, sharpened two pencils and washed his hands. He tried not to think what he would say if Amos surprised him. It had to be done. He'd thought at first he could simply talk it over with his father, but that wasn't going to do. From a ledger, he knew how to find a certainty.

The books were in surprisingly orderly shape. Amos was keeping precise and complete records of the sure course to disaster that he seemed to have charted. After twenty minutes work, Sam was satisfied. He leaned back in the chair and clasped his hands behind his head. It was pretty bad. A man like Castle would be frightened. Now that Sam knew, though he was no longer worried. There were things to be done. He'd have to take hold quickly.

CHAPTER VI

The town of Moccasin Branch had its beginning in 1891. Cyrus Trotter was an Alabama cotton and timber broker, bankrupt by the chaos of Reconstruction and angrily convinced that he was destined for great things. He had come with two friends who had their troubles, too, and they had built their settlement as far from cities and commerce as they could get it--partly because land was cheap and they all wanted land, and partly because of that pitiful terror they shared of banks and business. Cyrus had built his house just at the mouth of Moccasin Branch and his friend Marshall Abel had built right across from him. Those two houses, built down in the marshes, were two mistakes. William Tracy, the third pioneer, had been wiser, but then, he was the oldest and had been a farmer until (and he had never understood just how) the bankers had gotten his land. He built on the high ground where now his son and his grandsons had their store.

They did well, except for Trotter. He and Abel built a sawmill that immediately rode on a rising demand for cypress. But Cyrus hungered to be a farmer and heard wonderful things of the citrus business. He mortgaged his interest in the sawmill to get his start. He planted his oranges where the drainage was poor and the air didn't move.

Then he fought the rot, the insects, the molds and scales and diseases, and the frost. He harvested oranges the size of walnuts, and with no more juice. There was more work than he and his two sons could handle, so it was a serious matter when young Walker ran away. And by the time Walker came back to throw his romantic fortune in his father's face, Cyrus had sold out to the Abels and was an old man, haunted by his own handiwork: those rotting, insect-ridden orange trees.

Tracy, on the other hand, had farmed up in the sandy loam, where the farming was good, and then had branched out into cattle and swine and chickens and store keeping and politics. He was the only one of the three who paid any attention to those people over at the county courthouse, and his influence grew with his money.

Abel put his sawmill money to work in land speculation and was soon very well off himself, but some hidden string in him was suddenly and romantically plucked by the finger of history and he went off to fight in Cuba. He was commissioned, he fought, and he was copiously decorated. He came home to find that his wife, who he'd left in charge of the business, was as shrewd and capable as he could ever be, and he told her that he believed he'd stay in the Army. She was satisfied. She had her two children and she liked the feel of the business reins.

All the while the town grew up around them. When young Walker Trotter built his citrus packing plant and laid out his groves, this time on the rolling land across the branch from town, he and Mrs. Abel went together to build the shacks by the stream where they housed the Negroes they brought in to work at the plant and the sawmill. They acted in combination quite often, partly in an effort to outmaneuver the Tracys. Of the three families, the Tracys were the largest to begin with and the second generation was now beginning to proliferate mightily. By sheer weight of numbers they were shouldering aside the Abel and the Trotter interests.

In 1917, with a population of 128, the town was incorporated. The three pioneers, with their very own town now living and breathing, had passed out of the picture. Abel had died early that year in Texas, of dysentery. Before the year was out, Bill Tracy was to drown while fishing in Moccasin Lake. Only Cyrus Trotter lived on with the town, a pot-bellied, peevish old man, stewing in his martyrdom, refusing for weeks on end to talk to his sons, dying at last as gracelessly as he had lived, in 1923. His last words were mumbled curses on the Republican Party.

* * * * *

At the mouth of the branch, Amos sat upon the little tumbledown dock that was all that was left of the homeplace his father had built. He'd been fishing. His rod and tackle were upon the dock beside him, but he wasn't ready to go back to the house or the plant. He sat and looked down at the slow rolling water and thought of his sons. For an instant there it was is if the memory of thirty years were frighteningly compressed and foreshortened. How quickly, and with what awful purposefulness, they had passed through his life! First they were babies and a wonder and a mystery, and then they were briefly boys and all his pride, and then Amby was dead four thousand miles away and Sam was gone off to make his life in another kind of world.

On the far side of the branch was an opening in the trees, once a clearing but now overgrown. Back in the shadows he could see the skeleton of the old Abel house. Creepers swarmed the walls, the top of the chimney was gone and through the glassless windows he could see weeds and brush that had sprung up through the rotten floor. The place was said by the children to be haunted, but Amos thought it looked rather as if the jungle was haunted by the gray ghost of this house it had killed. And it was still trying to put it down for good.

He wondered what Sam thought of him. Sam was so busy and serious, and he had such a sharp way of looking at things

and people--not exactly scheming, but always looking for a yes or a no. He was smart, all right. But did he take time enough? Did he feel? Wondering what Sam thought about him, Amos felt a sort of guilty resentment.

It was the consuming wonder of Amos Trotter's life, that in everything a man does or speaks or wants he is forcing himself upon the sacred and secret lives of others. In truth, he was a man so often surprised by himself that he was cautious of evaluating others. He saw the world a sum of infinite imponderables, all sacred, and he reserved judgment.

Leaving his tackle on the dock, he rose and walked with deliberate and leisurely steps up through the brambles and into the brush beyond the two ruts of the old road. He strode through the dry weeds, the ground about his feet erupting with locusts in whirring flight, and into the trees. Four great old orange trees with branches spreading thirty feet grew here, placed in a square. The flagstone walk had run up between them, but they had pried up the stones when they tore down the house. The trees had not been cared for in years, but they were still strong and there was a little fruit on them. No one bothered to come down here to pick them, and the ground beneath each tree was covered with the decayed fruit of many seasons. A tart sickly odor rose from around each of them. Continuing on, Amos came to stand, as

nearly as he could guess, for there was only a tangled clearing before him, where the front steps of the old house had been, the house they had lived in until Walker had come home to change everything. The house Amos' father had built.

The clearing was broken on Amos' left by one tree, a tall, slender, smooth barked tree with gracefully upthrust limbs. Among its thorns were flowers, five or six greenish yellow blossoms just opening. It was a buckthorn, the kind they used to call a lotus tree. His mother had hated to leave it here. She had wanted it moved with them to the new place, but Walker had convinced her that it was too big to uproot, and that it probably wouldn't live up there on the hill so far from water. Amos could hear his mother's voice (Why! it had been right here, right at the front steps. He and Walker and his mother and father had been moving furniture.) as she complained: "I put that tree in with my own hands. We'll just dig it up and put it in the truck and take it with us." Walker had laughed and set down a load of framed pictures and said: "You and your lotus tree! It'll die up there, Mama." "What difference is that?" she'd asked. But Walker said, "Don't worry about it, Mama. You'll have a plenty of trees up on the hill. I'll buy you a magnolia tree. How's that?" But the old lady had smiled and shook

her head. "You'll know, when you're my age, how it is with things like trees."

Wading through the thick weeds, Amos went to the tree and looked up at one of the blossoms. He put out his hand and softly touched a petal of it. He put his finger on the point of one of the long thorns, testing its cruel, unyielding sharpness. He was sorry now that he had not taken his mother's part. She had been right and he did know, now, how it was with things like trees. They should have tried to move it for her, or never taken her from it. One must be so careful.

He started back to the dock, but paused between the big orange trees and looked back at the place where the house had been. His father had asked so little! Just to be his own man, and have his own place.

He was home in time for lunch, but Gwyneth told him that Sam had phoned that he was having his lunch with the Abels. Afterward, he had to drive over and talk some business with Al Tracy, so it was late afternoon before he finally went back by the plant, just as the workers were leaving. Castle told him that Sam had been looking for him and had left the plant only a little before. The foreman said: "I was glad to hear about Sam staying down here, Amos."

"So were we all, Emory."

"I guess he'll be coming in with you on the groves, hunh?"

"I think so."

"That'll be mighty nice," Castle said. He seemed strangely nervous about all this.

"Was he over here to start to work already?" Amos laughed.

"He was just looking around at things, I guess. He bought a pen of game chickens from Stan Tracy and we put up coops for them over in them lemon trees."

"Game chickens?"

"He got two stags and a hen."

"You go on, Emory. I'll lock up."

When Castle had gone, Amos closed the back doors and went to his office. He dusted everything and straightened up his papers and his desk. With a little shifting around, he thought, there'd be room for another desk, or perhaps they could put in another partition and make two smaller offices. Sam would want to handle the books, of course. At that thought, Amos sat in the swivel chair and frowned at the desk before him. He'd let things go, he knew, pretty badly. A lot of things, he'd put off. It had become hard to take any real interest, these last few years. But if Sam were coming home! He locked up the front and walked up

into the lemons. There were the chickens, all right, scratching away in their two new coops. One of the stags eyed him truculently. Madigan grays. Nice looking birds. And that was Sam's way, too, to make up his mind and go whole whole hog without hesitating. He felt now that he'd been unfair to his son earlier, wondering about him, feeling half afraid of him and his judgments.

* * * * *

Sam wanted to talk to Amos alone, but there was no chance for it that night and Amos' merriment at Sam's home-coming was still in command. Sam was a little impatient at it. That decision was made, it was a fact and he was ready to go on to the next thing. That next thing was clear, too, it was the groves. He had to know a lot, and he had to know if Amos realized what bad shape the business was in. He decided it would be best to go to the plant with Amos in the morning. There they could talk. As for his mother, he still owed her a hearing, too. He could take care of that before breakfast. He was pleased and encouraged during dinner when she observed, as Amos was talking of "surprise", that she had "had a feeling" all along about Sam coming back. She was weaving him into her scheme of things.

After dinner he repossessed the room on the second floor that had been his before he went away. Since then, it

had been stripped of him, but a little searching unearthed his boyhood. In back of the chiffonier, tightly rolled, was the Confederate flag he had found in the cemetery at Selma the summer they went to Alabama to visit his mother's family. In the bottom drawer of the dresser was a collection of oddments neatly boxed and labeled "Sam's Things": flint arrowheads, a turtle shell, a Canadian coin, two corked vials containing nothing, the skull of a snake. In the back of the closet he found his first pair of leather boots, mildewed and cracking. In a shoe box on the shelf he came across something puzzling.

There was a yellowed piece of paper covered with drawings, and what seemed to be carved pieces for a machine of some sort. It was his, undoubtedly. His hand had written across the top of the sheet: Plans and Specifications. The drawing below was nothing Sam could recognize. Dimensions were neatly lettered in pencil, and arrows which seemed to indicate movement. Taking up the carved pieces and one piece cut out of tin, he tried to fit them together in the way shown by the plan, but the plan didn't show how they were to be fastened. Holding the contraption before him, he tried moving various parts to see if he could get some idea of the way it was supposed to work. It didn't seem to do anything. He put it aside and went on rummaging. He found a jar full of mule teeth and a broken alcohol compass,

but then he went back to that ridiculous, meaningless piece of machinery. He put it together again and looked again at the careful plans. It remained as enigmatic and irrelevent as a dream thing.

He found the little single shot rifle Walker gave him when he was twelve, wrapped in oil cloth, oiled, and set on the closet shelf. Amos must have been taking care of it. That had always been hung on pegs over his bed, but the pegs were taken out now and the wall was repapered. He would put it back, he decided. It wasn't a very good rifle. Walker told him that when he gave it to him. "When you get where you can kill anything with that rifle," he scowled, "you'll be a good shot and a woodsman, 'cause you'll have to get damned close on the game."

Walker was coming clearer to him now, Sam thought. He must have been the kind of man Abel admired, the man who knows he is alive, and tests his aliveness from day to day, whetting it against only the hardest stones he could find. Sam looked down at the bandages on his palms. That, he thought, was the first sharp feeling I had had in years. He meant more than just the pain he'd felt in his hands, he meant his fright and the leap for the tree and all of it.

He undressed and lay down and went to sleep thinking about that morning in the swamp. He'd probably never have another chance at that big fish he'd lost, but perhaps

there'd be another meeting with the pig. Maybe they could go after it with dogs, he and Bobo and maybe his father. It had to be killed.

He went to the kitchen the next morning before his father was up, while Gwyneth was starting breakfast. She poured him a cup of coffee, then she ceremoniously dried her hands and sat down at the kitchen table across from him.

He sipped his coffee. "Well," he said, "what do you think about having another mouth to cook for?"

"I think it'll be grand, Sam. Have you definitely made up you mind?"

"Signed and sealed."

She regarded him thoughtfully out of the corner of her eye. "This came about awfully suddenly, didn't it?"

"Not really. I've been dissatisfied with things for quite a while."

"Well, I expected that, to tell the truth, Sam. You're an independent young man. It's the Welsh in you. I've had an idea you were about through with that office, but there's always the straw that breaks the camel's back. You didn't have a fight with your boss, did you?"

"No, we're friends. I just made up my mind."

"You've got a job, son, and you've worked awfully hard to get where you are. I wouldn't just throw it over in a minute." She reached out to touch his arm gently. "You haven't by any chance got the idea that you ought to come home to take care of the old folks? Because I think Amos and I could scrape through on our own."

"No."

She rose and put a frying pan on the stove. "Well, I can't say I'm surprised, Sam. I've kind of had a feeling you'd wind up back home, but I didn't expect it so soon. I thought you still had a lot of youthful running around to do yet."

"I'm not exactly thinking of retiring. As a matter of fact, in a few years I probably wouldn't want to come back. I want to feel the sun on my head while I'm still young enough to enjoy it. If anything, I'm coming out of hibernation." He thought for a moment. "Gwyn," he said, "what did you think of Moccasin Branch when you first came here?"

"Lord! I felt like I'd come to the ends of the earth. This was still like a frontier, then."

"Did you like it?"

"Yes, I did. Everyone here was so open and friendly, I liked it right away."

"No one ever treated you like an outsider?"

"Oh, they tried to, but I can get along with anyone, Sam. I just let them alone, and went my own way, and after a while they got used to me. Walker helped. I was his sister-in-law, and nobody around here cared to step on his toes."

Sam watched his mother working over her cooking, confident and at ease. "What was Walker really like?" he asked.

"Why, you remember Walker, Sam."

"I don't know. I was only a kid when he died."

"Well, with Walker it all depended on what he thought of you. He was pretty hardboiled with anyone that he didn't like, but with those he loved he had a heart as big as the world. He didn't take any foolishness from anyone, though, and when those eyes of his went sort of cold and gray, he meant trouble. He had the sweetest tenor you ever heard. When he got a little bit high, he could bring tears to your eyes with his singing."

"What made him tick?"

"Independence. That was what he prized more than anything else."

"Then why did he come back here after he made all his money?"

"Just to throw it in his father's face." She pursed her lips thoughtfully. "But I think Walker actually loved

his father very much. He cried like a child when grandpa died. I think he was sorry for all their squabbling over the years. He loved him, but he still had to show his independence. It was too bad."

Somehow Sam felt that was all too simple and superficial. He had hoped Gwyneth might give him a better hint, might just say something that would open Walker Trotter to him a little more clearly. Sam had begun to think it would clarify a lot if he could only get hold, some way, of the _real_ Walker, not some kind of simple abstraction, but the living breath of the man who'd been driven by something to make a legend of himself. But Gwyn's picture of Walker was, he suspected, no better than his own boyish memory. What she would remember, he feared, was only that she had understood Walker.

As Sam was finishing his coffee, Amos came in. He was very chipper through breakfast, and as he was having his second coffee he pushed back his chair and cocked his head at Gwyneth.

"Mrs. Trotter," he said, "the men-folks are going fishing. We need some meat scraps. How about some nice greasy gristle?"

"You, Mr.. Trotter, sound like you're drunk."

"No, but I may be before long."

"As I recall, you went fishing yesterday morning. I thought you worked over in the groves."

"Oh, that's an easy outfit to work for, over there. They give a fella a morning off whenever the weather's good. How about the bait?"

"I suppose I can find something," she said with a smile.

"Now, Sam," Amos said. "I'll start teaching you something about the orange grove business. We'll need a spool of heavy line, about a dozen sinkers and medium hooks, and a box of Mason jars and a tow sack. I'll go hunt up a sack and the jars and you get the line and the rest of it. And we'd better get moving. This is a highly competitive business."

They collected their gear and threw it all in the back of the pickup. In addition, Amos fetched a bottle of his good whisky from the store room in a paper bag.

As they drove down toward the branch, Amos seemed immensely pleased with himself--more excited, really, than he had been the night before. "I thought a little lazy fishing," he said, "would give us a good chance for a talk together." Sam nodded.

"How'd you talk Stan out of those chickens?"

"He needed some money."

"Mind if I ask what you gave for them?"

"Fifty dollars."

"That's not bad. If you get any chicks out of that hen, you'll be way ahead on the deal."

"I wanted to ask you to train them for me," Sam said. "At least, until I catch on. And I'll have to have somebody to handle them in the ring."

"Well, let's get Emory to help out. He probably knows more about keeping games than I do, anyway."

"Fine."

"You can take it easy for a while yet, if you want to Sam. There's time enough for you to start worrying about those orange groves."

Sam felt that this was a chance to speak, but he remained silent. He didn't really know, now, what he was going to say. Amos' high spirits had somehow deflated Sam. He did not feel, just then, as sure as he had felt the day before in the office. But it was there in the books! he remembered. It was true.

"How long's it been," Amos asked with a broad smile, "since you've been jugging?"

"Since I was a kid, I guess."

"Well, you need a little lazy man's fishing after all that fly rodding and rowing around. If the catfish will leave us be, we can take our ease."

The motor was on the boat, so all they had to do was park the truck in the shade and carry their gear to the dock, load and shove off. It was a sunny day, but not hot. Just a perfect day for jugging. Amos took the tiller as they headed downstream, under the bridge, past the church and then the pump house, and out into the flat country where the branch ran slow and dark between grassy banks and cypresses that tilted precariously out over the stream.

The branch was fifty feet wide where Amos finally cut the motor and tilted it up out of the water. Sam set the oars in the locks and took the middle seat as Amos unpacked the tackle. They worked as a team, in silence, as the boat drifted in slow turns upon the brown green water. Amos cut lines of two or three feet and attached hooks, then Sam crimped sinkers to the lines and tied them to the necks of Mason jars. When they had eight jars rigged up with line, sinker and hook, they baited them with strips of greasy pork skin and gristle, and tied the bait tightly to the hooks with thread. Then the jars were launched by throwing them out of the boat from both sides, so that when they were done,

they were drifting in the middle of a sparkling, bobbing fleet of jars.

Amos leaned back against the motor, propped his feet upon the gunwale and fetched a sigh of contentment. "Now if there's an easier way to fish," he declared, "I'd sure like to hear about it. Hand me that paper bag. No. Open it up and help yourself. I was about to forget that you're the guest of honor on this cruise."

Sam uncorked the bottle and drank. Then he passed it over and Amos, before taking his drink, raised it in a silent pledge.

They drifted in the sunlight for a bit, without talking. Sam didn't want that little business conference any more. Amos' happiness seemed to blur everything. And what could he say to him? One thing, though, he had to know. He had to know how much ready cash they could get their hands on. He had thought it all out the night before. There could be no backing out of the hole Amos had gone into; they would have to spend more money in the hope of realizing a profit on what was already spent. Irrigation was a good investment, but it had to be made right. There was a lot to be done, but he didn't need to probe and pry at Amos any more than he had to.

From time to time, Amos drank, tucking the mouth of the bottle neatly under his mustache and tilting it glittering in the sunlight. Each time he offered it to Sam and about half the time Sam drank too. He had decided that if Amos meant to get drunk, there was no reason why he should stay sober.

"Sam! Dammit, how many bottles do you count out there?"

There were only seven of their jugs rolling and winking on the water now. They scanned the surface, Amos facing astern and Sam forward.

"There it is!" Sam shouted, scrambling for the oars. The jar had appeared again twenty yards downstream. He spun the boat and started after it, throwing up buckets of spray as he dug the water.

"Easy! Easy, boy!" Amos yelled.

The jar was wobbling crazily as the fish fought the hook. When the boat neared it, Amos leaned out the side but just as he reached for the jar it spun and went under again.

"That's a good fish!" Amos cried. They drifted, watching. "Yonder!" shouted Amos, pointing, and Sam spun the boat about again. This time he overshot and the jar bumped along the side of the boat when Amos missed it. They came about again, but the violence of the maneuver toppled Sam to the floor boards and he nearly lost an oar. When he

got under way again the fish was valiently towing the jar upstream. Amos, leaning far out over the side, caught it in both hands and heaved jar, fish and a dollop of branch water into the boat. It was a good one, all right, a three pound blue cat. Amos dropped him into the burlap bag, tied the bag to a thwart and dropped it overside. Then he gravely offered his hand to Sam. They shook, and he dug out the bottle, which had rolled under the seat in the excitement. They each had a drink before they baited the jar and set it adrift again.

"Fishing, Sam!" Amos exclaimed. "Fishing will do more for the soul than church-going." He gestured grandly at the scene about them. "You can't tell me," he said, "that my primeval forebears were herd animals. I think they wandered each one alone and grunted politely when they met. I suppose they may have kept their females in herds, where they could talk about their labor pains to each other." He fell thoughtful. "Now, you know," he mused, "if they hadn't let the women herd up, the women wouldn't have needed conversation topics and they wouldn't have littered so often. But they did, and pretty soon the out-of-doors got crowded and game got scarce and here we are, living indoors and eating vegetables."

Amos turned all around for a careful check on their fleet of jars. All were there. "Listen, Sam," he said,

altering his voice just enough to show that this was more serious. "Your mother... well, women look at things in ways we never would. Mothers or wives all the time. You mean the world to Gwyn. You know you do. She always was partial to you and after Amby was killed and you were overseas... You can imagine how she felt. You remember how she was. She wanted me to get you out of the Army, somehow, on a hardship plea. We had a bitter quarrel about that. It seemed crazy to me, but a mother's worries and fears are a load to carry. Just remember that. Try to understand."

"You mean anything in particular?"

"Yes, I do. I saw you and Gwyn were having a chat when I came downstairs this morning, and I've got a pretty good idea what it was about. She talked to me last night. She thinks you shouldn't come back here. She doesn't want us to be a burden on you, and she thinks you must have a great future up North. Don't ask me what's the reasons behind it all. She was in that woman herd when you and I were ranging alone.

"For my own part, it's going to be good to have you home."

"It's good to be here."

"What brought you back? No, I know. What made you decide?"

"I wanted a place of my own, I guss."

Amos nodded. "This place is bred in your bones," he said.

"I'm not sure," Sam answered. "Maybe it doesn't have to be this place. Just a particular place."

"But this is where you came. It's in your bones."

Sam found that he was a little drunk. He couldn't think about it very well. He was here, where he wanted to be, and now he wanted it left at that.

There was a loud ka-chunk and they both spun about to scan the water. Seven jars. In a second the eighth came up over by the bank, spinning and bobbing. They chased it along the shore, but before they caught it there was another ka-chunk and another jar was jerked under. By the time they'd landed the first one, the second had come up and gone down again, far upstream. Sam rowed heroically and by the time it reappeared they were almost on it. Amos scooped it deftly out of the water and they collapsed, laughing, with the two fish flopping about their feet. When they recovered, they had a drink, slipped the fish into the bag and sent the jars out again.

"Well, Sam," said Amos, "the truth is, I can use another man in the groves. I'm not any spry young sapling like yourself. And by all rights you ought to know a thing or two about business, with your experience."

Sam took a second quick swallow of whisky, wiped his mouth and said: "What's your financial situation, Amos?"

"Oh, you'll find out all that when we have a look at the books together. Plenty of time for you to start taking on the worries."

"Are you solvent?"

"Solvent? We're secure, if that's what you mean."

"But are the groves showing a profit?"

"Sam, it's no secret that I've let things slide. I've had no reason to keep striving, frankly, with Amby dead and you gone. At my age, a man lives only in his sons. Making an orange grove pay isn't a thing I can care about anymore, just in itself. I'm through forever with lifting a burden just to feel my own strength. But there's other things, and now I save myself for those. Things besides money and goods and all that. There are people... my friends, my employees and their families. For those things I'm still willing to lift as much as I can.

"But you saw the groves. You can see how I've put things off and let things go. When I said I was glad you were coming home, I didn't mean that I'm ready to hand all that mess over to you. You'll see. Give me something to work for, and I can hustle morning and night with any man going."

"How much of a cash reserve have..."

"There he goes!" Amos whooped, and Sam jumped to the oars. It was the strongest fish yet, and they chased it for fifty yards back and forth across the branch before they caught it, Amos yelling instructions and Sam bending to the oars. They had no sooner boated the fish than one of their jars came past them, towing handsomely along behind another. Amos dropped the first one and lunged out at the one passing. He yelped, the boat rolled, and Sam was thrown flat on his back as he saw Amos topple stiffly out and into the water.

By the time he had recovered and struggled upright, Amos was several feet from the boat, thrashing furiously. He opened his mouth, but swallowed water and went under. Sam grabbed up an oar and shoved it toward him but Amos came up facing the wrong way and instead of trying to turn and grab the oar, he began swimming feebly upstream. As the boat rolled, Sam had to let go of the oar and catch himself. The oar drifted out of reach. Quickly, he unshipped the other one and tried to paddle after Amos, but the current was against him and he was too confused to manage the long oar. Throwing it into the water, he sat down and began tugging at his shoes. Barefoot, he somehow got into the water without upsetting the dory. Amos was still paddling in a wavering line upstream, but Sam quickly caught him. The instant

Sam touched his shoulder, the old man simply went limp. Sam rolled on his back, supporting Amos' head on his chest, and struck out for the bank.

Getting him out of the water and up the slope was a task, for Amos made no effort to help and Sam was nearly exhausted. He rolled him the last few feet like a sack of grain and laid him on his back in the weeds. Amos' face was dead white and his lips a frightening blue, but he opened his eyes and smiled and said in a surprisingly strong voice: "Oh Lord! I'm pooped!"

Sam flopped beside him in the grass and gasped. "Couldn't you see the boat?" he panted.

"I thought I'd head for shore. Kind of dangerous to try to climb into a boat from the water."

"You didn't look like you were heading for shore. Looked like you were heading for Moccasin Lake."

They laughed together, then Amos sat up, his white hair and mustaches dripping, and said: "I hope nothing happened to that bottle," and they laughed again. But Amos' laughter ended in a cough and he fell back in the weeds clutching his chest. Sam sat up to look at him. His lips were still blue. In a moment he got his breath and said in a queer, amazed tone, as if he'd made a discovery: "Swallowed a little water, Sam. I'll be all right in a few minutes. You'd better catch that boat."

The dory was almost out of sight around a bend. Swimming after it, Sam realized, would be a long drawn race, and he wasn't sure he had the wind for it. He'd have to run along the bank and get ahead of it. He stood up and looked down at Amos, who nodded and waved him on.

His bare feet were cut and bruised by the time he came abreast of the drifting boat, and the cool water felt good on them. He was too tired to climb into the boat when he got to it, so he towed it to the bank. The whisky bottle was intact. He had a short drink before starting the motor, then he chased down the two oars.

When he got back to Amos, the old man was still on his back with his eyes closed, but he sat up wearily as the boat nosed ashore. "I'm kind of winded, Sam," he said. "I think it was a mighty lucky thing for me that you were along today."

Sam got him into the boat and gave him a drink. Then he cranked the motor and opened the throttle all the way. Amos sat hunched on his seat, breathing slowly and looking down at his clasped hands.

What does it matter? Sam thought, about the damned cash reserve. I can check into that. They didn't talk all the way in. Sam thought ahead to just what he'd have to do, and how he'd do it. How he'd get things going on this

irrigation business, and find out about getting trees and opening new land and clearing the tangles and the dust.

Gwyneth was furious. She helped Sam get Amos up the stairs and into his bed, raging at both of them.

"Talk about old fools!" she cried. "And you stink of whisky, both of you. Any man sixty-five years old ought to have sense not to do his drinking in a boat that's so tippy you can't sneeze in it."

She tucked Amos in bed and fetched hot water bottles and sent Sam to his room to change. When he came back she was savagely toweling Amos' head. Amos was sheepishly silent, but looked as if he were pleased at all the fuss. Sam left them and went downstairs and out to the porch. He was feeling quite above his mother's scolding just then. He sat on the top step and turned out upon the world of Moccasin Branch a keen, appraising look, as if he were taking the measure of it all.

Amos' two hounds came around the house. Buck wriggled in under the steps, but Mustard, the new one, stopped and looked up at Sam. He got up and started down the steps and the dog growled softly far back in his throat.

"Down, sir!" Sam snapped. "Down!" He went to the hound without hesitating. Mustard's legs stiffened. "Down, pup," he repeated. He went on talking to the dog and put out his hand slowly. For a few seconds he let it look at

his outstretched palm. It sniffed. Then he put his hand on its head and scratched first one ear and then the other. The hound seemed to look a little embarrassed, but gratified. "Down, sir," he said, and he continued to scratch its ears while he put the other hand on its haunches and pushed down. The hound resisted for a moment, and sat down. "All right," said Sam. "Good." He gave another rub to the floppy ears and walked away. He went back to his seat on the stairs. For a moment, the dog remained sitting, looking curiously up at Sam. Then it stood up, looked all around, and went under the steps.

The screen door opened and closed and Gwyneth came silently across the porch. Sam looked around to smile at her, and returned to studying the landscape.

"What will you do about your job, son?" she asked softly.

"I'll write a letter to my boss tonight."

"Do you think this may cause you trouble when you look for another job?"

"I don't think so."

"I don't know about that, son. All people have to go on is your record, you know."

"I'm not going to worry about it."

"But you haven't notified them yet?" He shook his head languidly. "Are you so sure that you're doing the smart thing?"

"Look, Mama, I decided I want to live here. It's not so complicated. I like it here and I didn't like it there. I was bored, up there. You've been other places."

"I think I could be happy anyplace, Sam."

"I don't think I can. I don't want you to think there's any hidden reason for this. In Chicago, my life wasn't interesting, my work wasn't interesting, my friends weren't interesting, and nothing I found to do was interesting. Moccasin Branch _is_ interesting. Up there, everyone does, says, sees, and thinks the same things, and it's all pretty slick and harmless and colorless. Can't you believe that?"

She nodded, but said with great solemnity: "Wherever you go, Sam, you take your troubles with you."

"Fine. Now I'm going to have my troubles in a more exciting setting."

"Living here," she said, "isn't going to make you belong here."

"Is it a club? Do I have to pay dues?"

She came halfway down the steps so that she could turn and look him in the face. "Are you ready to throw away all your schooling now, and go to work in the groves?"

"It won't be thrown away. Amos needs an accountant."

"Amos doesn't need any help, Sam. I don't want you thinking you've got to come down here and take care of us.

He's made a go of things in harder times than you'll ever see, and I wouldn't be surprised if he could still do it."

"He's nearly bankrupt."

She looked at him thoughtfully, but she gave no sign of surprise. Finally she asked: "How do you know?"

"I went through the books. Has he told you?"

"No. I figured it out for myself, from little things. How bad is it?"

"I was exaggerating. He's not bankrupt, or even near it, but it's bad enough. I'm not sure. There are some things I'll have to find out before I know just what the situation is."

"I thought so, Sam," she said with a grim nod. "You've got the idea you have to come down here and pull him out of a hole."

"Listen to me," he cried. "I made up my mind before I even knew he was in trouble. But you're right, partly. I am going to pull him out of the hole, if I can do it--and I think I can. But that's something extra. It's going to take some work to put the groves on their feet. Fine. I'd a lot rather knock my brains out for him than for somebody that just happened to hire me. That's what I mean, Gwyneth. I'm coming back here where things mean something to me."

His mother gave him a look of bland understanding. "You can save your trouble, Sam. He dug his own grave.

You're not going to fix things that don't want to be fixed." He started to interrupt, but she waved him down. "We own the house and some land. We aren't going to the poorhouse, whatever happens. Amos has been trying to get rid of the groves since Walker died."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said."

"He could sell the groves anytime he wanted to."

"I didn't say he wanted to sell. He doesn't. He wants to lose them, and see them go to seed. And I'll tell you why. Because they were really Walker's and Amos is ashamed of Walker. He's almost afraid to think of his brother, for fear he'll remember something that he doesn't want to know, something about Walker's money."

"Like what?"

"Like where all this mysterious money came from. Amos just prays that he'll die without finding out that Walker robbed a bank or stole the money or something."

"Do you know?"

"Of course not. And what difference does it make? Walker's twelve years dead and the money is almost all thrown away now. But Amos doesn't want to be helped, Sam. Go away. If you don't like Chicago, go somewhere else, but don't waste your life here. Leave Amos to his dreaming and philosophizing and worrying."

"Won't you believe that this hasn't got anything to do with whether I stay or not?"

"No, I won't. You may convince yourself, but you won't convince me."

"Then let's not argue."

"You're staying?"

"I'm staying."

CHAPTER VII

Gwyneth Griffin Trotter's confidence in portents and her own sixth sense was drawn, more or less consciously, from her Welsh ancestry. Five generations (the last three sadly mongrelized) lay between Gwyneth and Wales, but she held Welshness to account for much. Whatever name she wished to put on her actions or her feelings: magnanimity, sentiment, love of song, steadfastness in affection or enmity--she certified with the phrase: "It's the Welsh in me."

Hers was a world of strict order in which effects followed axiomatic causes and in which nothing was concealed from those who knew the catch-word keys. Gwyneth's instincts were good, but she had them continually confused with astrology, omens, old saws and a fancied ability to read character in faces or voices or genealogy. In another age she might have been hanged as a witch and gone to the gibbet complacently convinced of her own dark powers.

These powers and insights of hers helped her deal with her loved ones with never a moment of fear or doubt. When young Amby had died so far away from home it had been six months since they'd had a letter from him, and there had been many, many previous signs that Amby--a kindly but self contained young man--simply did not care for his home or for either of his parents, she had borne the shock well,

knowing in her heart that things had always been just as she'd believed them, and that Amby had masked a deep and sensitive affection for her behind a bored, superior way of speaking and looking. How Welsh of him! So she found behind everything she saw, the thing she knew should be there, and contradictions often stood as proofs to her abiding faith in Absolute Order and Good.

Still, Gwyneth tried not to parade her omniscience. She was above that. Sometimes, though, she had to confirm herself by a hint or a suggestion of her insight. During the weeks following Amos and Sam's fishing trip, it grew harder and harder for her to remain knowing and silent as she watched the father justify his own aimless and fruitless life by leading the son down the same way. As the two of them grew thicker by the day, she began a painful emergence. She was above compassion or anger, as an oracle is above them, but she had pride, after all. Perhaps she felt that Sam would be chastened if he were shown that all was ordained and understood, that it might inspire in him a worthwhile piety. So she began to try to let him know--first by a wry turn of the mouth, then by a quickly smothered smile or a short, meaningful laugh--how far beyond his new excitements she could see.

From the very moment that she and Sam stood over Amos while he shivered in the bed with blankets tucked up to his

chin, smelling of branch water and whisky, she had seen their conspiracy taking shape, a little boy conspiracy, full of self importance and purpose. Amos, she thought, was play-acting a sort of Moccasin Branch country squire. Sam's role was the backwoods buck. The next morning at breakfast, the two men had not said a word about the day before. In fact, they had said very little at all. They had eaten their big breakfast with only a few judicious remarks about the weather and about the work in the groves and then they'd gone off together in the truck. She had stood at the porch door and watched them away, having to smile at Sam's gesture of wiping his mouth with his shirt sleeve as he walked to the truck.

From that morning on, Sam was almost always in the groves at work or out fishing or over visiting with the Abels. He and Amos didn't come in drunk again, but it became custom for them to have a drink together in the living room before supper. As she listened to them talk over their meals, discussing the work in the groves, she could tell that Amos was sliding the burden to Sam and the boy was taking a foolish pride in it; but the worst was the slow change in Sam's talk and his manner. He was acting "Country" already, and she got the idea that he was aping that Cajun woods tramp, Bobo, that he talked about so much. He dressed like a roughneck and the yellow dog, Mustard,

began to tag around with him all the time. It seemed to make no impression on him when, now and then, she let him see her smile in pitying comprehension.

He spent a lot of evenings with the Abel girl, and Gwyneth did not like that at all. The child was only sixteen, and Sam was not too far from thirty. Mrs. Abel, of course, was a good soul, but the General was one of those people with little, unwinking eyes and round heads and on top of that he had been Walker Trotter's drinking mate and she had heard him talk to Walker with his sarcastic smirk, sitting out on the porch steps years ago, until he had Walker raging like a teased bull. She was sure, now, that a lot of Walker's wild carryings-on had been things Fred Abel had goaded him into. She decided that there was no meaner man on earth than Fred Abel, the way he'd wrapped poor, broody Walker around his words. She even took it into her head that Abel must have had some sinister hold upon Walker. She thought some very dark thoughts, never flinching, about Walker's past, his mysterious money, and about his relationship to the General's mother.

Walker had been Gwyneth's first friend in Moccasin Branch. Before her marriage, during the courtship in Alabama, Amos had told her a lot about Walker. She had discovered that Amos had a sort of awe for his older brother.

Many long evenings on the porch of the little house in Selma they had sat holding hands while he unwound tales of Walker's exploits and his audacity.

They were married in Selma without Gwyneth ever having seen Moccasin Branch or any of Amos' family. He had come up there to work for an uncle in a machine shop, supposedly to learn the trade. He and Gwyneth had met, very properly, at church. They were engaged, less properly, after three months. Her parents had been horrified, although not precisely by the element of impropriety. The Griffins were an argumentative family, used to thrashing things out at highly emotional conclaves. When Amos simply spoke up at dinner one night with an announcement of their intentions, he had baffled the whole lot of them; for when they prepared to give the idea a thorough going-over, he had excused himself with a pleasant good night. The controversy had kept the household upset for days. At last Gwyneth had mentioned it to Amos, asking him what they would do if the decision went against them. Amos had expressed mild amazement that there was any doubt. Then he had gone straightway to her father to demand if Mr. Griffin meant to block their marriage. Her father had begun an involved: "Well, now, no, of course not; but it just seems that what with one thing and another and so much to take into account, you have to give this thing some talking about; figure what sort

of.." from which Amos had plucked the "no" and announced that he had talked to a preacher, the preacher of the church where they'd met. They were married on Saturday afternoon two weeks later, in a church full of frustrated Griffins, still muttering away. Gwyneth and Amos had honeymooned in the Louisiana bayou country.

What a forceful, down-to-earth man she had thought him beside all the fretful, talkative Griffins, making a Welsh parliament out of every issue! Looking back on it years later, of course, she saw how wrong she'd been about that. Amos had simply never understood them. Far from being forceful, he'd been in a dream, supposing at every step that the ground would be there when he put his foot down. Perhaps he had won a battle, but only because he'd never known it was engaged.

Their honeymoon had been a fine time. They spent the last few days in New Orleans. At the race track she picked a horse that Amos wouldn't let her bet on and, of course, the horse won at fabulous odds. They had their first argument over that, as a matter of fact, Amos holding that it was better to lose than to bet on a ridiculous long-shot, but later the argument became part of the whole, bright picture of their happiness--along with standing on the dock beside a steaming tub of oysters, eating them as fast as the sweating colored boy could open them and

bathing in the hot, aromatic, torpid evening; along with the prickly, soap-and-starch feeling of all her new clothes; along with the grandeur of the hotel; along with the fine, black enamelled carriage they took one night for a ride up along the levee. The argument had been part of their coming to the married estate. She'd known that even then. The intimacy of marriage was no problem to her, for she concentrated at all equivocal points on composure so bland and ladylike that it befuddled Amos and created for her an impregnable emotional superiority.

After a visit with the Griffins--still muttering--they headed for Moccasin Branch, all band box new but now settled in their roles. Then, as the train rattled along through the sandhill country and into the palmetto country, Amos began to talk about Walker again, but with an odd, constraining perplexity, as if he could not really remember what he had to say. She gathered that he was giving her a warning. "He's sometimes very short, Gwyn. Don't let him upset you. Do you know how some people are, who swagger around growling and talking very blunt and always trying to look like they've got the Devil tied up inside of them? You'll think Walker's one of those. The truth is that Walker is what those people want everyone to think they are."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he's very gruff. He's impatient, sometimes, with the here and now. He's got his mind on other things."

"What things?"

"The Lord knows."

"All his building and managing?"

"Well, that isn't exactly what I mean."

"What are you carrying on so mysterious for? What do you mean to get at?"

"I just want to tell you to remember that Walker's very unpredictable."

"Well, that won't bother me."

She saw that he was running away from her suggestion of a mystery, but she could think of no way to reopen the subject. They rode in silence for a while before Amos turned to her and blurted: "I want to tell you something, Gwyneth. Walker gave me all the money for our honeymoon."

She didn't see what was so terrible about that. In fact, she thought it rather handsome. But Amos began angrily to assure her that he meant to repay every penny of it. He subsided at last, leaving her quite confused, and she sat looking out the window and humming a tune until, after a very long and uncomfortable silence, he told her, gravely, the whole story of Walker's unaccountable fortune. When he was done, she had the idea that he was trying to tell her he disliked to take Walker's money because of its dubious

source, but then he smiled and she realized that he had actually taken a great relish in the story. "Maybe," he said, "that'll help you to understand Walker, and maybe it won't. Anyway, we owe him three hundred dollars."

She reached Florida determined to be quite unimpressed by Walker Trotter. He was, in fact, not at all what she had expected. He was smaller than Amos, for one thing, and seemed younger, rather than older. He was a wiry, reddish man with thin brown hair and permanently narrowed eyes. He met them at the train in Panomee driving a big, high, Cadillac touring car. He was dressed (she never forgot the first sight of him) in whipcord riding britches and laced boots. He scowled at them, making no attempt to help with the bags as they alighted, and when Amos presented her he squeezed her hand and said: "You look like you've got better sense than to let little brother drag you off into the woods." It was a joking, commonplace thing, like anyone might have said; but it seemed frightening. That was his way. He was always saying joking, ordinary words like that, but with a tight, angry, serious air--as if there might be more than a joke in his thoughts.

Gwyneth sat between them in the big car for the ride to Moccasin Branch, and she held her breath on some of the curves.

For the next two years they spent a lot of time jammed together in the front seat of that Cadillac, driving all over creation. Walker went out of his way to think up fantastic reasons for taking trips: to see a new building going up or to have an oyster supper at some place he'd heard of on the coast. A lot of times they didn't end up at the place they'd started for, and most times they went on from there to another place. Since Amos was the silent, unexcitable member of the trio, she began to feel closer to Walker, in a way, than to her husband; but in a comradely, masculine way that flattered her more than anything she'd ever known. She spoiled it at last, though, when she asked him about the money. They were in the yard in front of the big new house on the hill and she was watching while he worked on the car. They'd been talking for half an hour and he had made her feel very close to him, so she simply said, straightforwardly: "Walker, where did that mysterious money of yours come from, anyway?"

From under the hood of the Cadillac he said without an instant's hesitation: "I stole it." Then, as she held her breath, he straightened up and said as he carefully wiped the grease from his hands: "Or would you rather I found a buried treasure?"

Perhaps she was mistaken that his respect for her seemed to lessen after that. Perhaps, after all, it was

simply that the war came along and Walker went away for ten months to work in an Atlanta factory. About the same time, young Amos was born. Walker came back, of course, but he had had the flu and wasn't strong for a long time, and was as bald as an apple so that he really did look like Amos' older brother. She and Amos had a family and a scheme of things of their own by then, and it was about that time that Walker began to spend so much time with Fred Abel, then a sly, cynical young captain, rather good looking in his uniform--which he wore, she recalled, for months after he was put on inactive service. After that, everything ran together very quickly: Walker sick a lot but spending more and more time out in the woods or on the lake, letting Amos take care of the groves; the death of Amos' mother; the fire at the plant; Sam's birth--everyone and everything changing, but becoming just what it was fated to become, her life taking a definite shape and tenor which seemed spontaneous but which she knew must have been determined by every little thing that had gone before. As far as she knew, Amos never paid Walker back the three hundred dollars they spent on their honeymoon.

It was not long after the ignoble fishing trip that Gwyneth discovered Sam was keeping a pen of fighting chickens over by the packing house. That, she supposed, was more of

Amos' doing. She was wryly gratified that they saw fit to exclude her from that little part of the game. She'd never seen a cock fight, for in the days when Amos and Walker were keeping chickens women had been barred, but she really saw nothing wrong with it. She was no prig. But no, they had to have their secret club, like little boys with a hideaway. When Amos told her, a couple of weeks later, that he and Sam would spend Sunday fishing, she simply nodded brightly and smiled at him. Mrs. Kennon had already told her that there would be chicken fights Sunday. Amos, however, seemed oblivious to the mockery in her smile. He even went to the trouble of putting fishing tackle in the truck. Sam, at least, she was glad to see, was a bit embarrassed by that.

* * * * *

Amos drove the truck out to Reed's Point with Sam and Emory Castle in back with Sam's two stags. They looked very good, and Sam was sure they'd both win. Even with that, though, he was a little abashed about this whole venture. He had realized after only a few days, that he had bought the cocks without any idea of what was involved in taking care of them. Emory and his father had disposed of his ignorance. As a matter of fact, they had taken over so thoroughly that he was feeling a bit dispossessed. Fighting cocks, he found, had to be fed just so, with an

eye on their weight, their comb color, their skin texture, their feathers, their feet, their eyes--a thousand little signs. They had to have just so much exercise and just the right sort of exercise. They had to get just so much water. Worst of all, the regime depended on time of year, age of the chicken and stage of training. The week before a fight he was on one system, the day before on another. Amos, luckily, knew it all.

The night before the fights, as Sam was getting ready for bed, Amos came into his room and solemnly presented him with a small leather box. "A gaff case," he said. Inside, all nested in separate compartments and loops, were the delicate, surgical steel tools of the game pit: the little saw to cut away the chicken's natural spur, a pair of shears, chamois to pad the spur stumps, strips of soft leather to bind the steel gaffs to the stump, waxed string to tie the gaffs--two inch, nickel plated daggers on sockets to fit the stump of the spur. In the top of the box was a plate engraved with the name Trotter.

"Made in England," Amos said. "My brother and I won that at a derby up in Georgia years ago. The gaffs are new, though. You wouldn't have wanted the old fashioned kind that we used. They wouldn't let you use them around here, anyway. Slashers, they were. The fights were quick and bloody in those days." He picked up one of the gaffs and touched the

point. "They had sharp edges, instead of being smooth, like this. Everything depended on having a fast working cock in the ring. I like it better the way it is now. Gives a strong chicken a chance to outlast the shufflers. They get more knocks, too, so you find out how much heart a cock's got. In these long fights, the dunghills don't stay around for the finish."

"How do the stags look?" Sam asked.

"They look good to me. They're as sharp as a good keep can make them. The big one's carrying a bit too much lard. Just hope he doesn't have to work too long and that it isn't too warm a day. I think they'll be all right. Of course, a good cock often meets a better, and there's nothing for him but luck. That's the game."

"Well, we'll find out tomorrow," Sam said, trying to suppress his excitement.

"That's right. Your girl friend going to be there?"

"Mag? Yeah, Fred's bringing her."

When Amos had left, Sam put the gaff case on his bedside table and thought, as he undressed, about Mag. Sixteen years old. That discovery had surprised him She was a very mature and sophisticated girl, certainly, but she was still a high school girl, and Sam was embarrassed. It did not help at all that her parents seemed unconcerned. The General did, as a matter of fact, behave a little strangely now and

then, but it was as if he were excited, rather than amused or upset. Anne was always very warm toward him, but restrained. She never seemed to get over watching him, appraisingly. She was very handsome, he had found, when she was thoughtful or grave. She could not be merry with any grace, but he thought she must be beautiful when she was sad. They talked aften, when he was waiting for Mag in the big living room, and he sensed that she liked him and liked to talk to him. She usually led him to talk about books or about something abstract like the difference between the North and the South, and she tried to keep these talks on a rather sophisticated and liberal level. Sam accepted the role, of course, and was even quite glib, but if the General came in, perhaps, while he was holding forth, he felt foolish. He supposed that Anne was lonely and needed to talk sometimes with someone who had a little more to say than most of the Branchers.

Mag continued to be absolutely undemanding... or rather, completely affirmative. But he never talked books with her, or liberal politics. He talked, in fact, just as he would have talked to the General, but without fear of competition. This coolness of hers, which sometimes seemed to amount to a sort of manliness, did make him uneasy on one score. He thought a couple of times as he brought her home at night that he would kiss her, but it just seemed

out of place. As a matter of fact, all his thoughts in that line seemed out of place. She wasn't really very entertaining to be with, as a companion, but it was peculiarly hard for him to think of reaching for anything beyond companionship. He found it took an effort of will to put his arm around her once as they walked from the town to her house one night together, but she responded naturally and easily by leaning just a bit closer to him. Still, that was the only time he'd touched her. He began to spend an unusual amount of time trying to imagine how it would be if he made a pass at her. He couldn't picture either her part or his own.

Once, after a lunch with Fred and Anne, he had gone with the General to that little glassed in den off the living room. Abel, gesturing to the glass panes on three sides, said with a thin smile: "My life is like a laboratory rat's, open to inspection. I live in a glass house and I throw all the stones I can lay my hands on. What do you think of that?"

"Proves something."

"Exactly. It proves that people who live in glass houses should keep a good supply of stones. The glass works both ways. You can see people coming. Did you hear what happened this morning?"

"What was that?"

"About a mile beyond your house, three children waiting for the school bus were chased by a black razor back boar. Sounds like your old friend."

"Anybody take out after him?"

"Not that I know of."

"I wonder if Bobo has heard about it. He and I are planning to give that pig a run, one of these days."

The General went to the gun case beside the door and lifted out a rifle. "Here's just the thing," he said. "Thirty-oh-six carbine. Plenty of stopping power, but light and quick handling." He displayed the other guns, pointing to each one in turn. "This is Mag's learning rifle," he said of the last one. "And that gal's getting pretty good. For Christmas, I'll give her that Savage. She's out of the beginner class." He closed the case and returned to his desk. "In more ways than one," he said with his grudging smile. "She's a wonderful thing, isn't she?" he demanded. "Most women are wonderful things at Mag's age, but then they go sour. Some matron cuts them in on the woman racket and they are forever damned. God save my daughter!"

Sam smiled and nodded his agreement.

"A good woman," Abel continued, "is like a good bird dog. She gives the impression of intelligence, but actually she is simply very highly trained in six or seven simple

actions. Nothing subtle! No nuances. Just polished competence in action and perfect composure at rest."

"Sounds all right for a man, too," Sam murmured, but Abel ignored him.

"Women, as God made them, are highly specialized creatures. The ones that appreciate that become real women. The rest flounder and look inscrutable."

The General lowered his head as if he were about to butt. "Mag has come to the time of the big change. Danger!" he cried. "This is the opening of the bud, the chrysalis, the egg of childhood. Venus rising from the sea. All the metaphors. It amounts to the fact that she's feeling her female apparatus begin to tingle. A wonderful thing to feel, probably. Things that happen to her now will make the difference between a woman and a gibbering, self important cow. I want to make sure that the right things happen to her." He cocked his head in his characteristic, pugnacious way and growled at Sam: "And that they happen in the right way. Know what I mean?"

He did not seem to expect an answer.

CHAPTER VIII

They were a little late reaching the pit. The weighing had begun. They took the two stags, a little fretful from the confinement, out of their boxes, and stood in line for the scales. Old Man Corey was just in front of Sam, hugging another of his huge reds. He craned his wrinkled neck to look over his shoulder at Sam's stags and he winked merrily. "That's a mean looking bird, young fella," he squeaked. "Hey, looka here at the Trotter grays, will you," he shouted at the bystanders. A few of them smiled and Sam chuckled at the old man.

When he came to the scales Daniels looked at him and at Amos behind him and bawled: "Sam Trotter entering two grays!" Someone shouted: "Oh, that Madigan line! Watch out!" and Sam glowed. There was another ripple of smiles among the watchers.

One of the stags weighed three pounds, two ounces and the other, the one Amos had thought might be fat, was three-eight. Daniels said the three-two would fight second or third. They took them back to the truck and shut the big one in his box. Emory sat on the running board with the other one between his knees while Amos, telling Sam to watch closely, trimmed his spurs. With the little saw from the gaff case he cut the natural spur off square, leaving a

half inch stump. The stag didn't seem to mind, even though the stump bled slightly until Amos chalked it.

Daniels came down with his pairing card and told them the three-two would fight second. He was matched with one of Mayor Kennon's reds. Amos grunted and when Daniels had gone he muttered: "Those reds are great stayers. You don't beat them by wearing them out, and it's a warm day. I hope this stag can hit."

They waited by the truck for the first fight to begin, even though Emory offered to hold the stag while they went up and watched. They had some visitors, men who drifted up to look at the grays and speak a few words to Sam. There was a suppressed warmth in all their greetings and Sam realized that they were proud of him. To them, he thought, he was showing his allegiance. He was being a Trotter and a Brancher. He waved to Stan Tracy, who was heeling a cock for the first fight. Bobo appeared in a purple sateen cowboy shirt, looking as boggle-eyed as usual. "Give 'em hell, man!" he said earnestly, and stalked off to the ring. Just before the first fight, as Daniels was noisily rounding up the owners and handlers, General Abel and Mag came up. Abel stook the stag and held it up to his face to look into its eyes.

"Seems to be in shape," he said, feeling its breastbone. "Who're you fighting?"

half inch stump. The stag didn't seem to mind, even though the stump bled slightly until Amos chalked it.

Daniels came down with his pairing card and told the[...]

the three-two would fight secon[...]

of Mayor K[...]

CORRECTION

[...]rotter and [...]o Stan Tracy, who was heeling a cock for the first fight. Bobo appeared in a purple sateen cowboy shirt, looking as boggle-eyed as usual. "Give 'em hell, man!" he said earnestly, and stalked off to the ring. Just before the first fight, as Daniels was noisily rounding up the owners and handlers, General Abel and Mag came up. Abel stook the stag and held it up to his face to look into its eyes.

"Seems to be in shape," he said, feeling its breastbone. "Who're you fighting?"

half inch stump. The stag didn't seem to mind, even though the stump bled slightly until Amos chalked it.

Daniels came down with his pairing card and told them the three-two would fight second. He was matched with one of Mayor Kennon's reds. Amos grunted and when Daniels had gone he muttered: "Those reds are great stayers. You don't beat them by wearing them out, and it's a warm day. I hope this stag can hit."

They waited by the truck for the first fight to begin, even though Emory offered to hold the stag while they went up and watched. They had some visitors, men who drifted up to look at the grays and speak a few words to Sam. There was a suppressed warmth in all their greetings and Sam realized that they were proud of him. To them, he thought, he was showing his allegiance. He was being a Trotter and a Brancher. He waved to Stan Tracy, who was heeling a cock for the first fight. Bobo appeared in a purple sateen cowboy shirt, looking as boggle-eyed as usual. "Give 'em hell, man!" he said earnestly, and stalked off to the ring. Just before the first fight, as Daniels was noisily rounding up the owners and handlers, General Abel and Mag came up. Abel stook the stag and held it up to his face to look into its eyes.

"Seems to be in shape," he said, feeling its breastbone. "Who're you fighting?"

"One of Kennon's reds."

"Shall I bet on you?"

"Damned if I know," Sam laughed nervously.

"I figure it an even fight," Amos announced. Emory nodded.

Abel smiled sourly. "Then I won't bet at all," he said.

Mag looked down at her father and said dryly: "Not even moral support for Sam?"

"From here on it's the morals of the cock that count. Let's go get a seat. When do you fight?"

"Second."

Mag reached out as she turned to follow her father and stroked the stag's hackles. "Good luck," she said.

The first fight seemed over awfully soon. Emory set the stag down a couple of times to run a few steps and loosen its legs. Amos and Sam sat on the shady side of the truck and listened to the shouts and cheers from the pit. Then they heard shouts of "That's all!" and saw the crowd around the ring breaking up. Amos stood up and raised his eyebrows to Sam. Emory held the stag and Amos bound the steel gaffs tightly to the spur stumps. "I'd like to have a dollar," he muttered, "for every time I've been stabbed doing this." When the gaffs were on, they handled the stag very carefully, being sure to keep a grip on his legs.

They started up to the ring with Dave Kennon just ahead of them with the mayor's red. Halfway up the path they met Joel Cranford carrying a dead white cock hanging head down, blood drying rusty brown on the feathers.

* * * * *

Although she was conscious of stares as she moved to the pit side bench with her father, Mag was not at all ill at ease. She had great confidence in the General and knew that she was privileged as his daughter, but more important, she was simply too excited to be self conscious. Her father had never flattered her as much as he had in bringing her to the fights. It was such an honor, in fact, that she had at first been overwhelmed. Then she had realized why. It was Sam. Her father had seen, before she had, that it was right she should be here, and the knowledge of his understanding was a wonderful, warming assurance. Mag had changed in the past weeks. It was not really a difference in her, it was a difference in the part she was given. She had been doing what was expected of her for a long time. Her father had never <u>told</u> her what to do, directly, but all her life she'd been learning how to take her cues from him. She had never understood her role. She'd never tried to. Now it took shape for the first time--with Sam--and she sat beside the pit, as the princess beside the lists.

"What odds on the second fight?" her father said to the man beside him.

"Kennon and Trotter?" the man said. He was a big, sweaty man with bulging lips. He ran his tongue around his teeth as he thought about his answer. "Who do you want?" he asked at last.

"Trotter."

"Well," the man gulped. He studied the sand before them. "Well," he said, "I'll give two and a haf'."

The General grunted and faced the ring.

"Shall we bet?" Mag asked in a voice at once crisp and disinterested. That was the way she knew to speak.

He shook his head.

The sweaty man gulped again and said, "I'll make it three."

"No!" the General snapped.

The sweaty man shrugged and the General gave all his attention to the three men in the ring. One was Mr. Daniels and the other two, Stan Tracy and Joel Cranford, were carrying chickens. They stood close together and began to butt the chickens' heads together. The cocks snapped at each other and tried to struggle free, but the men held them. Could they fight like that? It was absurd. She glanced at her father. He seemed intent on what was going on, and his

brows were drawn together in a deep scowl. Suddenly he straightened up and looked at her.

"Three to one," he breathed, and shook his head.

"Bad?"

"Amos said an even fight. This man is offering three-to-one against Sam. That's incredible odds, for a cock fight. Something's fishy." He nodded at the men in the ring, losing his scowl and seeming to resolve to say no more about Sam. "Now watch this," he commanded. "The cocks are ready to fight now. They pit them about six feet apart and the cocks meet in the middle. Keep your eyes on the gaffs."

Watching the gaffs was not so simple. Three times the cocks met in the middle of the ring, tumbled and flopped and were separated. She couldn't make out just what happened and she began to feel rather let down. The third time they were separated, though, she saw that there was blood on the head of Joel Cranford's chicken. Joel was in the corner just in front of them. As the bird rested in his handler's arms he breathed through his open beak and stared dully straight ahead, not looking around the way a chicken usually does. The glistening, oily blood seemed to pulse in time with his breathing. Joel pasted feathers into the wound and wiped its beak clean, but simply left the blood to dry all sticky on the white feathers.

In the next pitting, the white cock was killed, and still Mag didn't see exactly how it happened. He simply began to flop around the ring, exactly as a chicken flops with his head cut off, and everyone began to shout and jump into the ring. Stan Tracy grabbed his winning cock by the tail and hopped out of the ring even before the white one had stopped flopping. Cranford picked up the dead one by the legs and carried him away with his dirty, smeary feathers all turned the wrong way.

"Quick one," her father said. "Sometimes they are very long drawn out." He studied her. "How did you like it?"

Mag had a moment of uneasiness. That was a business-like question. How did she like it? For a second, she couldn't discover what she had thought about it at all.

"I couldn't follow it very well," she said judiciously.

"You'll have to see a few before you learn how to watch them. Notice one thing, though, neither bird ever flinched away from the fight. That's what counts. Heart. That's what makes a fighting cock."

She noticed that Joel Cranford, trying to get away through the crowd with his dead chicken, wore a distracted expression as if he had something else on his mind, and he seemed to carry the chicken as if he didn't even know he had it. He seemed embarrassed, rather than angry, at losing.

She realized that someone was speaking to her and looked up, but it was someone she didn't know and he was already hurrying away into the crowd, a bristly, lump faced young man with thin, brown arms.

"What did he say?" she asked the General.

"He asked your pardon."

"For what?"

"An obscenity. He forgot your presence for a moment."

"Oh," she shrugged. "I didn't hear anything."

Sam came into the grove with his father and Mr. Castle, carrying a gray and black chicken, and smiled across the ring at them. Her father lifted his hand in greeting and she nodded. Men began to mill around the Trotters, looking at the cock and asking questions and laughing. Sam smiled and said something to one of them that brought a laugh all around. He was rather like her father, she thought, reserved and judicial, smaller than most of the men around him but standing up with them just because anyone could see he was confident of himself and his place. Her excitement began to return. This would be better. Now there'd be a fight they had some interest in. Sam and Mr. Castle stepped into the ring. The mayor's son was already there with a slender, red chicken in his arms.

Sam's father came to their side of the ring, greeting Mag with an elegant gesture of his hat, and stood just behind

them. The General was scarcely polite. Something was bothering him. She knew how difficult it must be for him, though; all the things he liked were difficult, with the unending necessity of watching himself, of never letting go. She had a sharp insight, as she watched his cool, withdrawn, intent face, of how it must be: always standing aside to watch oneself. It was something Mag had discovered for herself not long before, the feeling of the bystander, and she was uneasy about it. It gave her the same queasy feeling she could get by thinking about her own death, and seeing the General's life that way, always that way, gave her a little shudder of compassion.

Now Mr. Castle and the mayor's son and the referee were in the ring, and Sam came over to her. The man next to Mag made room for Sam on the bench. He grinned at his father and the General and said: "I got even money. They wanted six to five."

He was plainly proud of himself, and Mag nodded. She could never keep it straight about betting odds. She'd have to ask her father later.

The General grunted something unintelligible and never took his eyes from the ring. Now the crowd was falling silent as the two handlers took the cocks to their marks. Sam's stag was watching Kennon's red cock with vicious concentration that gave her a little thrill. The red, his head

up high, seemed uninterested. Sam's forearm lay against Mag's and she bent forward, just as he did, for the start.

The first pitting was over quickly, and as usual she could not tell what had happened, even though there'd been some yelling from men around the ring. It seemed everyone was more on edge than they had been before. Sam looked at her and made a wry face, and she shrugged, smiling. The second pitting took longer. The chickens flew together six or eight times and then began stalking around the ring, heads together, as if they were tired. Someone in the crowd shouted: "That stag wants to go home!" and everyone laughed. Just then the chickens flew again and the handle was called.

Mr. Castle brought the gray stag to mark and began fondling him, ruffling back his feathers to look at his skin. Mr. Trotter leaned down from the bench and said: "Hit?"

"Not that I can see," Mr. Castle answered.

In the third pitting, Sam's stag was killed at the first fly. The stags met and sparred and suddenly the gray, his head covered with blood, ran wildly as if he were blind and crashed into the barrier, where he fell and fluttered and was dead. A great whoop went up from the spectators and Sam, before she could say a word, had hopped into the ring and was taking the dead stag from Mr. Castle. Mr. Trotter

leaned down and said to her father: "There's a fast chicken, that red. I never even saw him hit."

"Neither did the gray," said a fat man who was in front of them in the ring. "He had his eyes closed."

A couple of people who heard the remark laughed. Mag looked nervously to her father, but he was still sitting with the detached and restrained expression on his face, staring at the crowd in the ring. His scowl was forbidding, but she leaned toward him anyway and said: "What happened?"

"The gray flinched," he said. "He got a couple of knocks and lost his nerve. When he turned his back to get away, the red got him in the head about three fast licks." Abruptly he stood up and backed out of the crowd.

She followed him out through the pines toward the lake. He stopped on the bank above the water. As she came up beside him he growled: "Those sons of bitches! They had to spread the word. I expected from the beginning that Tracy had sold our young bull a bunch of dunghill chickens, but I didn't realize he meant to make it public just before the fights." He was really angry, angry enough so that she was frightened. He wasn't supposed to get overwrought like that. She tried to think if there were anything she could say or do--but then she could almost see him remember the blood clot near his heart, and see him back away from him-

self, grow calm and abstract. "I might say," he murmured absently, "that commiseration is not in order. Understand?"

"Of course." It wasn't often that he was so direct with her.

"Unless Sam's second stag shows something, it isn't going to be possible to pretend that nothing out of the way happened. The best thing, probably, is to kid him a little. But not too much." He smiled drily, once more in command, once more outside himself. "Your young bull," he said, "has a fine spirit. But it can be broken."

In an instant, he seemed in wonderful spirits. She admired her father, most of all, for the secret spring from which he could call up, at the worst of times, his bland amusement at the world. Although Mag had no very clear idea of what had happened at the ring, she understood that Sam had been swindled and made a fool. She was surprised that her father was so angry about it, but he seemed altogether different in his attitudes where Sam was concerned. It was precisely that that had awakened Mag to her new role. Partly, she felt, it was for her sake, and she was glad of that, but the General seemed genuinely fond of Sam in his own right. He spoke to her in a new way when he talked of her and Sam, calling Sam "the young bull" and her "torera", and there was envy in the way he spoke of Sam. That was under-

standable. Sam was just what the General must have been himself, and did all the things the General was forbidden.

By all the standards her father had taught her, Mag knew that Sam was... something unnamable, but right. It was no quality you could name, and perhaps that was why the General never mentioned it explicitly. It was something you felt in things or people, a clearness and forthrightness of character, a special sort of manliness. She did not conceive this quality as a way of thinking or even as a way of feeling, but rather as a way of doing which was there the way "heart" was there in the gamecocks.

"It looks as if they're ready," he said. "Let's go see what the other one does."

The fight was terrible. Sam sat beside her again, at first laughing and shaking his head about the first stag, making light of it. She laughed with him and it seemed that things would go off smoothly. The second of his stags was fighting a blue black cock handled by a wiry, hairy man in a fantastic purple shirt who, she found, was the famous Bobo that her father was always talking about. The stag fought willingly until he was hit a couple of times and then he tried to run. The black would hit him and bowl him over, the gray would get up and spar a bit and then turn to run and the black would knock him reeling. Within a minute the pitside was howling with laughter. Sam maintained a ghastly,

idiotic grin and seemed to be trying to pull his head down between his shoulders. Mag couldn't smile, but she managed to look confused, as if she couldn't understand what was so funny. She understood now. Sam's chickens had no heart.

Between pittings, the men around the ring vied in clumsy witticisms about "Oh, those Madigan grays!" and suchlike. A couple of them yelled to Sam and he choked out good natured answers.

The second pitting was the same thing over again, with the grove a storm of laughter. Sam was trembling. When the gray eluded the black long enough to jump the barrier, someone caught him, held him up shouting: "The gray flash, fastest road racing stag in Florida!" and tossed him back into the ring.

Her father was nudging her. Softly he said, "Tell him to get in there and kill that stag while this is still funny."

She nodded, but couldn't say anything. Sam was being humiliated. If she spoke she would say the wrong thing. Just then the black knocked the gray completely over and fell down himself in his eagerness and while a great roar went up she grabbed Sam's arm and cried: "Oh, kill him, Sam!"

Sam shoved Mr. Daniels aside as he jumped into the ring. The hairy Bobo saw him coming and snatched up the black stag. As the gray looked frantically about for an

escape, Sam grabbed him by the head, lifted him, swung him and snapped him like a whip. The cock thrashed and Sam let him fall. The crowd began to clap and shout and Sam returned to them, still with that smile.

Sam and Emory Castle took the dead stag down to the Trotters' truck and Mr. Trotter, after mumbling a bit to himself and stroking his mustache anxiously, followed them. Mag and the General sat by the ring and slowly the crowd broke up, drifting to the cars to watch the chickens being heeled for the next fight. Most of the people who came past them were chuckling and talking about the Gray Flash. A kind of drunken excitement seemed to have hold of everyone. After a bit Bobo came up to her father, grinning indecently.

"Jesus Mary!" he exclaimed delightedly, bobbing his head to her as he addressed the General. "Where'd them chickens come from?"

"Stan Tracy."

"Some dunghill got into his grays, man!"

The General said something in French and Bobo hooted. Then her father said: "That was a nice blue."

"Nice, man? And couldn't kill that gray for trying? I'd wring his neck if he was mine, same as the gray."

Her father laughed. "Beau," he said, "this is my daughter, Maggie."

"Sure. I see you sometimes by the store. I wonder how you got so pretty by a mean, ugly old man like you got."

From his sly expression, Mag couldn't tell if he were treating her as a child or teasing her by pretending to. Either way, she was embarrassed, and she didn't like him, despite all her father had told her about what a marvelous fellow this Bobo was. Her excitement and anger at what had happened had left her momentarily quite independent. She gave him a smile, though. He left as the crowd was again gathering around the pit. The next fight would be starting soon, she supposed, and that would be a blessing. The General, however, suddenly hopped up and, motioning her to follow, hurried down to the cars.

By the truck, Sam was talking earnestly with Mr. Castle. The conversation was ended as they came up, but she got the impression that Mr. Castle was being apologetic and that Sam was mad.

"Trotter," said her father, "I'm going home. Mag wants to see the rest of the fights. Would you mind bringing her home?"

"Glad to," Sam said, and without a backward look General Abel strode rapidly away and left Mag to herself. Or to Sam.

They saw four more fights before the lunchtime break was called. Sitting by the pit, with Mag between him and his father, Sam felt painfully conspicuous and helpless. The worst of it was that he simply could not make himself look at Stan Tracy. He wanted to, he knew just the look he should give him. He should stare him in the face and say with his eyes and a thin smile: This leaves me a score to settle, and that's just fine with me. But he kept his eyes on the chickens in the ring and between fights he talked to Mag. She was amused, but in just the right way, and he felt closer to her than he ever had. Amos was being unbearably kind to him, trying to overlook the whole business, and for the first time Sam found something besides pathos in his father's softness. Castle was completely broken up by the whole thing, and kept trying to apologize.

When Amos invited Mag to come to the house for lunch with them, Sam added his insistence and she agreed. Castle was immensely relieved to stay for Tracy's sandwiches. On the way to the house Amos, with great archness, told Mag that Gwyneth did not "altogether approve of the ancient sport. We just don't mention it."

Amos' childish play-acting about secrecy had begun to annoy Sam, but at lunch he was grateful for the arrangement. He was spared any more of Amos' clumsy solicitude, and Mag's presence gave Gwyneth a chance to be hostess. The table

conversation was all on the weather, the chances of a serious drought, and a couple of Gwyneth's anecdotes about the days when Amos' mother was alive (Before you two were born, believe it or not.) She was an entertaining story teller and an account of Mrs. Trotter's war with old Mr. Grimes, over the Grimes girl's wedding, put everyone into an easy mood.

Amos went upstairs for a nap after lunch and Mag said she had better go home. There was not even a hint about going back to the pit. At the truck, all Sam's unhappiness returned at the sight of the two empty boxes that they'd taken his stags to war in. Now, though, away from the crowd at the pit and free of Amos, he could be openly angry, which was at least a way of not feeling quite so belittled. Rattling down the road with Mag beside him, he glowered a while in silence.

"One hundred dollars," he said at last.

"For those two chickens?"

"Fifty for three chickens and fifty-some I lost in bets today." She was impressed. "I was talking to Emory the other day," he went on, "and he mentioned a Mr. Montgomery over near Orlando who breeds games. The best. I guess I'll have to call on Mr. Montgomery."

"You sound vindictive."

"I'm a hundred in the hole. And I'm going to get out."

Instead of going through town and out to the Abel house, Sam turned down beside the branch, past the church, and stopped at the plant. "A little unfinished business," he explained. He let himself into the back door of the plant and got a hatchet from the packing room. Mag followed him back to the chicken pens among the lemon trees. The gray hen was standing forlornly in her pen and clucked nervously to him as they approached.

He carried her back into the trees and there, with Mag watching solemnly, he cut off her head and threw the carcass into the tangle. Then he wiped the hatchet on the grass.

"At least," he said, "she won't have any cowardly little chick-a-biddies." Mag laughed. She was all right. He was proud of the way she had said, at the pit: "Kill him, Sam!" He swung the hatchet and sank the blade solidly into the fork of a thick lemon. He left it there while he kissed her. She stood quite still, her hands lightly touching his shoulders, her lips not moving at all. Her coolness ruffled him. When he stepped back and looked at her, she lifted her eyebrows and smiled in a "That's that" fashion. He had to do something, so he took her roughly by the arms and kissed her again. This time she leaned against him and responded. Then, still holding her with one hand, he reached over and pulled the hatchet out of the tree. It left a gaping white

gash. He had not realized, until that instant, how coldly furious he could feel.

"How brave a hen are you?" he said.

She hesitated tremulously before she answered, "I'm terribly brave." Her answer, and that moment of hesitation, were very unlike her.

"We'll see," he said very coldly.

*　　*　　*　　*　　*

General Abel arrived home in a mood of black depression. His cultivated impassivity was very vulnerable, actually. He was subject to fits of awful lethargic despair when things went the wrong way for him, even slightly. It frightened him when things seemed suddenly to go haphazard and untidy. Confusion, damned inane happenings that simply happened, idiotic and aimless turns of chance that seemed to have no relation to the world as he felt it, angered and then depressed him. He had gone to the fights and, more important, taken Mag there, convinced that things were going according to his vague vision of them. Stan Tracy's little joke had snatched that conviction out from under him. The whole thing had turned messy. Mag, thank God, was cool. She had done well, and he reproached himself for having thought he had to tell her what to do. Perhaps, he told himself, Sam's humiliation would help things along by

spurring him to a burst of valiant self importance. There was nothing wrong with Mag seeing the boy in a ludicrous light, so long as he wasn't made so ludicrous as to be uninteresting. Mag must have her triumph, she must kill her young bull, but not on the level of comic opera. He comforted himself that Sam's vulnerability had been proven today. The bull had certainly charged straight for the cape that time. But a bull must not be so hurt that he refuses to charge ever again.

An yet, for all that he reassured himself, the General was morose. These "on the one hand then on the other" things disturbed him. He disliked things that had to be reasoned out.

Anne was in the front yard pruning the hibiscus. "Where's Margaret?" she asked.

"Young Trotter's bringing her home."

"You didn't stay?"

"Of course I stayed. I'm over there having a hell of a big time. Can't you hear me cheering?" He immediately regretted that, not for the unkindness to Anne, but for himself sounding pointless and petty. "I didn't want to stay," he said mildly, and started into the house.

"Did anything happen?"

"The boys," he said in his driest tone, "gave our young friend a thorough going-over. He was embarrassed. I decided not to stay and be a further embarrassment."

"What did they do?"

She followed him into the house. In the living room, usually restful to him with all its murky corners and bulky shapes, but now simply dark and gloomy, he threw down his hat and stretched himself in a leather chair.

"Fred?" she breathed. She was hovering by the fireplace like the heroine of a Victorian novel.

"Would you mix me a drink, Anne?"

She advanced softly into the room. "If you're feeling upset, Fred, perhaps you'd better wait a bit."

Although his face did not show a flicker of feeling, General Abel groaned within himself. Oh, Damn! She was solicitous. The thought, however, that perhaps little Anne, all softness and mush, was more hopeful than afraid, even guiltily a bit thrilled to see the invalid working himself up to an attack, gave him a cool satisfaction. He regained a measure of his confidence and said in a patronizing drawl: "A little wine for my stomach's sake, and a little soda for my heart's sake."

She brought him the drink and while he sipped it she perched on the edge of the big sofa. He had that feeling of

everything around him dark and formless and moving and he was glad when she spoke.

"What happened?" she asked again.

"Young Trotter turned up at the ring, swaggering like a drunk Marine, with two beautiful, beautiful Madigan stags he bought from Stan Tracy."

"Yes?"

"Except that the stags were very little Madigan, except for the feathers. They were pure, gutless dunghills."

"Oh, no."

"Oh, but yes. And Stan apparently tipped all the boys off about it. Half of them must have been there just for the show. One of his chickens was killed trying to get away and the other gave a great exhibition of leg work."

"I think that's terrible!" she said firmly. "I think Sam should get his money back."

"Money! for Christ' sake," the General snarled. "The point, my dear, is that Sam has been informed of something sad but true: that he's a condescending and bumptious ass."

"Fred!"

"Listen to me. There is a thing Sam wants to be--a kind of person. He will never be that kind, never on this earth. Because he is what he is, a footless, foolish mooning young man. Today, they tried to let him know. I'm afraid he got the idea."

"That's mean and cruel!" she cried. The General was surprised.

"It's true," he smiled.

"You're being unfair to Sam and to all the rest of them!"

"I know this town and I know those men. And I know a man, when I see one."

"Sam's a fine young man," she said indignantly.

"I like Sam," he said without hesitation. "The fact of his basic imbecility does not affect my interest in him. I'm not being superior. He is conscious, I suspect, which is more than most men ever lay claim to." The General, by talking, was regaining his poise. "I think it is arrogant to like only those people you think faultless and it's stupid to claim that those you like for one reason are likeable for other reasons. Sam is likable because he resents, very bitterly, not being a free agent. But he had chosen an asinine way of protesting. He could probably have stayed where he was and worked himself senseless and made a lot of money, which might have convinced him that he was a force. He could, perhaps, have become a successful lecher, with the same result. Instead, he has chosen to expend himself here, trying to be a kind of man he thinks romantic."

"What kind of man, will you tell me that?"

"Oh, for Christ' sake, will you forget the whole thing?" Abel had suddenly seemed to hear himself, lecturing pompously and glibly to a formless void.

"All right," she said. "But I wouldn't worry about Sam, if I were you." She studied him. "I want to finish the hibiscus. Why don't you rest for a few minutes and then I'll fix some lunch."

"Fine."

She left him, and it was all gone, all his confidence. The drink was horribly insipid. What he'd said--or tried to say--about Sam, frightened him. He didn't like to see himself grasping at words, trying to get things <u>stated</u>. He went to the sun porch and tossed the drink out through the door. The porch was no better than the living room. In the flat, hard light everything seemed artificial and insubstantial, like stage props... even the gun case and the fishing rods on the wall. He sat down at his desk and took out his journal. After leafing through it for a few moments, he put it away. He simply couldn't look at the things written there. He sat a few minutes staring out at the palmettoes and Anne, working out in front of the house, began to sing. The thin soprano voice was even thinner to his ears and he retreated angrily into the forbidding cavern of the living room.

He wandered to the kitchen and looked into the refrigerator. Then he had a drink of water and walked down the front hall. There was some mail on the table by the door. He leafed through it. An envelope in his doctor's letterhead gave him a start and he snatched it up and put it in his pocket. He realized that it was a window envelope and couldn't be anything but a bill, so he took it out and held it in his hand while he looked at the rest. Book clubs, a couple of circulars and a letter from the Army and Navy Club. He took it all to the porch.

It was a bill, all right. He dropped it in the top drawer and then threw the rest of the mail into the waste basket unopened. He was due for a visit to Dr. Reinhard in June. After that he'd stop all this. He simply couldn't keep it up. Even as he thought about that he knew that he would do it, though. Right then, it seemed to him that any face he could present to the world would be seen for false.

It had been three months since General Abel's last trip to Jacksonville to see his doctor, and for that three months he had been lying, every day, in every thing he did and said. No, he did not really have to lie at all. All he had to do was to cancel out that visit to Dr. Reinhard and go on as he had been going for three years. He had come home from that visit meaning to walk into the house and say to Anne and Mag, very drily: "That damned fool Reinhard can't

seem to find his famous blood clot." He'd meant to tell them all that had happened, the long, careful examination and re-examination and Reinhard explaining to him that the clot must have dissolved, the way they sometimes do. He'd never even thought of not telling them. All the way back, alone in the car, he'd thought how it would be to be able to walk upstairs or lose his temper and bellow or spend the whole long day in the sun or boat a fish or go swimming or lay his wife. But then he'd come in the house and he'd said nothing until Anne asked him and then all he said was, "Mortality is still very much with me."

It was true, though, about his having an appointment in June. Reinhard wanted to check him again, just to be sure. He could go to Jacksonville then, and come back and say what he'd planned to say in December. He was sure, though, that he would not do that. He did not ask himself why. He had never asked himself that. It was simply that he _was_ still, blood clot or no blood clot, the same. He felt himself still the man he'd been these three years. He couldn't even imagine, any longer, any other self. He didn't really try to, for all his speculation about hiking and swimming and fishing and laying his wife.

Anne was still singing. He heard her voice in its whole setting of whirring locusts and rustling foliage and a dog barking down the road, all the sounds crossed and

conflicted and each one stumbling obliviously its own way. When he stood up his chair rocked and creaked and he grabbed at his ears and threw himself face down on the hot, musty sofa.

* * * * *

As Mag sat beside Sam in the pickup truck, driving down from the groves to the bridge, it seemed as though every ideal, every dream of herself, had suddenly descended within reach. And simply because these things now lay surely within reach of her life, all their satisfactions filled her: She was beside Sam in a fast automobile driving through a far-off place where the houses were all pastel stucco and the mountains stood above and the sea below; she was beside Sam leaving a party in the sweet, warm dawn; she was beside Sam, beside Sam. All this, not in the imagination, but, because inevitably, really. She did not look at him, she did not speak to him, she scarcely breathed, and the wind touched her and the sun warmed her and all the world was as it had to be for them. And, Oh! she was proud. She was proud of Sam and she was proud of herself, but, already dissolving the two together, she was proud of the two of them for their togetherness and their rightness and their love.

He parked in the drive and put his arm on the back of the seat, touching her shoulder with his hand.

"I'll call you up," he said.

"All right," she answered weakly. And then, because she must not be messy--God! Let her not be messy!--she said, "Come in for a drink?"

"I don't think so."

She was grateful. She couldn't be another moment with him or something would snap in her. She threw open the door and sprang out and ran to the house without looking back.

Anne called to her from the kitchen when she entered, but Mag simply shouted a greeting and went to the porch looking for her father. He was at his desk, writing, but when she came in he closed his book and put it away.

"How were the fights?"

"Wonderful."

"Good chickens? That must have been a relief."

She laughed and sat down on the sofa. She was all trembly and light-headed. She wanted him to know, but she never said things directly to him. That was a messy thing. Besides, just now she couldn't have said it if she'd wished to. It had to be hers for a little while.

"And the young bull?" he said with that secret smile of theirs. "Does he still charge straight?"

"Straight as an arrow."

"Mag, if I were a young bull, I'd run from you. But I'm not. I'm an old and wary bull who's been in too many bull rings." He sprang up from his chair and stood with his hands on his hips, scowling as he said, "To kill a bull, torera, you've got to get blood on your hands."

She nodded. She did not even notice his excitement and intensity. As for what he was saying, she scarcely heard it. She was a long way away--Sam's Mag.

CHAPTER IX

Sam was not quite so humiliated as General Abel thought by his fiasco with the cowardly fighting cocks, but the first fine bloom was taken off his enthusiasm by it, and he began to think. He began to reappraise Moccasin Branch and his decision to live there--without, however, really questioning either of them. But it was not only the cock fights that started him questioning. He began to find all sorts of little thorns upon the lotus. It was difficult to talk to people in Moccasin Branch, it seemed always to take an effort. Sam didn't think of blaming himself and his vanity for that, and it didn't occur to him that he was being impatient. There were only two people with whom he was really at ease, however: Anne Abel and the Cajun, Bobo. With those two, he found, he could be himself. From this, he deduced something. He did not want to be a primitive, he realized. That first impulse had been all wrong. He had underestimated himself and his motives. He suspected (being very cruelly analytical about himself) that that first impulse had been no more than a rather mild and ineffectual man's grasp at force. But underneath that he found a more attractive idea. "This is my own place," he told himself. It was true, and not a thing to be ashamed of, that he wanted to be a man, to think of himself as manly,

but that meant more, he reasoned, than grasping for some kind of hot, deep-breathing, hairy-chestedness. What counted was to see yourself sharply, to have a sense of individuality and force. That was what the city had stolen away from him. To have a place you could feel, and understand, in a world you could comprehend and believe in!

He talked about that to Anne, sitting one hot afternoon in beach chairs before the waterless pink fountain of the Abel patio. This patio, enclosed all around by the big white stucco house, was a tiny place. They'd given up trying to keep grass in it, and the General had had a cement floor laid, leaving planting spaces for half a dozen dwarf palms and some clumps of cactus. Anne had tried to brighten the place a bit by hanging gourds and rattan baskets on the posts of the loggia.

"It's a question," she said in her prim, schoolteacherish way, "of pride, Sam. Self respect."

"Yes," he agreed, "but that's not all. For ten years I've felt all at loose ends, without knowing it. Unattached. Maybe it isn't a place that I want, at all. Maybe it's that I want to do something that seems to matter. Maybe I should have studied medicine or something like that."

"It's not too late."

"But at the same time, I believe that wouldn't have made any difference. I can't believe it's just me, and what

I've done, that makes me feel this way. I don't know. I'll never feel at home here, really." He squinted at the pink plaster fountain and said: "I just want to be interested in my life, in things around me. Do you know what I mean?"

"Of course I do."

"It sounds snobbish and bored, but I'm not bored. I really want things to matter to me."

"Sam," said Anne softly, "don't worry. You're just trying to name yourself. Your instincts are right."

She had been more warm and more kind to Sam since that afternoon of the cock fights when General Abel had given her his opinion of Sam's character. Usually, Anne made allowances--large allowances--for her husband's troubled life. But that had stuck with her and continued to irritate. She fancied now that she rather admired Sam. He had the courage to care. Even though she was still shut out of Mag's heart, her moment of desperation had passed. Sam might still build the link between her and her daughter.

"One thing that matters right now," Sam declared, "is the orange groves. Things are pretty bad, you know."

"The drought?"

"That's the least of it. We've got troubles."

"I didn't realize that."

"Oh, it's no disaster. My father's not as young as he was. He can't really keep things in hand."

"Your father's not so old," Anne smiled. "He's--what? Sixty?"

"About sixty-five. But he's worked pretty hard all his life."

"I suppose it is time for him to take things a little easier."

"There's a lot that has to be done over there," Sam said, and as he said it he already seemed more content. "And I guess I'd better be getting back."

"Mag will be home in half an hour."

"Tell her I'll call her up a little later."

Sam's nervousness about Mag had grown stronger, and was pointing to another bothering fact about Moccasin Branch, one that he did not talk to Anne about. There were no women. He knew exactly four girls in the town, aside from Mag. They were equally unexciting: all a little boney, a little sun roughened, a little drab, and all, it seemed, self satisfied and dull. Just Crackers. Mag was the finest girl in town, she was practically at his feet, and he was friendly with her family; but she was still sixteen years old and he found, since he had kissed her among the lemon trees, that her age was beginning to show itself in irritating little ways of speaking and gesturing and thinking. He could not help but think of it in terms of: "she has a

crush on me." That Anne and Fred Abel were so obviously pleased with this did not help at all.

It was several days after that before he saw Anne Abel again, and when he did, he had a new idea. It was a Saturday. He started the day very early, leaving the house without breakfast so he could get to the plant before Emory sent the pickers out. He called the foreman into the front office and closed the door. Castle had taken a very hat-in-hand attitude toward Sam since the day at the cock pit, and Sam was wishing he could find some way to put some starch into him and, at the same time, make him forget about those Madigan stags.

"Emory," he said briskly and cheerfully, "what's the best place around here for a lath house?"

"A lath house?"

"That's right."

"Well, between the plant and the lemons, I guess."

"How long will it take to build?"

"That depends. What size set-up are you thinking about?"

"Big enough for about eight hundred or a thousand seedlings."

"That'll take a little doing. A day or so, I guess."

"Okay. Take some of our pickers and put 'em to work. Let's see if you can have the house built by tonight."

"All right, Sam." Castle was hurt and dignified. Sam went to the desk Amos had set up for him and took a handful of pamphlets from the drawer. He spread them on the desk top and motioned for Emory to look at them.

"I got these from the Department of Agriculture. Citrus management booklets. I thought I'd try to learn something."

"I guess they got some pretty good tips in there," Castle said hoarsely.

"There's a limit to how much I can learn from books. You're gonna have to give me a hand, Emory."

"I'll be right glad to do whatever I can," Castle said stiffly. He hadn't forgotten what had happened the last time he gave Sam a hand.

"We've got to start a re-stocking program, Emory. There's no sense putting it off. We're going to start some trees right away, while the weather's still mild. What do you think of this? We'll start our own trees now, and at the same time we'll begin getting the land ready. We'll clear about four acres. Next spring, we'll put in nursery trees and bud the stock we'll have in the lath house. They'll be ready to set out the year after that, and we've got a start."

"That sounds okay."

"You know all about getting the land in shape?"

"I reckon."

"We've got eleven acres, as I figure, that isn't working. When we get that producing, we'll start finding out which oranges pay and which don't. Now, while I'm in Orlando, I'm going to see the man that designed this irrigation set-up, this Hal Northrup. I phoned him last night. I'm going to go ahead and order the control gates.

"The next thing is to get the trees cleared so we can pick oranges. How many men will it take to work on the lath house?"

Emory swallowed painfully. "Four, I guess."

"Well, take as many more as we can spare, get together some pruning saws and such and start them clearing trees ahead of the pickers. Okay?"

Castle hesitated. "I don't know," he said hoarsely. "We got ripe fruit out there. We oughta get it picked."

"The trees have got to be cleared, too. Emory, we're going to lose money this year. Just get used to that. We're going to forget about this year and worry about next year and five years from now. That's why I don't think we ought to worry about improving the plant just now. We'll scrape along as we are, while we concentrate on irrigation and improving our stock. If you think I'm doing anything wrong, I want you to tell me. You know more about the job than I do. But that's one thing you've got to go along

with--the trees and the irrigation system come first. Just make believe we're starting a brand new grove, with nothing but dirt to work with."

"All right, Sam," Castle said hoarsely. He was clearly angry both with what Sam was doing and the tone of voice he was being subjected to. "What about Amos?" he said.

"Don't worry about Amos." Castle shuffled his feet sulkily and started for the door. "One more thing," Sam said. "While you've got men working on the lath house, you might as well take a couple more and have them build two more cock houses over there."

Castle gave him a look of deep felt outrage, and went out. When he was gone, Sam took the ledgers from the safe and opened the account book before him. He felt fine once more. He felt as potent and dangerous as he had that afternoon when he killed the hen and kissed Mag up there among the lemon trees. Anne's reassurances had helped him shake off his fit of self questioning. He had written out a list of things that had to be done about the groves, and he was about to begin. He had said nothing to Amos about all this, except indirectly: "What about..." and "Maybe if we..." and such as that. Amos never seemed really interested. Once or twice he had vaguely indicated that Sam should go ahead with his ideas, but he couldn't seem to bring himself to the point of beginning anything. Sam had tried every

way he could think of to get Amos to give the commands that had to be given. He'd given him every chance, but he couldn't afford to ask permission. If Amos shoved him aside then, there'd be no chance at all.

Sam worked over the books for nearly an hour before Amos came in. He materialized silently in the doorway, smiling, his wide brimmed felt hat squarely on his head. He stood there firmly, his feet slightly spread, and smiled softly.

"Good morning, Sam," he said lightly. "On the job early, aren't you?"

"I work best in the morning."

"I did too," Amos said. He ceremoniously hung his hat on the coat rack. He cleared some papers from the table by the window and sat on it to stuff his pipe. Sam felt a cowardly relief that his father had come in without noticing the men who were by now at work on the lath house. "When you were a boy," Amos said, "we never knew where you were, either. Many's the time you were up and gone before breakfast, without a word to anyone. Out to hunt, generally, you and your dog. You always were one for keeping things to yourself, weren't you?"

"I guess so."

"I hear you're planning to grow some seedlings."

"Yes sir. I was just going to talk to you about it. I thought I'd kind of experiment with bringing up some stock. If they turn out good, we can use the trees."

"I see. How do the books look?"

"All right."

"How's the picking coming along?" Sam saw that Amos' hand, as he struck a long wooden match to light his pipe, was trembling.

"About the same," Sam answered. Suddenly, he distrusted his voice. "We're bringing in about eighty-six or eighty-seven boxes to the acre. Not so good. I told Emory that maybe he should get some men to work clearing trees."

"And what did he say?"

"He said 'Okay.'"

"I see. You've got your finger right on everything, haven't you?"

"I'm beginning to catch on, I think."

Amos puffed a cloud of smoke. "Are you counting me out, Sam? Have you decided to just sit down and take over?"

"No sir."

"Then what do you call it?"

There was a long silence.

"Well, we've talked about all this. We agreed about a couple of things that needed doing. I figured I might as well go ahead with some of it."

"What else are you up to?"

"I'm going to try my hand at starting some trees. It's cheap, and we need the trees. What's wrong with that? And I put a few of the men to work clearing some trees."

"Nothing, I suppose," Amos answered with a shrug. He waited, as if to see if Sam would say anything more, and then he looked out the window as he said: "Hal Northrup telephoned me this morning, Sam. He didn't know I had a son, and he wanted to check up if you were a bona fide representative of mine."

"Well," Sam said, "this irrigation business is all over my head. I want to talk to him about it."

"I'll tell you exactly what he said, Sam. He said: 'Someone called up claiming to be your son and talking like a tycoon, Amos.' That was how it sounded to him."

"My God, all I did was ask him if he could talk to me today if I came in for a few minutes!"

"Emory tells me you gave him a flock of orders this morning. He came through the groves to meet me. He wanted to know if you had my okay on all this."

"Look, I'm sorry you feel..."

Amos interrupted. "You didn't, Sam. You didn't have my okay and you didn't even ask it." His eyes brimmed suddenly with tears. "Who gives you leave to decide it's time to put me on the shelf. Who gives you leave to judge me? There's other things than a set of books!"

"Dad, I just wanted to help. I want to have a part in things."

"Is the way to do it to come along and help yourself?"

"I'm sorry it looks like that to you," Sam said. "I guess I got excited and carried away."

Amos rubbed his eyes with his fingers and growled something through his mustaches. Sam didn't understand and when he asked, Amos simply shook his head.

"Sam, we're all of us full of ourselves and everything that happens seems like it's aimed at us." He got off the table and wandered across the room. "A young man," he said, "always takes his daddy for a fool. That's the way of it. In a way, he's right, because a young man would be a fool if he was like an old man." He sighed heavily. "Have I let things go all that bad, Sam?"

"We're losing money."

"They still take my checks at the bank."

"I know it's not that bad. But I can look at this place and see that there's more to do than one man can handle."

"Depends on the man. I have my mind on other things, like an old man. We all of us look for getting old. We know it's coming along. The thing you fear is that it'll creep up on you and you'll be an old fool and won't know it. And no matter how close you watch, it does catch you. I'm near seventy. I suppose I'm getting soft-minded and hard-headed, the way an old man does." He smiled wanly. "But I can't really believe it."

"Neither can I. You're not so old as all that."

"You don't know. You still want to fight with the earth. I don't. It will be my home, soon enough." An air of dreamy melancholy seemed to have come over him, and it had in it a note of self satisfaction. "It would be enough," he went on, "for me to know that I'll be buried up there with my people and have more of my people tend my grave. That's why it made me glad to see you come home. I thought you might settle down here and get married and have a family and so on. I didn't count on your taking the reins out of my hands, though. Not yet."

"Amos," Sam said firmly, "there's things that have got to be done, and quick, too. That's all there is to it."

"And you're the man to do them? No, no, don't fly up in the air. There's no point to quarrelling. And I'm not saying you're <u>not</u> the man to straighten things out. You've

got a lot of zip to you, and you've got business experience and you're smart."

Sam's relief was like a stimulant, now that the worst of it was over. He was sufficiently at ease to pay some attention to Amos. His father's sudden talk about graves and old age was very strange. Amos' words, and his ingenuous manner, his wide and guileless eyes, seemed baldly insincere, to Sam. Was this Amos' idea of playing the part of an old man? And why? "I've got a lot of ideas," Sam said. "You know the things we've talked about. And then I got these books." He picked up the pamphlets and handed them to Amos, who shuffled them, reading the titles.

"I've got a set of these up at the house," Amos smiled. "Sam, I'm glad you want to take an interest in things. I'm proud that you feel man enough to pick up the load and carry it by yourself. But I got my hackles up at your tip-toeing around me. I'd like to talk it over with you and hear some of these big ideas."

"Okay," Sam said. He wondered if Amos had even noticed him before when they'd talked about what had to be done in the groves. "What did you tell Emory, Dad?"

"About what?"

"About those things I wanted him to do."

"I told him to go ahead. I told him to take orders from you just like they were mine. And, if you want to, we can go partners, legally. Probably be a good idea."

"We needn't worry about that. We can wait and see how things turn out."

"No, I think it would be a good idea, Sam. A partnership simplifies a lot of things. Think about it, though. If you'd rather not rush into it, we'll wait."

"It would probably be a good idea to talk it over with a lawyer," Sam said.

"You're no fool, Sam," Amos chuckled. "You're no fool."

"In business, you've got to think first about taxes and second about everything else."

"It's the truth, I guess, from an accountant's point of view. But I'd say you've got to think a lot about people, too. They come first."

"That's something else."

"Sam, let me tell you this. Don't count on Emory too much. You know how he is--he looks at a thing from the side he comes up to, and that's all he ever sees."

"I think I'm getting him figured out."

"It's all people, Sam. Theories and all can go to hell. You've got to know your man."

"That's not always easy."

"That's God's truth," Amos sighed. "But try. Remember to take others into account. Such as me, Sam. But not only me. You know what I mean."

"I think so."

"And remember what you yourself just said. It's not always easy to understand someone else. Make allowances."

"I will."

"Good. Good."

"And right now I think I'd better be on my way. I've got a lot to do in town. I'm going to take Mag Abel with me, if she wants to go."

"Make a day of it. I'll hold it in the road until you get back."

He left his father in the office and walked out to the truck. The Negroes were at work up among the lemon trees, building coops for his chickens, the ones he was going to buy in Orlando. He had the name of a man whose fighting chickens were called the best in Florida. He had no idea how much they might cost, but he was going to bring home a pen of them. He had a score to settle. Another group of men was breaking ground for the lath house. As Sam stood watching them at work, the dog Mustard came from under the truck where he'd been waiting and nosed at his leg. He scratched the hound's ears. He felt good.

* * * * *

The Abels began that Saturday as early as Sam did, with a large breakfast. The family's meals had lost the old, rigid pattern, to a certain extent, and they were all conscious of it that morning. Mag still spoke only rarely and judiciously, Anne still kept up her fragile line of unthinking talk--it was the General who had changed. He was no longer so brusque and terse. He knew it himself. He just seemed to keep talking. And all his superior joviality seemed gone, too, all the private good humor he had always seemed to maintain behind his public irritation.

Anne, automatically stuffing a chink in the conversation that morning, said: "A tapestry, or something like that."

"By all means," said Abel. "A goddamned tapestry is just the thing. Jazz the place up a bit." He grinned delightedly at his wife and leaned across the table for the platter. Although half his first serving was still on his plate, he scraped another big portion of scrambled eggs on top of it and with a great show of gusto began shoveling it into his mouth. He had not shaved before breakfast and his jaw and chin bore a silvery frost. He growled hungrily at his plate for a moment, then sat back and as he chewed waved his fork at the walls of the room.

"On second thought," he said, "a painting. An extra large 'September Morn.' No, no! 'The End of the Trail.' You know, the fagged out redskin with the wind whistling through his ragged jock strap. How do you vote, Mag?"

Margaret showed confusion only very briefly. She had been caught, she felt, watching her father. She cocked one eyebrow up, smiled wryly and shrugged.

"Mag will have no part of it," the General barked. "Mag, Mag! You're nobody's fool. Our Mag will wear the green hat for no one. My own particular green hat is off to you. When I can get it off, that is." he chuckled and shook his head wisely at her. "But we have to decide. What shall it be? The tapestry, the chilly nude or the fagged brave? Mother?"

"I'll think of something," Anne said. She smiled with a superior good humor. The General turned once more to Mag.

"How about the hide of young master Trotter?" he asked. "Aren't you about ready to nail that to some wall or other, Mag?"

"Now, Fred!" Anne cried archly.

Mag dropped her fork to her plate and scowled at her mother. "If I took my love life as seriously as you do," she said, "I don't know what would happen."

Mag had been rather pleased to have the conversation turn to her and Sam, and then Anne's cry had dumped it onto the school girl level. She resented the tone and she resented having shown her annoyance. Everything had got so jittery, it seemed! Vaguely, she blamed her mother. It was partly habit to blame Anne, but also Mag felt that she was the only one who saw the change in General Abel. She wished she knew what was troubling him, and she was still child enough to suppose Anne could know, if she wished, and make it right. But as the days had passed, Mag had begun to fear that it was up to her. If Anne wouldn't, or couldn't see what was wrong, then Mag must. She must understand, and help. She even thought that her father was trying to tell her what was the matter, in his own way. She even thought she knew, but she was afraid to believe in her thought. That thought, was that the General, somehow, had come to the end--that he knew, perhaps could feel in every beat of his pulse, that he would die soon. And she tried to understand what it was he wanted of them first. She had begun to fear that it was up to her, and to fear that she did **not** know what he wanted.

"Are you two going for target practice this morning?" Anne asked.

"We are. Ready, Mag?" Half the General's breakfast remained on his plate. All his gusto, like his words these last days, seemed false.

"Whenever you are," she answered.

He wiped his mouth vigorously, pushing aside the plate. "Get your rifle."

They walked out through the scrub and the palmettoes and turned up toward the pine woods. He didn't head toward their usual shooting place, but Mag didn't question him. The day was mild and the General apparently intended to have a little longer walk. He set a sharp pace, and when Mag found herself puffing she wondered if she had not better stop him. Before she could decide, though, they reached the first shady stand of pines and he called a halt. He took off his topee and scrubbed his short hair with his knuckles. He had not spoken since they left the house, and seemed in no mind to. From the way he looked about him squinting into the sun, scowling and breathing loudly through his nose, she could tell he was feeling good. She leaned against a tree and waited, cradling her rifle, as he stood scenting the wind and glaring out at the prairies. He turned to her with a sharp look. "Pooped?" he demanded. "Not me." He clapped his sun helmet on his head and set out again.

The General was feeling grateful for the sun and the air and the silence in which they walked. He knew that soon enough he would start to talk again. He knew why, he thought. I talk, he had explained to himself coldly, because I want to tell. Except for that few moments of weakness when he saw the envelope with his doctor's name on it, the General had not thought directly about the lie of his bad heart, but it had been with him, he knew. It was lying right behind these words he'd been pouring out for days now. Will I keep on until I tell, he'd wondered. Will I just spit it out on the table one day, for all of us to look at? He thought none of that directly, of course, but with some dark fringe of his mind. And in that same place in his mind, he had asked, for days now, despairingly: Why? That was the worst.

He stretched the silence out until they had walked farther than they ever had gone before, up into the high, barren grass stretches beyond the pines. It had grown hotter and the breeze that had started with them died. Mag was glad that the General stopped often to rest. On a sandy hump overgrown with smut weed and prickly pear he stopped and took her by the arm. He pointed south to dark trees.

"That's the Tangles. Swampy woods along the river bottom. My father used to hunt deer there. It's closed now."

"Why?"

"Who knows why things get closed? They do. Let's put a couple of targets against that hump down there and shoot from here."

He paced off seventy-five yards and set up targets side by side. When they returned to the hillock he took the rifle from her and loaded it. She moved behind him. His first shot was into the sand at the base of the target, but she didn't see any of the rest. He fired a string of ten shots, then opened the bolt of the rifle and sat down in the sand. She took the rifle from him.

"Your first round was low."

"I know. You run off a string."

While she fired her ten, he sat right beside her and when she was finished he made no move to go get the targets so she seated herself in the sand and cradled the rifle across her knees.

"I think you were throwing right," he scowled.

"There's no wind."

"You canted the rifle. Dropping your left elbow."

"No, I didn't."

"Don't tell your old man. I was watching." He sat silently for a moment, the sunlight making the bristle on his jaws glisten. She knew it was going to begin again. He was going to start talking, asking, and she would not under-

stand. "Mag," he said, "do you know why men are afraid of women?"

She shook her head.

"Men are afraid of women because a man knows that a woman is out to make him father of the son who'll push him out of the picture. Fathering a son is a damned nasty duty. On the other hand... On the other hand..." His thoughts seemed to race ahead of him for his voice dropped and for a full moment he simply stared at her quite blankly. "Don't be deceived by your young bull, my sweet. He may charge with lusty bellows and joy in his eye, but that doesn't mean he doesn't know there's a sword in the pretty cape. He knows it damned well. He pretends. His charge is considered to be his triumph, but it isn't. The torero who took the charge is the one who wins, if he takes the charge fairly and well and kills without any mess."

There it was again. The General went on, and Mag listened, dutifully but without any real hope of understanding. She knew that Sam was the bull and she the torera, but that wasn't enough. And this, this talk about bulls and capes and swords, she felt was the center of all that her father wished to tell her, or to ask of her. He seemed to keep coming back to it. He seemed to find no other terms for what he had to say.

And as he talked on she thought, too, that perhaps she had been deceiving herself about the two of them. He had always seemed to take it for granted that she understood him and perhaps that way he'd tricked her into believing that she did. But she had let him do it. It was her fault. She'd always pretended to understand. No, she had believed, really, that she understood--not just him, but everything--and now she was finding that she did not. Everything. She'd always presumed, for instance, that she knew all about sex. But she didn't. She simply didn't know anything real, any of the facts. All she knew was how to behave, how to hold her face and when to smile and when to shrug, while someone else talked about something she did not understand. Since Sam had come along, Mag had thought more and more, and with growing fears, about how little she knew about sex. There were things, she was sure, that you had to know.

But now, here as the General talked to her, there was something more important. She listened.

"Triumphs can be had, Mag, but not cheaply. It's people willing to settle for cheap triumphs who wind up wondering what became of their souls. Anything that comes easy should be held suspect. I don't mean just the obvious things. I mean the subtly easy things. To suffer keenly can be the easiest way, and is probably the cheapest triumph

of all, because you can always find something to suffer under."

With an inner, constricted shudder Mag thought again that he knew he was dying. He knew.

"The pangs of love!" he exclaimed with a sneer. "The pangs of love come easy. But to inflict love. To inflict love! Or something like it. I don't know why I'm talking to you, though, Mag; you are one of those who're born to inflict love."

She gave him back his stare, unwinking, but she was frightened. There was something in what he'd just said that made her wonder if he was losing faith in her, if he was realizing how little she could understand or help him.

"Go down and get the targets," he said. "Let's see how we did."

She walked down to the targets feeling his eyes on her back all the way, but when she took them up and turned around he was not looking at her at all, but out at the barrens as he had before. He was small and alone there, sitting in the sand in the dazzling sun. It made her head swim a little to look at him. If she could be sure of Sam! she thought. If she could be sure of Sam, she could at least try to help. She carried the two targets back and he took them eagerly from her hand.

"You canted the damned rifle," he growled. "If there had been a bull's-eye at three o'clock you'd have shot it out of the target. I didn't do so hot myself, but at least I strung them up and down the middle."

"Shall I set up two more?"

"In a minute." He stood up. "There's something I want to tell you, Mag. I haven't known my wife in the flesh in several years. Is my wording too obscure?"

"No," she said calmly, but she had begun to tremble a little at the unexpected shock and thrill of what he'd said.

"The reason," her father said quietly, looking once again out at the palmettoes and the pines and the parched grass, "is my heart. Love making can be--is--a strenuous business. The young are often appalled by that fact when they discover it in the course of events. I don't propose to treat you to a lecture on my physical condition, but my case, speaking philosophically, is interesting. It has a splendid, beautiful, symbolic bearing. Observe that I may not behave as a husband, as a man, without killing myself. Because of my heart. And the heart is the seat of the passions, tender and otherwise. Isn't that pretty? Most men, however, don't have the matter before them in such clinical terms. With them, it is symbolic and psychological, with me it is actual and physical.

"Consider this figure of speech: To embrace death. Common enough, in poetry and so forth. Most people would see nothing wrong with refusing to embrace death. But I have no choice. None at all. And neither has your young Sam." The General's voice had taken on an unaccustomed softness. The growl had gone out of it and his face had seemed to soften, too. "There's nothing wrong with being kind," he went on, "and giving a man the benefit of the doubt. But there is a point where giving becomes a sin. And, as I told you, there is a difference between giving and inflicting."

His voice stopped, and he remained looking away from her, out there at nothing. He had tried to tell her something, to give her the secret of his wisdom and his courage. Perhaps the thing he wanted was only to know that she understood. Whether or not she was sure of Sam, she had to give him that. She had to speak now, and trust herself to have understood. When she tried to move her mouth to speak, she found her jaws clamped so that they ached, and it took an effort to open them.

"Fred," she said thinly, "Sam wants me to marry him." As she heard her voice say the words, she felt all the fiber sucked out of her and she sat down heavily in the sand.

She raised her head and saw her father smiling down at her, their wry, upside down smile. "Are you surprised?" he asked.

"No, I guess not," she answered. Her voice had come back and the General's smile seemed to put everything together again. Everything but the lie she'd told him. Her heart began to thump ponderously. "Don't say anything about it, please," she said. "Not to him, or to Anne either."

"Good God, no! Anne would take the young man at his word before he knew what had hit him!" The General threw back his head and laughed hoarsely. Then he looked down at her again. He seemed waiting for something more, but that lie was so big in her that Mag could think of nothing. She did know, though, that there was something wrong. The whole thing had slipped out from under her.

Unconsciously, Mag had put one hand to her breast as if to hold to her heart. She said, the words choking: "I love him very much."

For a moment, the General did not reply. Then he raised his right hand, the wrist limp, and laid it on his chest and said, in a weak, startled voice: "With gestures, by God!" Tears flooded into Mag's eyes so that she saw her father's face all twisted an awry. It was not all her tears, though. For an instant his eyes were round as a child's with bewilderment, and his lips parted as if on a shout, but then

she wiped her face with the back of her hand and saw his brows gather and his eyes squint into slits and his mouth set in a hard line.

"I'm sure you love him, Mag," he said. His voice was once again dry and flat. "Are you going to marry him and live happily ever after?"

"I'd rather you didn't say anything," she pleaded. "I haven't answered him yet. It's just sort of vague."

"It's very vague, Mag. Very. Do you love him with all your tender, virginal heart?" He stooped and picked up the rifle. As he slipped his arm through the sling he glared at her on the ground before him. "Oh, you're a brave kid, Mag. Real guts."

He turned and strode off through the grass. He didn't look back. She stood up to watch him but she made no move to follow. When he turned down into the pines and out of sight, she threw herself to the ground as if to cry, but she did not cry. Quite unexpectedly, she was not frightened, but angry. All her sorrow for her father, all her longing to help and understand, were gone. Gone, too, was any wonder. Black anger blotted it all out. He had no right to talk like that! No right to hurt her! Her wrath was too wild to be more explicit, but it was brief, too. She still had Sam.

Then she remembered her lie. If Sam should hear of it! and there was no telling what her father might do or say, ever. On top of all the rest, Sam would hear that she was claiming him, and that way she'd lose him. Now she did cry.

CHAPTER X

When Mag and the General had left Anne washed the breakfast dishes, straightened up the kitchen, made a grocery list and watered all the house plants. Then she sat down alone in the huge, high-ceilinged living room and took up the newspaper. She looked at the front page but before she'd read twenty words she found her attention wandering. Lately she was finding that she ran down easily unless there was something to do, something to occupy her hands. She found no diversions. The latest books from the book club were unopened and she hadn't turned on the phonograph or the radio in days.

Like Mag, Anne had taken to watching Fred and listening to him with an abstracted curiosity and wondering. Like Mag, too, she saw behind the General's obscure and flooding words, the fear of death. Whatever he had relied on these last years, she decided, had worn out at last, and he was afraid. She did not thing that any thing or any happening could have broken and disarmed him. She supposed that he had simply come to the end of his strength.

She was sorry, and she would have liked to help, but she couldn't seem to make the effort. From the moment that Anne had realized the change in her husband, the power to involve herself with others had gone out of her. She had

been angry at him, and then she had found him defenseless, and after that she could only watch. All her interest in ideas and projects and Charity and improvement had died. Her hopes for Mag, and her fears; her sympathy with Sam; her worries and indignation--all fell slack. She watched, and she wondered if she were waiting for him to die, if she would simply stand by. She was shocked at herself, but not even that shock seemed to stir her, really.

As she laid the newspaper aside, she saw that the cocktail table wore a film of dust. That was sufficient, for the moment. A house cleaning would keep her in motion for a while. She went to the kitchen, fetched a broom and dust mop and polishing clothes and set to work. There was a great deal to the house, even with the upstairs closed off. She cleaned the living room and the big dining hall and the two bedrooms and the hall and almost decided against bothering with the General's study. Besides, he didn't like for her to disturb his things. But when she had finished all the rest they still had not come back, so she gave his sunporch a quick going over with the broom and the duster. It was a nice place to sit in the morning. She put aside the broom and sat on the front of Fred's big leather chair and stared around at the room, or rather, at the water oaks and hibiscus and oleanders that crowded up around the house and at the scrub land that surrounded it all. And then she

was lost again--limp and empty headed and motionless, yet feeling a confused urgency, as if she should, she must, do something. She wondered if all this could be no more than guilt that she didn't know what to do for Fred. Well, he didn't care. He expected nothing of her. Or did he? She couldn't keep her mind on it.

She suddenly realized that that was the whole point. She couldn't think. Her mind shyed away when she tried to make it work for her. Something, she thought, might be the matter with her.

She found a little after that that she had been sitting for several minutes without thinking or feeling anything at all--just letting memories and imaginings run random through her head. She had to think about Fred. Really think about him.

She went to the General's desk and opened the side drawers one at the time. The top one held pens, pencils, ink, rubber bands, paper clips and thumb tacks and tape, all in neat order. The second contained three sorts of stationery and packets of envelopes, the third a number of letters and official looking papers, bank books and cancelled checks. Then she opened the wide top drawer and without hesitation took out her husband's journal. She'd never touched it before. She opened it on the desk top and began to thumb the pages.

The entries were dated, and she realized that if she wished she could think of any day she wished, of the immediate past, and look it up. It hadn't occurred to her that she might pinpoint days and happenings. She tried to think what she should look for, but she had no real purpose in doing this, she wanted nothing, and no days or happenings came to her mind. She stopped and read half a page. It was a description at considerable length of the youngest son of Al Tracy, the pug nosed boy named Dale. It was scurrilous and unfair, but quite witty, she thought. She turned backward and forward to other pages. There were a lot of those descriptions, but most of the book seemed to be snatches of philosophizing and speculation. She read just a little bit, just sentences here and there. Some of it seemed surprisingly shallow and pompous and she wondered if he could be like that. It was embarrassing and pathetic. Not all of it was like that, though. There were incidents and stories recounted, and some were very funny. But there was a lot about people. She was rather touched at one or two places. She hadn't realized that Fred took such interest in the Branchers, even an angry and bad tempered interest. There was gruff admiration in some lines, a warmth of feeling she had almost forgotten he possessed, even though it was here tricked out in obscure dress. She was glad she'd looked at the book. Maybe it would help.

Flipping the pages, she saw the name "Trotter" and stopped to read:

> Young Trotter watches me out of the corner of his eye. I can almost hear him whinny. He is feeling rough as oak bark and lusts for Mag and steams like a pudding when I needle him. I have had to be a little less subtle with him. He wants in every way to believe that I am saying to him, "You, Young Bull, are just the man to do my daughter an extraordinary service." I think he does believe that I have said this, and still he doesn't believe it because to believe it fully he would have to be the thing he knows, in his bowels, that he is not. When it is done he will know, with what bowels he has left, that I never said anything of the sort. When Mag shows him she is his better, what will he believe? What is the truth of it?
>
> I have built for Sam a couch of love, and dug a tomb, and contrived an epitaph. For Mag--the wreath of ivy, the blade, the stone. What precisely is the nature of the incestuous desire? Will a man pre-date his own death? Shall I grieve at Sam's bier and envy Mag her laurel? Both were my doing. So do we hunger for the subtler sins!
>
> But Sam shall do us all a service: Mag and me and himself.
>
> Mag's pride is the lustiest thing I've seen. One day before long she shall wear that young man like a badge.

Anne read the last sentences of the entry through a shimmering veil of tears. She started to close the book, then flipped back and read the date. It was less than a week since he'd written that. She closed the journal and dropped it into the drawer and only as she walked away from the desk did shock and rage reach her. She began to tremble so violently that her step faltered and when she put her hand

to the desk she laid it upon the dagger that was always there. She seized it and threw it wildly. Glass broke and fell. That sound almost panicked her and she had to clench her fists and grit her teeth to keep hold of herself.

She plunged into the dark living room and ran to the kitchen. There, she composed herself. She stood in the middle of the floor and began to think what to do. When they came back she would send Mag out somewhere, and she and Fred would talk. They'd have it out.

It was then she realized that she didn't understand what she'd read in the journal--not altogether. But she understood enough. She didn't even try to imagine what fantastic reason Fred could have, except utterly cold self-love, but it was clear that he thought he was arranging Mag's seduction. Often before, when her husband had posed some callous and, to her, imbecile idea of insensitivity, and called it good sense, she had smiled to herself to think what airs he was putting on. Now she saw that he'd always been sérious with his heartless and brutal ideals. It was as simple as that. There was no more to him than those airs. He believed in them.

Before they got back, she decided, she had best have another look at that book, a careful look. She started back to the front of the house, thinking what she would say when, soon, they would face each other. It might mean a fight.

It might kindle in Fred a rage to match her own, a rage that would kill him if anything could. She could kill him that way, she realized. It was in her power. She was halfway across the living room when an automobile door slammed in front of the house. Someone must have picked them up and given them a ride home. The idea of an outsider stepping in rattled her. Then she realized that Mag and her father always came and went through the palmettoes. Nobody could have picked them up. She rubbed her face with her hands, composed her features and walked out into the hall as the outsider knocked.

When she opened the door to Sam Trotter, a tremor shot through her. Her voice quavered as she returned his greeting, but in an instant she was all right.

"Come in, Sam. Come in."

He must have caught that shiver as she saw him, for he hesitated. He was plainly startled and embarrassed, for he toed the door sill like a school boy. "I'm going to Orlando," he said. "I've got a couple of errands. I thought Mag might like to go along with me."

"She's not here," Anne breathed. "She and her father are out. Come in."

She led him to the living room. It would be best, she decided, to let him take Mag away for the afternoon. That would be fine.

"If you can wait just a little while," she said, "I'm sure Mag would love to go."

"How little is a little while?" he smiled.

"Not long. Not long at all. They'll be back any minute now. I'll fix you a drink."

He sat down. As Anne started to the liquor cabinet it came to her like a shock: This is the man. And then she remembered that she had not had the chance to go read some more in the journal. What had happened in a week? He was saying something. "It's too early for me." Yes, of course. For the drink, he meant. She went back practically staring at him. It was hard to connect him with the pitiful but monstrous Sam ("The Young Bull") of that diary. And what was his part in it anyway. He couldn't be the fool her husband thought him. What was he? Just a young, rather slight and very tanned man. His clothes were neat and his face was friendly and open. He was even boyishly handsome. Well bred might be the term for his looks. Yes, well bred and harmless. But now he was important. He was saying something about the weather, about how dry it was.

"Is it hurting the orange trees?" she asked.

From the odd look he gave her, she knew that that was exactly what he'd been telling her. "It's killing 'em." he said.

"Really?"

"It won't take much more. That's one of the reasons for my trip today. I want to get this irrigation project speeded up. The lake's down about eight inches."

"Is it? I don't notice things like that." She took a chair and smoothed her skirt over her knees. "I saw your father the other day," she said, "down at the store. He was going fishing."

"He fishes a lot."

"I know how it is with these fishermen. Fred used to fish all the time, everywhere. We used to drive hundreds of miles for him to go fishing. When we could get away. Army post life, you know. They just have to be there so much. You were in the service, weren't you?"

"During the war."

"It was a little different then. In peacetime the Army is different."

She could see that her nervousness was infecting Sam. There was a tic in her knee and she had to stand up. Then Sam bobbed up and she had to tell him to sit down. She went to the fireplace and straightened the things in the fire set.

"How does Margaret do with a pole?" she asked.

"What?"

"Fishing. You two went fishing the other day, didn't you?"

"Oh, sure. She's okay."

"Fishing. At her age, I wouldn't have though of it. She's part hoyden, I'm afraid. But not really."

"Not at all."

"I'm so glad you're around, Sam. There just hasn't been anyone Mag could meet around here her own age and with her interests who she could talk to and go places with."

He wasn't Mag's age at all, she realized. Why hadn't she thought of that and realized what he was after? But that wasn't fair. She didn't know anything at all about him. She went back to her chair and sat down.

"Sam," she said, "you know Fred isn't well. It upsets him, you know, and preys on his mind." She stopped. What was she trying to say to the boy? That her husband was insane? Was she going to tell him Fred didn't really mean whatever he'd said? Was she going to tell him he couldn't have Mag, no matter what Fred said? There was such an idiotic tenor to her thought that for an instant she was afraid she would giggle and go all to pieces. Sam shifted uneasily in his chair and his eyes avoided hers. She had to remember that he was the important thing, this pleasant young man. He was what she had to know about now. "I'm sorry," she sighed, "I'm afraid I must be awfully harebrained today."

"I think your husband's a remarkable man," Sam said very calmly. "It never occurred to me that anybody could worry about him. Do you know what I mean?"

"Oh, yes, yes. Fred's very capable."

"More than that. He sees things clearly and he doesn't flinch from the facts. I think I would call him a man of principle."

He was so calm, so self assured, so contained. And he was the key. He was the center of it. Even if nothing had happened, yet, even more if something had happened, he was the key. The whole frail structure of her family pivoted now upon this neat young man, upon what he was and what he could feel and, above all, upon what he wanted.

He was saying something about Mag, about how like her father she was.

"Not so much as you may think," she said.

"Mag's almost frightening sometimes," he said. "She takes things so simply and literally and matter-of-factly. She's uncompromising about how she feels and when she comes to something she doesn't pay any attention to what's been said about it or what she's been told she should feel about it--it's the thing itself."

Again, Anne stood abruptly. She had made up her mind. She had to know about Sam. That was more important than a quarrel with Fred. "Sam," she said, "I'm afraid

they're going to be late. They actually didn't say how long they'd stay and sometimes they're forever. But if you're going anyway, would you mind taking me? I have a lot of shopping to do and I'd like to look through the stores. I hate to drive all the way to Orlando myself."

"Be glad to. I'm in no hurry, though. We can wait a little for Mag."

"Well, I'll go get my hat. We'll give her that long."

She didn't want to take too long. They might come home any minute. There wasn't time to bathe. She washed her face and slipped into a dress and combed her hair hastily. She decided she'd have to put on hose. She grabbed up her hat and her gloves and when she got back to the living room Sam was still alone.

"Neither of us has all day," she said. "Let's go."

* * * * *

By the time Sam and Anne left Moccasin Branch in the pickup truck, the day was growing hot. A haze of dust hung over the road, swirling sometimes into the windows. Sam was excited by Anne's sudden show of interest in him. He'd gone to the house all keyed up in the first place. Her nervousness had embarrassed him at first, but then he'd calmly analysed the situation. Her sudden decision to go with him he found very flattering. As he'd waited for her to dress,

he'd thought it over. What in the world could be eating at her? She kept looking at him in that queer, anxious, frightened way. At first he'd thought he'd walked in on something private, but then there was the way she'd almost yanked him into the house, insisting that he wait, and those looks. And so he had kept deciding that all her nervous flutterings somehow concerned him and then thinking that ridiculous--but. It was an absurd idea, all right. He had tried to draw her out, to get her talking something besides small talk, but with little luck.

They rode in silence most of the way. In the dust and the heat, Sam returned to his determined and confident plans for the groves. He went over in his mind just what he had to do today. He thought of questions to ask before he bought anything or made any kind of deals. He thought on, beyond that day, until, as he drove along the dusty road, he was caught up by a vision of all he'd do and the reality and urgency of it filled him. As the truck rattled along he raised a new water tank and laid the pipes, he supervised a crew of sweating Negroes as they laid tile in the hot, oily groves, he spun the iron wheel of a wier and saw the water wash into the dry ditch. He pruned and dusted and culled the trees and the groves grew and flourished. New ground was turned and new buildings raised.

He looked at the silent woman beside him. She was very attractive in the light silk print she'd put on. She looked very real, very flesh and blood. Her skin looked warm and living and her mouth was moist and mobile.

She seemed pleased when Sam started a conversation and they talked of Moccasin Branch gossip for a few miles, but as they talked he saw that same air of constraint come over her once more until their words became halting and uneasy. He couldn't imagine what was wrong with her. He decided, loftily, that it would be best to leave her alone. If the thing on her mind had something to do with him, why, he'd find out. If he tried to press her, she might shy off. He let go of his end, and the conversation fell. From there on he watched the scenery and hummed to himself as he drove.

He left her in the shopping section of Orlando and they arranged to meet in a grill she knew of. He had some trouble finding the irrigation engineer's office and by the time he did it was the lunch hour. He ate a sandwich in a drugstore and found the address of H. L. Montgomery in a telephone book.

The place was well out of town, but easy to locate. A sign by a side road, newly cleaned of dust, read: "H. L. Montgomery. Brahma Cattle." The road led through sandy pastures to a grove of oaks and a small white house. Hump-backed Brahma cows grazed in the sparse grass and there

were some that seemed to be crosses. All very appropriate, he thought. An animal breeder, a believer in blood lines, would be a fighting cock fancier, all right. Another fitting touch was the handsome, long eared hounds that came belling around the house as he parked in the shady yard.

He sat in the truck as the dogs yelped and clamored about it and in a moment the screen door of the house opened and a hoarse voice yelled a command. The hounds milled in confusion and Sam got out among them. "Mr. Montgomery?" he called.

The dim figure in the doorway answered with a grunt and Sam walked to the porch. The man peering peevishly from the shadows of the hall was tiny and bald, dressed in denim shirt and pants faded almost white. The hand that held the door for Sam was as thin and rough as a bundle of sticks and when he could see more clearly Sam realized that Montgomery must be terribly old. He was quite thin, but the skin pouched and sagged on his skull like a deflated balloon.

"Yes?" the old man shouted in his face.

"Mr. Montgomery, I'm Sam Trotter, sir, from Moccasin Branch I'd like to..."

"Deaf!" shouted Montgomery, smiling pleasantly.

"My name's Trotter, sir, Sam Trotter. I drove over from Moccasin Branch.

"Come in, come in," the old man cried. He held the door until Sam entered and then sprang off at alarming speed, tottering wildly at every step. Sam followed him into a tiny, smelly, parlorish room with bare wood floors where Montgomery plopped into a rocking chair and regarded him delightedly. "Trotter?" he asked.

"Yes sir."

"Where you from, may I ask?"

Sam repeated "Moccasin Branch" twice again.

"Oh," the old man cried at last. "You'd be one of Cyrus Trotter's people."

"He was my grandfather."

"Then you're Amos' boy."

"That's right."

"You'll have to talk pretty loud to me. I don't hear worth a damn."

"I wanted to find out about some chickens, sir."

"Fightin' chickens?"

"Yes sir."

"I don't talk for newspaper people."

"I'm not from a newspaper," Sam said.

"Which one?" Montgomery said with a sly expression.

"I said I'm <u>not</u> from a newspaper."

"I know what you said. They come out here and enjoy my hospitality and then write it up about the cruelty of the

sport and all that. I got no fight with them, but I won't have my hospitality abused."

"I don't blame you."

"People that want to do good can find a lot to take care of before starting on chickens, anyway. There's human souls to be saved in this world." Sam didn't know what to say. Montgomery was growing peevish. He regarded Sam intently. "You're from Moccasin Branch, eh?"

"That's right."

"Well, I can tell you as much about cock fighting as another fellow can. What's it you want to know?"

"I'd like to buy some stags, sir, and a couple of hens."

"Buy some?"

"Yes sir."

"I don't sell game cocks."

After an embarrassed pause, Sam ventured: "Not at all, sir?"

"I don't hear what you say."

"I say you never sell any chickens at all?"

"Never sold one in my life."

"Well, I guess that leaves me out. I wonder if you know of anybody I could go to who sells."

"For chickens? I don't know. Chickens you can buy you don't want to buy, as a general rule. Know what I mean?"

Sam had an instant of horrible suspicion that Montgomery had somehow heard of the stags he bought from Stan Tracy. That didn't seem possible, though.

"Amos and Walker Trotter once had some fine birds," the old man yelled. "What come of them?"

"They haven't had any for years."

"Walker's dead, ain't he?"

"Yes sir."

"That's what I heard. He was a Christian," Montgomery shouted. "He was a Christian gentleman if one ever lived. He took Christ into his life and let Him walk beside him."

Sam simply goggled at that. Here was a totally new conception of Walker Trotter. But Montgomery went on. "How's Amos?"

"He's all right."

"Understand he ain't doing so well with them groves."

"We're having some water trouble."

"That so? Irrigate!" Montgomery barked.

"We're working on an irrigation system now," Sam said wearily.

"I can't hear you," said the old man, and Sam repeated.

"I know, I know. Been working on it some time, ain't he? How much water's he pumping?"

"I don't know. Not much."

"You gotta move water, and a lot of it. And you gotta get it to the trees. Them trees ain't gonna come to the ditch to drink like so many mules. Know what I mean? Who designed your system?"

"Hal Northrup."

"He's all right. Do the way he tells you. You want to take a look at my irrigation rig?"

"Why, yes sir. I'd like to see it."

Without another word, Montgomery leaped up and started out the front of the house, grabbing a faded engineer's cap from a coat rack as he passed. "Just drive out the way you came," he directed as he hopped into the truck, "and turn left. I'll show you after that."

They managed to get out of the yard without running over any dogs, and Sam followed the old man's directions. Half a mile on out the road, they turned down another well kept side road through Montgomery's pastures. After a mile or so they topped a rise and orange groves lay before. Sam slowed down to look as he drove down in among the trees. The trees were beautiful. There didn't seem to be a dead twig in all of them, or a scratch on the bark. The leaves looked as though they were hand polished. The soil between the rows was freshly harrowed. The old man touched Sam's arm and he stopped the truck.

"Not enough fall to the land," Montgomery said, "for a gravity operation. I use pipe. Now, there's four main ditches. Go to your left and we'll start at the beginning."

They started at the beginning and went to the end. Sam drove slowly down the rows, listening as the old man's cracked voice shouted out the details of his management of the groves. A dozen times they stopped and got out while Montgomery showed Sam some point of the irrigation system, or looked at young trees, or examined a motorized sprayer. Everything was so perfect it was hard to believe that it was all the work of this wobbly, deaf bundle of sticks.

Sam asked questions. He asked every question he could think of about the irrigation, about cultivation and handling, about yield and profit. Montgomery answered every one of them without hesitation, shouting at the top of his lungs. When the tour was done, Sam was almost physically sick. He knew now how bad things really were with the Trotter groves. They were very bad. He didn't even try to keep it all in his head. Montgomery had told him a thousand things he should remember and think about and look to. It was just too much. They headed back to the house with Sam, silent, clinging to the steering wheel as if it were a life preserver.

"Who's the minister of your church?" Montgomery demanded.

"Dr. Reed."

"He's a Methodist."

"Yes sir," Sam said listlessly.

"I don't know nothing about him otherwise. How do you find him?"

"I like him all right."

"I'm a Baptist, myself. It's all right. So long as a man worships."

They parked once again in the yard. When Montgomery hopped out, Sam stayed in the truck and started to thank the old man for the tour and make his farewell. Montgomery cut him off saying: "Just you come along here, if you will," and set out around the house. Sam got out, fending off hounds, and followed him.

The outbuildings of the farm were fanatically well kept, and white-washed within the year. Montgomery led his visitor around the side of the house and past a big barn and a row of cow sheds, stopping once to snatch a scrap of broken chain from the ground and put it in his pocket. Near the end of the sheds he grabbed Sam's arm and pointed eagerly at a huge Brahma bull drowsing in its pen. "Dade's King Ramses!" he shouted, and Sam nodded.

Montgomery's chicken pens were on a cleared slope below the sheds, about thirty houses. The old man's penned cocks raised angry eyes to them as they passed and fretted

at their cages. A gold hackled red variety predominated. Handsome birds. The old man stopped by a pen that held a single stag and gestured at the bird.

"How's that?"

"A good looking chicken."

"I can't hear you."

"I say he's a good looking stag."

"Ain't he, though? That's Montgomery's Albany cross. Not worth a damn. A played out line. Twenty years ago, the world wouldn't hold 'em, they was that fine. The strain's gone sour, though, like they do. I'm trying to cross back to put some heart in them, 'cause they're the hardest hittin' shufflers in the game. No luck, though. The line's played out."

He went to another pen and a slightly lighter stag.

"Montgomery's Claret-Roundhead-Georgia Shawlneck."

"Pretty."

"Another hard hitter. I breed for hard hitters, every time. You can have these windmill cocks that hit three for one but never hard enough to dent your hat. Know what I mean? You got any boxes with you?"

"Sir?"

"You bring any boxes?"

"No sir."

"That's all right. I got some crates I'll give you. I want you to take this stag and three others and two hens. I'll show you which ones. Now one of the hens is this stag's mammy. I want you to fight him two or three times and if he does good you breed him back on his mammy. Then you and me halve the hatch and you're in business with chickens of your own." He turned his head thoughtfully and said: "If there's an odd chick in the hatch it goes to me. Understand?"

Sam found himself inexplicably and pitifully embarrassed. "But you don't sell any," he said lamely.

"I'm loanin' you these," Montgomery shouted. "You handle 'em and fight 'em and halve all the hatches with me and if I want one of these stags or hens back I'll send for it. Do you mean to feed these birds yourself?"

"My father and I will feed."

"Fine. I don't know if your father knows anything about keeping, but he's all right and I'd trust him."

"This is awfully nice of you, sir."

"Yes, yes. I'll have the nigger box 'em up. Come in the house and I'll give you a list. All my birds are tattoed under the off wing. I'll give you the numbers. Now, you understand about crossing this fellow here back onto his mammy?"

"Yes sir."

"Come along."

When Montgomery had given Sam a list of the numbers of the chickens and careful instructions about the crossing, they went out to the truck and watched a Negro farmhand load four boxes. The hounds came out again and slobbered on Sam's hands when he scratched their ears. Montgomery passed his hard little hand over his eyes.

"I want you to say hello to your daddy."

"I'll do that, sir."

"There's many of my old friends I'll never see again. I'm seventy-seven years old. Soon, I'll go to claim my crown." He squinted around them out at his broad, neat farm, at the grazing cattle and the white buildings and the straight fences. "I'm seventy-seven," he repeated. "When I was thirty-one years old I opened up my heart and let Jesus come in and I've had Him walking beside me to this day. I haven't got no fears of the judgment."

The crates were loaded and the old man offered his hand. As Sam backed the truck out of the yard he was already tottering precipitously around the house, yelling at the top of his lungs at his Negro helper.

CHAPTER XI

When Sam had left the packing plant Amos remained for a while in the office, checking over the books. He was used to his own simple ledger bookkeeping, though, and didn't understand the system Sam was setting up. The boy was full of ideas and plans, so anxious to take hold of things. Too anxious? Amos was a little ashamed of his peevish outburst. Sam seemed so intense and serious about everything. He was really worried about the business. Amos knew that the groves were in bad shape, but all that was needed, after all, was a little bearing down. All Sam's frantic running around and giving orders and laying big plans seemed childish and melodramatic. For the first time since Sam's homecoming Amos was a little irritated with him. He was temperamentally antagonistic to his son's headlong and heedless way of going at things. But he remembered a saying of Walker's from the days when he and his brother had had their differences about that. "Don't ask a shotgun to go off slow," Walker would say.

But me, Amos thought, what about me? Where am I in Sam's picture and plans?

That was not fair. With a sigh, Amos reflected that perhaps all the real making and doing had to come through men who are insensitive to the million subtle feelings and cares with which acts become entangled. Who, after all,

would do anything if he stopped to weigh all the consequences for everyone? But some, the best men, are guided by the right instincts and spare others without having to stop and think of it. Walker was that kind.

He put the books away and went out into the plant where for a while he watched the oranges come along the belt. Then he walked outside and exchanged a rather cool and formal greeting with Emory. He stood beside the foreman and watched the men setting up the lath house. Poor Emory! He'd always wanted to rebel at Amos' way of doing things, and now he was on what he thought was Sam's side and feeling bad because of it. They'd never again be easy together, he and Emory, and Amos could feel only that this was just the foolish way that things could turn out. He was not angry or sad. Perhaps Emory was. That debacle with the dunghill cocks that Sam bought had hurt Emory, too, he knew. He'd felt pretty bad about that himself, but he was glad to see Sam wasn't letting it bother him. Sam bobs right back up, he thought. That old man Montgomery probably would be fair with him, if nothing else, and maybe he'd get some pretty good chickens.

Another truckload of fruit came in and three Negroes rose from the shade under the loading dock and clambered up on it. It was a pleasure to watch them handle the boxes, straining gracefully and easily and swinging the crates

from one to another to dump the oranges into the bins. He felt a familiar old envy of them. To be a young, husky nigger with never a care but payday! He smiled and turned away.

Amos always kept a fly rod and a little tackle box in one of the office cabinets. He fetched them now and sat smoking a fresh pipe as the loaders finished with the truck. When the load was emptied he climbed in the cab and told the driver to take him down to the bridge before going for his next load.

The water in the branch was still dropping. Spots that had been good fishing places were showing mud now. He let the skiff drift down past the bridge and the church road, casting one side and the other. He had two or three strikes, but took no fish. Most likely they were moving up into the lake as the stream became cloudy. Still, it was a fine fishing day, with just enough of a breeze to ripple the water. He caught a nice little bream and threw it back and by that time he'd drifted in sight of the pump house. The engine was going, throbbing away sort of eerily all by itself. He gave a pull on the oars and let the boat come down by the intake sump. He grabbed the concrete foundation of the pump house and steadied the boat while he looked down into the sump. Half of the intake screen was showing above

the level of the water. If the branch dropped another four inches, the pump would be drawing air. A siphon would be the thing, or maybe it would be easier to knock out the side of the sump and just put a pipe down into the water with a box screen on the mouth of it.

There was something he could do. He could tie up the boat, go up and get a couple of men from the plant, and have the thing fixed in an hour or so. He could hear the sound of hammers up there were they were working, and he heard a nigger's deep laugh. He didn't tie the boat up. He shoved off and began to row quietly back upstream. I can't do anything, now, he thought, because I'm ashamed to have Sam think he made me do it.

He rowed all the way back to the branch mouth, taking it easy and picking out all the spots he remembered from fifty years of fishing this stream: the deep spot by the shale bank, where he caught his first big fish when he was just a boy; the patch of lilies where he sometimes came in the evening to catch stump knockers on a trout fly; the bend in the stream where a kingfisher had nested in a cypress for the last five or six years. Just below the bridge there was one place marked by no special feature of the bank or the water, a spot he couldn't tell another man how to find, but where he never cast a fly or a bait without a thrill because it was there, at least ten years before, that he'd hooked

the biggest fish he'd ever felt on a line, a bass that must have weighed fifteen pounds, that had fought him for three minutes at least and then broken the leader. That was the fine part of fishing, he reflected. Every time added a little something to the times to come, and just that little murmur of water around the boat was filled with all the days he'd fished and all the shady creeks and sunny lakes and black water woods ponds.

At the landing, he pushed the skiff in through the stiff, drying reeds and tied up and then, reluctant to leave, stood on the end of the little dock and made another dozen casts out into the branch. After that he sat down on the sun whitened boards and stuffed and lit a pipe. He broke down the rod and took off the reel and cut the lure from his leader. He put the rod back in its case and stripped the line from the reel to lay it in loops on the dock to dry, the way he always did. That was another part of fishing, the affectionate ritual of fooling with your tackle, taking care of it and working on it.

Of all my life, he thought, is this to be all I have left? These rememberings and these little private rites?

As he sat in the sun the breeze brought to Amos, from the dark trees behind him, the faint, sweet scent of the spoiled oranges beneath those four old trees by the old home-place. He left his tackle on the dock and walked up across

the old road and into the tangle. In under the four big orange trees, the pulpy groundings were buzzing and crawling with clots of great green flies. He pushed through into the clearing, rousing the flies to a brief, sluggish frenzy, and looked about. He kept coming back here lately, it seemed. Are you already beginning, he aked himself sadly, to live in memories? He went to look at the queer, thorny, lotus tree and touch the close grained velvety wood. Such a lovely thing. It was bearing, too, big glossy purplish pears. A lovely thing, so simple and clean and straight. No wonder his mother had prized it.

Here, by his left hand, would have been the corner of the porch. The hall must have run back where the chokeberries grew in a heap there, and you turned right into the dining room--now **three** little oaks stood four feet high at that spot. As Amos invoked the vanished house, he walked forward into the clearing as if the chokeberries, the reaching young oaks, the weeds and the briars, might give way to his mother's home. He stumbled and almost fell forward into the weeds. With his foot he turned aside the brush and poked at the thing that had tripped him. He kicked away mold and twigs and matted leaves to reveal a course of crumbling bricks at the level of his calf. This was the old foundation. He broke away more brush to clear the side of the bricks and kicked them with his toe. A little mortar

crumbled away, but the bricks were good ones, they didn't give. He put his foot against the foundation and shoved hard. They held firm. Good bricks, all right. His father had laid them--Lord!--sixty years ago. He remembered the building of the house in a vague, physical memory of sharp, new, exciting sensation: the rosiny smell of fresh timber and sawdust; the splintery feel of the planks; the damp, acrid odor of mortar; the cold, oily touch of new nails.

Amos followed the old foundation all the way around, turning back the brush at different places and kicking at the bricks or crumbling a bit of mortar between his fingers. A cypress shoot had opened the joints at one place, buckling all six courses of brick. They could be broken out, though, and replaced, and the footing would be as good as the day it was laid, with a little leveling. His curiosity aroused, Amos tramped down the brush in back of the old place, looking for the wellhead. He misjudged the spot and finally found it much closer to the house than he had remembered. His father had neatly capped it before they left. That was the very last thing they did, in fact, capping that well. The iron was deeply pitted with rust. The casing was probably choked with roots, down inside. Easy enough to open it up, though.

He went back: through the sapling stand in the dining room and down the vine tangled hall, and stood on the founda-

tion where the front door would have been. The orange trees stood two on a side, their branches almost meeting before him. You could see the branch glittering in the sun and the hibiscus blooming on the far bank. Once, this had been a lovely spot to sit of an afternoon. A little warm, sometimes, and damp in the winters, but a fine place for a house. He stepped down to the ground and waded slowly out through the weeds and back into the sunlight.

His line was dry. He dressed it sitting there on the dock and rewound the reel and started up toward the bridge. There'd be someone at the store, perhaps, who'd give him a ride home. It was lunch time, though, and he found no one around except for three colored boys fishing from the bridge with cane poles and red and white bobbers.

"How's fishing?" he called as he swung himself up to the bridge.

"Got some bream," the biggest boy murmured politely. He showed a lard bucket with four or five little fish, and Amos nodded.

"That looks like good eating. You like fish?"

"Yessuh."

"I like 'em," said the smallest boy, eagerly grabbing the spotlight. He rolled his eyes. "I'll eat a dozen of 'em."

"You think you could handle a dozen, boy?"

"I ate a dozen yesterday."

"You ain't eat no dozen!" exclaimed the big boy, scowling ferociously. "Dozen's twelve."

"Well," said the little one, "I eat a lot. I reckon I eat mighty near a dozen."

Amos laughed and patted his shoulder. "I'll bet you'd eat a dozen if got hold of them, all right."

"Yessuh. I eat _twenty_, if I get holt of 'em."

The older boy turned away in mute outrage. Amos scrubbed the little one's head with his knuckles. "You'll have to catch them first," he smiled. "So you better get to it. What's your name, boy?"

"Robin."

"Robin what?"

"Robin William Tucker."

"Is Carney Tucker your daddy?"

"Yessuh."

"He works for me."

The boy didn't seem to make much of that idea. He couldn't be more than five years old. Amos asked: "Are you boys brothers?"

"Yessuh." Robin had a sudden thought. "My daddy work in them groves."

"I know."

"He run that tractor."

"Is that right?"

"Yessuh. He went fishing and caught the biggest perch outa the lake, too."

"Did you go with him?"

"We all go, 'cept Mama. She scared of the water."

"You aren't scared, are you?"

"I can swim. I reckon I can swim all day. Daddy show me how to swim when I was little."

"You must have quite a daddy."

"I reckon," Robin sighed.

Tears suddenly filled Amos' eyes and he straightened up, blinking, and had to stand a moment looking up at the bank before he could turn again to the boy. Robin had already gone back to his fishing. Amos rubbed his head again. "You be good, Robin," he said. "I'll see you again some time. Good luck."

"Yessuh."

Amos left the boys and climbed the hill beyond the branch. The road was shaded from the sun, but the dust was pretty bad. Where the breeze didn't reach, it just seemed to hang motionless in the air. He thought about Robin. The tears of sentiment he had so nearly shed on the little fellow's head were foolish tears, he knew. The fish those children catch, he thought, are probably important to their family, with too many children and not enough money. Little

Robin will go to work soon, while he's still no more than a boy, and it'll be the beginning of a life of heavy work. He'll grow up ignorant because there's no school for him and nobody cares. He'll be driven through his life by superstition and always chafed by the black skin he wears. And yet... And yet there remained the charm and grace and wonder of being a little nigger boy fishing for perch on a warm, clear day.

The thought of the old house that had been beside the branch kept coming back. Perhaps someday before too long he'd retire and he and Gwyn could build a new house on that very foundation. Sam could have the place up on the hill. He'd have a family of his own and now, it seemed, he'd really be taking over the groves.

Now, that's an improvement, Amos thought to himself. Now you're planning ahead, and at your age. Then he stopped dead in his steps and raised his face slowly to the sky as if at a vision. Why not? Why wait, or take it out in dreaming? Why not do it? Now.

They could all move down to the branch and rent the house on the hill until Sam was ready to claim it. But there was this Abel girl, Margaret. Amos had been dismissing Gwyn's remarks about that girl, but there seemed to be something to it. Maybe Sam would be ready for that house sooner than they guessed. Maybe knowing that he was going to have

the house would be enough to make Sam's mind up for him, if this girl hadn't done it.

He began to walk again. They could do with a small place. One floor, only. Six or seven rooms. It would be a lot easier for Gwyn to take care of than the big house. They could keep some chickens and make a little garden. Good soil down there.

His step quickened. A small, neat place, with everything as they wanted it. Convenient and tidy and quiet. He reached the first oranges below the house and turned up through them with his heart suddenly as light and confident as little Robin's. Now here, he thought, is something of my own. I'm not out of things after all. No one ever is. You always have your own life.

He found Gwyneth sitting in her living room rocker, working at her afghan. Before he said a word, she wanted to know where he'd been for lunch. He'd completely forgotten about that. She shooed him off to the kitchen, where there was soup on the stove and cold sliced chicken. She came out and sat with him while he ate. Back here with his wife, in their house, he was suddenly shy. He began talking, hesitantly, about the girl. Gwyneth was amused.

"I've been trying to tell you for weeks," she said, "that it isn't all right. That girl is sixteen years old, Amos."

"That can't be right."

"Well it is."

He saw he had taken the wrong approach. The Abel girl really didn't matter. He didn't want to get wound up in an argument about her. He ate his soup and tried to think about another way of going at it.

Gwyneth watched him eat, wondering what on earth he was so up in the air about. It was just like him, she thought, to wake up suddenly to what had been going on under his nose and get all excited about it.

Amos finally said, "But he'll get married one of these days before long."

"Being a normal man, I expect so. But I don't think he'll find his girl around here."

"Why not?"

"Can you think of one?"

Amos reflected. He couldn't just name a girl offhand that might suit Sam, but that was beside the point too. He didn't bother to keep up with the young people. "The boys around here," he said dryly, "do get married and settle down."

"Not many of them."

"Not many? What do you mean 'Not many'?"

"They just don't. They go away, and so do the girls. Moccasin Branch is drying up, Amos. The young people leave, if they can. When we were married there were three hundred people living here. Now there are about half that many."

"There'll always be those who'll stay."

"Those in their graves."

"I mean to be buried here."

"So do I, but I don't expect the world to stand still for that." She took his empty soup bowl and got up to rinse it at the sink. Over her shoulder she went on: "And I don't expect Sam to bury himself alive with us, Amos."

"Nonsense."

"Don't 'Nonsense' me."

"Why don't you want Sam to stay?"

"I want him to stay, for my own part. But I don't think it's fair to him to hold him here."

"How's that?"

"He's been here a few weeks only, and he's at his wit's end for something to do."

Amos found that idea so ridiculous it was incomprehensible. "He seems to be finding more than enough to do," he said.

"In the groves? I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't have enough of that before long."

"It's more than just the work. At least, I hope it means more to him than just the work he does."

"Amos," she said, "Sam's got a lot on his mind. When a man is Sam's age, he begins to look around and think about what he's doing with himself. He knows that if he wants to change, he's at his last chance for it. He's looking around and thinking it over. This is a good place for him to come to mark time. I hope he stays with us a little while. But don't get yourself up in a lot of high hopes about him settling down here. He'll be on his way again before long."

"What do you want him to do? I mean, what do you hope he'll do?"

"I hope he does something that will make use of all his talents and his training," she said piously.

"And do you know what I hope?"

"I've got a pretty good idea."

"I hope he'll get his roots into the ground and never have to find out he's spent his life on make-work--doing for the sake of keeping busy."

"Do you want him to marry that Abel child and settle down here and take care of the groves until he dies?"

Amos sighed and made one more try. "The girl isn't important. But when he settles down, I'd like it if he could have this house."

"It'll be his when we're gone, of course," she said.

Amos changed his mind. There was no use trying to talk to her about it.

"There's something you should realize," she said briskly. "This business with Sam and Margaret has upset Anne Abel. The last time I saw her at church she barely spoke to me. I don't believe she likes all the attention Sam's giving that girl." Amos stood up with a gesture of futility. "One of us," she went on, "should say something to Sam."

"I don't think that's a good idea," he said in a tone that Gwyneth found surprisingly sharp.

"I've done a lot of things," she answered, "that didn't get me any thanks, when I thought it was the right thing to do."

"Sam's a man."

She smiled a superior, womanly smile. Amos left the room and she heard him clumping slowly up the stairs. She returned to the living room and took up her work. As she sat down she heard her husband's slow, heavy footsteps overhead. He was most likely thinking her cruel and cynical and whatever it was that simple good sense seemed to him when he had these fits of sentiment. Despite Gwyneth's show of concern about Sam and Margaret, she was not actually worried. She

sat down and began to crotchet. Things were going, all in all, much as she had known they would. She saw no reason to doubt they'd continue that way.

* * * * *

"We're headed for ruin and damnation," Sam said. Across the cafe table, Anne regarded him solemnly. He was in a black mood, and the one drink he had just finished had been enough to put a fine edge of melancholy on him. At the same time, though, it had given his thoughts a touch of reckless bravado. "Amos has let things go completely to hell," he said. Anne appeared embarrassed. She seemed little better off than he.

In fact, Anne had got to the lounge ahead of Sam. She'd taken a table and waited, determined that when he came in she'd stop stumbling and stammering and have a talk with him. The best thing, she had decided as she shopped, was simply to tell him, as kindly and friendly as possible, that she didn't think he should see Mag any more. Driving in, she had had some sort of notion that she would try to probe him. That was absurd. What he felt and thought and intended did not matter now. What had happened so far did not matter. She owed him no explanation. But when at last he came in, swaggering ever so slightly in his anger, she found it would not be so easy as she'd thought. Trying to make him go

away might just lead to a serious quarrel with Mag. And besides, that wasn't the sort of thing Anne could do.

"Is it really as bad as that?" she murmured.

"I've just been talking to a man who should know. This man Montgomery, that I got the chickens from, is a little bit of a citrus grower himself. He showed me his layout. It made me sick."

"Oh, now Sam."

"It did. And that's the kind of outfit we're competing with. Only we're not."

"Your father's not as young as he was."

"So he tells me."

"Sam!"

"It's true. This morning he told me that all he's interested in now is a neat grave." He tilted his chair back and regarded her over the edge of his glass. "What do you think of Moccasin Branch?" he said. "Am I nuts? Am I backing myself into a corner?"

"You can always leave, Sam."

"Oh, no I can't. I can, I mean, but I won't. I'm settling down to it already. Do you know why? Because Stan Tracy made a fool of me. I've been thinking about it. He gave me a public standing, the status of the village butt. Now I've got to improve that standing. That's why I've got

those chickens out in the truck. That's a hell of a thing, isn't it?"

"I imagine there's more to it than that."

"I suppose. I don't know."

Anne sat for a moment, playing with her glass. Then she said, without looking at him, "What sort of life did you really lead up North?"

"Well, I've told you about it."

"Did you have a girl up there?" she said, and it sounded terribly bald.

"Sure," he answered. "I ran around with a number of them. You sound like my mother. She thinks I'm here because I got into some kind of woman trouble."

"That's what a mother would think of." Anne felt very foolish and small. She didn't even know what she hoped to learn by getting him on this subject."

"I never mislead any of my lady friends," he said, signaling to the waiter. "Those who thought my intentions were honorable didn't get the idea from me."

"Haven't you ever thought of getting married?"

"No, I guess I never have."

"That seems strange," she said.

"I suppose it does, but it's true. I want to get married someday, and have a family and all, but I've never thought about it in any particular case."

Sam talked very easily, but he was taking great pains to figure this conversation out at the same time. Anne was again as tense and constrained as she had been that morning, but now she was paying attention to what was being said. What was she after. He couldn't get out of his head the way she had said: "Did you have a girl up there?" She had sounded very shy, very girlish and awkward. Up until those words, he had thought it was Mag she was thinking about. Somehow that didn't fit, though, with anxiety about Mag. And he couldn't believe that she was about to ask him about his intentions.

She was saying "...settling down in Moccasin Branch. You'll have all the local belles setting their caps for you."

"You might pass the word around, just so I won't be misleading any of them either."

She couldn't help a slight smile. He was such a boy, after all. "You should remember," she said, "that things you do may have all kinds of meanings for other people, that you don't realize."

"I'm finding that out, all right. Everybody has assigned me a reason for this homecoming. Gwyneth has one, Amos has one, your husband has one. The only person who hasn't been anxious to hang a reason on me is Mag."

"She wouldn't, Sam. Margaret's wonderfully willing to take the world as it comes. Perhaps too much so."

"She's all right."

"She's terribly fond of you. For the Lord's sake don't tell her I said that to you, though."

"I like her, too."

"She's very young, Sam," Anne said, suddenly raising her voice and bending forward intently. "Very young!"

"I know."

His fresh drink was set before him. So it was Mag she was worried about? It still didn't go down with him.

"Don't you take things for granted," she said. "People, I mean. Look behind the obvious. Don't let yourself take the easiest course. Think about things. I'm going to tell you something about myself. The worst mistakes I've made came from believing something was all right. Later, you find out differently. People try to mean one thing, or feel one thing, and then find they can't. Not with their hearts."

What the devil was she trying to say to him? There was so much in his head, that he couldn't pin anything down. Half his mind was racing ahead with the work in the groves and another part was thinking of old Mr. Montgomery and his fighting cocks. He managed to analyse, very coolly, the Abel family as he knew it. No, all this intensity of Anne's could not be worry about him and Mag. Then what? The General?

"Fred's a strange man," he said tentatively.

"Not really," she said. No, she did not want to talk about her husband. That was unmistakable.

They stayed in the cafe for over an hour, talking, and he had two more drinks. He grew more and more calculating with each moment, watching her, listening to her, weighing it all. There was something, he decided, that she wanted to know about him. It was as if she were checking on one vital factor before... before doing what? There was something she was going to do, or wanted to do, but she was afraid.

By the time they left the bar, in late afternoon, he thought he knew what it was all about. He was sure enough to decide on their long, silent drive home that he must be very careful and very thoughtful about proceeding with Anne. But he decided very finally that she would be worth the effort. It all came crystal clear: an invalid husband twenty years older than she; a dull, strange little town; fears that she was growing old in a lonely, unrewarding life. And he, after all, was the logical choice.

CHAPTER XII

As the drought continued, the water fell in the lake and with it the water in the branch and in the Big Black Hole. In the swamp, banks of mud and decaying vegetation were uncovered and on hot days the odor of it carried all the way to the town. In the sawgrass marsh, stretches of sandy mud were uncovered and certain deep, scummy pools were left, cut off from the shrinking channels.

A hot day, when the scent of decay was almost palpable over the swamp, Sam and Bobo came into the grass in Bobo's long, slender boat. The piroque slid slowly along a shallow, winding channel, with the buzz of insects dinning all around them and the brown and brittle sawgrass rattling drily with every touch of a breeze. Bobo stood in the bow and Sam in the stern, pushing the boat slowly along with twisting thrusts of long heavy poles, and between them sat Sam's yellow hound, Mustard, twitching his nose at the hot, sharp odors. They had been poling the boat since dawn, when they'd shoved off from a shallow bay at the head of the lake where Bobo kept his piroque. Sam's arms and shoulders were already beginning to ache, but this was his third trip with Bobo and he'd learned how to handle the clumsy pole without tiring himself too fast. He could handle the needle like boat pretty well, in still

water, although he couldn't keep it gliding silently and evenly along the way Bobo could.

At every mud bank they passed, Bobo bent to examine the ground for tracks. Those he found, though, were either going into the channel, instead of coming out, or they were too old.

Something like a hot pin touched Sam behind his ear and he let got of his pole and swatted it so hard that the piroque nearly rolled over. Bobo squatted to keep his balance and yelped, "Hold steady!" "Deer fly got me," Sam explained. Bobo rummaged in the bottom of the boat and handed Sam a bottle of clear liquid. It smelled like kerosene and stung on his sweaty skin. Bobo said: "The Indians know how to chase the skeeters and flies. They rub all over with spoiled bear fat and put cocoanut oil in their hair. That's how come they stink."

A little blue heron, stalking frogs in the weeds, stared at them as they pushed off again. Bobo gave a low whistle and said to the bird, "Hey, boy, go tell Old Man 'Gator we comin' to see him and talk him out his hide."

They pushed through the reeds for another half hour before Bobo raised his hand for a stop. They nosed the boat ashore and stepped out. Sam came up to look at the tracks Bobo had spotted. There was a mark as if someone had dragged a sack across the mud, with little hand like prints on each

side. "That could be old sign," Bobo said. "I don't know." He squatted beside the trail and began measuring, with the stretched fingers of one hand, the width of the track, the size of the paw prints and the distance from one to the next. He looked up at Sam. "What do you say?" he asked. Sam squatted beside him and measured, trying to remember all that Bobo had told him about this kind of woodcraft.

"Just about six feet?" he said.

"Five foot or five and a ha'f." Bobo smiled wryly. "We could take this one and save him until the hide was legal. They change the goddamn' law every year, about. But there'd be hell to pay if they caught me. I'll remember where he is, though. We try some other places first."

Mustard had watched them anxiously from the boat. When they got back in, the dog flopped to the bottom of the boat sulkily. They had taught him to stay in the boat until he was told to get out.

"We'll try some holes I know about," Bobo said, and they leaned on the pushing poles.

After ten minutes of winding through the grass, Bobo pointed to a bank that Sam could never have told from any other muddy spot, and they beached the boat. They sprang ashore and Sam clucked to the hound to come with them as Bobo set out into the sawgrass. Fifty feet back was one of those still, scummy pools. Gnats swarmed above the water.

Bobo walked all the way around, bending to look at the edge of the water. Sam stood and watched his dog snuffling excitedly through the grass but never getting too far from the men. Sam felt the sweat running down his sides and back and into his rubber boots, and sun on his neck was like the open door of a furnace; but he was past the stage of sun burning. His neck and face and forearms were almost as brown as Bobo's. He knew it, too. By the way he stood, there by the stinking, slimey pond, even with no one looking at him, it was clear that he knew he was tanned and wind roughened and even a little broader in the shoulders than he'd been three months before.

Bobo came back from his check of the pool's edge and shook his head. "No sign," he said.

"What makes all these 'gator holes so slimey?" Sam asked.

"'Gator brings dead stuff and leaves it in his cave 'til he wants to eat. The water gets bad from it."

They whistled up the hound and went back to the boat.

The next two pools, they found no tracks. Bobo probed the bottom of each one with his pole, just in case, but found nothing. By then, the sun was high and not a breath of air reached them in the grass. They splashed more of the insect dope on themselves.

At the next pool, they found a fresh trail leading into the water. Bobo went all the way around it, with his nose almost in the mud. "He don't come out," he said. "How big you say?" Sam measured and figured. "Six and a half?" he said. Bobo read the sign and thought about it. "This is a big one," he said. "He fooled you because he's kind of lean. He may go eight foot. That's a lot of 'gator."

He remained staring down at the prints for a moment, and then he looked up at Sam. "When it's a big one," he said, "I like to have somebody hold a gun on him while I'm in the water." He thought it over, as Sam stood silent and expressionless. "When I find a big one," he continued, "there's a nigger hunter over to town that I generally get to go with me after him. You a good shot?"

"Pretty fair."

Bobo contemplated the mud for a moment and muttered: "I don't like taking no chances. If somethin' happens, you won't have no time to aim." He sighed. "Let's get the stuff," he said.

They went back to the piroque and hauled it half its length onto the mud. Bobo took up his pushing pole and looked around in the boat for the head to it. The head was a hook, four inches across, bent from a piece of tool steel, with a sharpened tang with holes in it. He drove the tang into the end of the heavy pole and fastened it with two

bolts he had in his pocket. When he was ready he handed Sam the rifle, a twenty-two with the barrel sawed off just above the forestock, and took for himself a light woodsman's ax. They returned to the pond.

Bobo dropped the ax on the mud. Putting the hooked end of the pole into the water, he walked all around the pool, feeling for the bottom and locating the alligator's hole. He showed Sam with his hand. "It goes in that way," he said. He stood directly facing the entrance and slid the long pole into the pond and into the cave. He stepped into the slimey water and reached with the hook, feeling the sides of the opening and working the pole down. He waded deeper, until the water was to his knees and only a couple of inches from the tops of his boots and the pole was ten feet into the water. Suddenly the shaft quivered and slipped back out of his hand. He retrieved it and looked around at Sam. His face streamed with sweat.

"He's in there," he said. "He butted the pole out." The hound had come up to the edge of the pool to watch. Bobo pointed around to a spot to his right and a little behind him. "You stand there," he said. "When you see him, put that gun on him, but don't shoot unless I yell 'Shoot'. I'm gonna tease him a little now." He licked his lips.

Bobo reached again into the cave, a tight grip on the pole. Suddenly the pole jerked forward, almost pulling

him off balance, vibrated and was loose. "He got hold, that time. He's strong."

Again he reached for the alligator. Again the hook was grabbed and shaken, but this time he heaved backward with all his strength and for an instant it looked as if he were heaving the alligator out like landing a fish, but the alligator let go. Bobo wiped his face with the back of his hand and looked around at Sam.

"He's bitin', but he won't hold on. I'm trying to hook him by a front leg and haul him out."

The hook went in again. Probing, Bobo worked it slowly, turned it, and then snatched at it. It came up freely and Bobo shook his head. "Missed." The next time the pole was butted out again and Bobo lost his patience. Putting all his weight against the pole, he rammed the hook five or six times straight into the cave, batting the alligator in the face with it. The alligator got hold of it and there was a furious struggle as he tried to break the pole or shake it out of Bobo's hands. Sam raised the rifle. Then the pole came free again and Bobo smiled in satisfaction.

"That boy's getting hot. Gimme that ax."

He laid the ax behind him on the mud with the handle toward him, then went back to work with the hook. The pole quivered and jerked and as often as Bobo had it loose for a minute he poked it hard straight into the cave. Suddenly he

let go of the pole completely and reached behind him for the ax. He stood in the water with it poised at head level, one-handed. Sam cocked the rifle and laid it to his cheek, aiming at the water in front of Bobo. Sweat streamed into his eyes so that he could hardly see the sights and his wrists lost their strength and his mouth went dry. The pool became calm. Bobo leaned a little forward and stared straight down at the surface of the water.

Two dimples appeared on the surface of the water and Bobo's ax splashed between them. At the instant he struck, he was scrambling backward out of the water. The pond boiled and frothed and Sam saw the white of the alligator's belly roll clear and a paw reach out of the water. The muddy froth showed a streak of pink. Then the turmoil stopped and the alligator surfaced on its side, one paw grasping feebly at the water. Sam felt the rifle taken from his hands and Bobo aimed and fired one shot. They heard the smack of the bullet hitting the alligator. Then Bobo shoved the rifle into Sam's hands. He stepped into the water and grabbed the alligator by the tail. It thrashed loose, but he got it again and Sam stepped in to help him drag the dying alligator out onto the mud. Now it was all over, Sam found himself shaking. All he thought of was "What if I had had to shoot?" The alligator lay clear of the pond, twice the size he'd imagined it, its sides heaving slowly and the yellow eyes half closed.

Dark red blood coursed from a gash down the top of its skull, and a smaller stream came from the bullet hole just back of one eye. The hound came up and began to worry the twitching tail, and Bobo shooed it off. Then he washed the head of the ax in the water and went back to the piroque. Sam followed him and they left the ax and the rifle in the boat. As he walked back to the pond, Bobo whetted his hunting knife on the heel of his hand. He squatted by the 'gator's head, sheathed his knife and grabbed its jaws in one hand to hold them closed. He took a steel measuring tape from his pocket and gave the end to Sam. "All the way to the tail tip," he directed, keeping a grip on the jaws. Then he read the tape and said, "Eight foot, three inches. Forty dollars, maybe." He looked at Sam as he wound up the tape. "Easy money, eh?"

He stood and kicked off his right boot and, standing on one foot, rolled up his pants to the knee. There was a deep scar running down the inside of his calf, a pink trough two inches deep between the calf muscle and the bone. "That's what you get learnin'," he said.

"You miss with the ax?"

"I whopped him too late. He'd already seen me and was coming for me. I got him in the neck, pretty good, or he'd have killed me, most like."

"What did you do?"

Dark red blood coursed from a gash down the top of its skull, and a smaller stream came from the bullet hole just back of one eye. The hound came up and began to worry the twitching tail, and Bobo shooed it off. Then he washed the head of the ax in the water and went back to the piroque. Sam followed him and they left the ax and the rifle in the boat. As he walked back to the pond, Bobo whetted his hunting knife on the heel of his hand. He squatted by the 'gator's head, sheathed his knife and grabbed its jaws in one hand to hold them closed. He took a steel measuring tape from his pocket and gave the end to Sam. "All the way to the tail tip," he directed, keeping a grip on the jaws. Then he read the tape and said, "Eight foot, three inches. Forty dollars, maybe." He looked at Sam as he wound up the tape. "Easy money, eh?"

He stood and kicked off his right boot and, standing on one foot, rolled up his pants to the knee. There was a deep scar running down the inside of his calf, a pink trough two inches deep between the calf muscle and the bone. "That's what you get learnin'," he said.

"You miss with the ax?"

"I whopped him too late. He'd already seen me and was coming for me. I got him in the neck, pretty good, or he'd have killed me, most like."

"What did you do?"

"Jesus, man! I run. What you think I did?" I didn't have nobody with me that time. It was too big a 'gator to take alone. Now I don't try the big ones by myself. I'd sooner split the money and stay alive." He put his boot back on and took out the knife.

Bobo took one of the alligator's forepaws and rolled it over on its back. It was still breathing, but it didn't struggle. He held the jaws again while he put the point of his knife into the throat just at the corner of the skull and cut deep. The animal shuddered as the knife went in and the back paws began moving left-right-left-right, as if walking. The hair prickled on Sam's neck.

"Hardest thing to kill there is," Bobo said. "They wiggle for hours. Sometimes they wiggle after they're skinned."

"Want me to help you skin?"

"Better not. You have to do it just so, or you can cut the hide."

Sam fought flies while Bobo skinned the 'gator. When he was done, he dragged the carcass into the reeds and left it. He rolled the fresh hide and they went back to the piroque. "We go someplace and have a little lunch," he explained. "Find some shade, eh?"

Although Sam would have had no idea which way to go, Bobo took them out of the grass in ten minutes and into the

shade of the cypresses bordering the big swamp. They tied the piroque to a stump and Bobo brought out the lunch, sandwiches and tomatoes. The sandwiches were thick, greasy ham on soggy white bread, and the tomatoes were warm, but Sam found he was weak with hunger. That moment at the pool, when the 'gator surfaced, had taken all the starch out of him. A breeze kept the flies away as they ate, and the overhanging cypress made a cool cave of shade. The dog went to sleep in the bottom of the boat.

The friendship of Bobo and Sam, begun that day on the island in the swamp, had grown during the days following Sam's trip to Orlando with Anne Abel. A lot of other things had grown during those days, too, for Sam had come back from that trip earnestly determined to take his life by the scruff of its neck and show it the way he wanted it to run. He took care, from that day on, that the things he did were his own doing. No more would he do what seemed to be expected, or be tricked into believing he was what other people thought him. And yet, the decision which began those days--Sam's conviction that he would seduce the General's wife--he always thought of as simple recognition of the inevitable, rather than a decision.

He doubted that conviction quickly enough, of course. The morning after their trip to Orlando he was sure it was all so much fantasy and drink. All Sam's enthusiasms were

subject to that shamefaced reversal of the day or the week or the month later. But as he sat in the office at the plant that next morning he thought it all out, trying to remember all the words that had gone between them, all her veiled, suggestive comments and questions and her flickering disclosures of excitement and wonder and fear, and he ended by returning to that one sentence she had said, and the way she'd said it: "Did you have a girl up there?"

He met Bobo on the road later that morning as he drove to the store, and took him back to the plant to look at the new chickens. When he told how he'd got them, Bobo was amused.

"Old Man Montgomery! He's a funny scutter, eh?"

"I thought he was going to baptize me before I got away from there."

"I always see him when I go over to the cock fights at Orlando. I seen him bet more money at one time than I got in the world. He wins plenty, too. He's a tough old bird."

"What do you think of the chickens."

"They look good. If he says they're good, you can believe it. A damn' lot better than the last stags you had."

"I know it," Sam said. "I still haven't got anybody to handle them, though."

"Whatsa matter with old Castle?"

"He's kind of shy. He don't want to play any more."

"I handle 'em for you."

"You will? That's what I was going to ask you."

"Sure. Any of Montgomery's birds I'd like to see what they got." Bobo squatted by the pen and purred at the stag. "You told anybody where you got 'em?" he asked.

"Just Dad and Emory."

"Why don't you keep it quiet, eh? Might make some good bets."

"Say, that's an idea."

"Somebody asks you, say you got 'em in Orlando, okay. But say you bought 'em. Say you bought 'em off of Glenn Hokinson. He sells a lot of half-assed Albanys and Clarets. You say that, okay?"

"Sure. And I'll tell Dad and Emory to keep quiet." Mustard trotted up, looking for Sam, and growled at the chickens. Sam cuffed him across the ears. "Down!" he snapped. "Say," he said to Bobo, "you still handling Corey's cocks?"

"I'll quit. I want to get some of the money when you take these babies out to the point. I got my eye on a dog I want to buy."

After that, he saw a lot of Bobo. Bobo came to the plant almost every evening just at quitting time to take a look at the chickens or to give one of them a work out. He always gave Sam close instructions on feeding, and when the

next fights came up, he wouldn't let Sam enter the new stags because they weren't ready. "They're just now feeling to home here," he said. "They haven't been feeding right. We want them to be right on edge before they fight."

Sam got things under way in the groves, too. He and Emory staked out a six acre tract adjoining the main groves and planned how they'd clear it. The foreman knew all about that. Grubbing out the palmettoes was the first step, and Emory took it over. Just to be safe, Sam had the irrigation engineer, Northrup, come out and look the plot over to be sure they could tie it into their water project.

After that, Sam went to Panomee and hired twenty Negro laborers and two white foremen to lay tile. That job was done in four days and on the fifth they began pouring concrete for the wiers. That put a stop to things, for they had to let the concrete season. Wages for that week were over a thousand dollars, just for that much. And, of course, the pickers and the plant workers were drawing their regular pay all the while. The wiers cost nearly fifteen hundred dollars for the twenty-two of them, and then there was cement and sand and he had to buy quite a lot of tools. In two weeks he'd spent over three thousand dollars.

He kept on ten of the men he'd hired in Panomee and set them to clearing the trees, working just ahead of the pickers, and cultivating. Then they started the pump and

found that the branch had fallen below the intake. Sam and two Negroes broke out the side of the sump and put a pipe and screen down into the water two feet deep. It took them most of one day. Then they filled the watertank and tested the wiers. It worked fine, but the tank wasn't big enough, by far. They really needed a second tank, as Emory had said, but two new and bigger ones would have been best. Sam decided to make do with the little tank and just keep the pump going as much as they had to. The cash reserve was going to be pretty low when he met his bills, he saw.

The next item on his list was pest control. Their one tractor could handle the job, but they had to have a pump and spray trailer. Amos had been getting along with a manual pump that could barely cover an acre a day. Sam spent four hundred dollars for a gasoline sprayer. He told Emory to pick out the worker who knew the most about the tractor and they put that one man in charge of it, with a helper, and Emory taught him how to mix the sprays he'd use.

Sam called all the pickers together and, with Amos on one side of him and Emory on the other, he laid down the law on gloves. Every man would get a pair of gloves on Monday, free, and if he turned up for work without them before the next Monday, he'd have to pay a quarter for another pair before he could go to work. They were amazed, but they took

the gloves and Sam had their section bosses make sure they wore them while picking.

Emory, strangely, seemed annoyed by the sudden upsetting of things, even though a few weeks before he'd been so full of impatience with Amos. Sam supposed that it was the fact that he suddenly had more work to do than he'd had in years. He raised his pay, but it didn't improve his disposition, so Sam left it at that. He got the work done, as long as Sam decided on the jobs.

At the end of the third week, the crew he had clearing the trees was still making slow work of it. The job was a big one. They were quite an expense, so Sam let them go and put four of the pickers to that work.

As the bills mounted, Sam talked to Amos about going to the bank for another loan. That was only a courtesy. He knew they couldn't do it, not with the debt they were already carrying. Amos agreed. As a matter of fact, Amos was surprisingly amiable about everything. There was not another scene like that one when Sam had started the lath house. Amos took a polite interest in Sam's work, but he seemed deliberately to be standing off most of the time. He spent a lot of time away--fishing, it seemed. Perhaps, Sam thought, he was hurt and sulking. If that were so, there was no help for it. He'd have to sulk. He seemed rather stand-offish and sometimes almost patronizing, but not really upset.

They continued to talk everything over and to have their drink of whisky together after supper.

Sam was wrong about Amos, for his father was not sulking at all. And he wasn't fishing as much as they thought, either. He was building a house. He had not told either Sam or Gwyneth what he had thought of. But three or four afternoons a week he went to the old homestead by the branch mouth and worked. He took a machete and a brush hook and a crowbar. He was cutting the brush away from the foundation of the old house. Where he found bad mortar, he would break out a section of the foundation and stack the bricks to one side, to be cleaned and used again. He had cleared the chokeberries from the hallway and cut the saplings in the dining room. There was still a lot to do. When it came to leveling the foundation, he'd have to bring a crew of niggers down from the plant, but he wanted to do as much as possible by himself. Busied with that, he let Sam go his own way.

About Anne, Sam found it difficult to _do_ anything. Mag was his entry to the General's house, but she was a stumbling block, too. He continued to see quite a lot of her, driving over in the evenings and taking her to a movie in Oaks or Panomee or just sitting around for an hour or so and talking with the family or with Mag alone. A couple of times in the afternoon he found Anne alone in the house and

those times were nerve-wracking, but frustrating. She made it quite clear that she did not mean to compromise herself. She was leaving it completely up to him and holding her line of retreat open. But there was no doubt, in Sam's mind, that they understood one another now and that knowing he understood had heightened her feelings. That restless, tentative passion, which had revealed itself so timorously at first, grew more open every time they met.

He had an amusing talk with his mother on the subject of Anne. Gwyneth very delicately told him that she'd noticed something was bothering Mrs. Abel. "She doesn't want to say anything, Sam, but she sort of looks crosswise at me these days. I talked to her over at Mrs. Cranford's the other day, and I wouldn't be surprised if I knew what's bothering that lady. I think it's you."

"Me?" he laughed.

"You and Margaret. You've been seeing quite a lot of that girl lately."

"You think Anne suspects my intentions?"

"Now don't you be so smart, young man. Mothers take these things seriously. Do you realize how young Margaret is?"

"She's sixteen."

"Isn't that a little young?"

"For what? I'm not courting her and I'm not trying to seduce her."

"Well, I hope she knows that."

"Mag's nobody's fool, Mama."

"Sixteen-year-old girls get some funny ideas in their heads, Sam."

"You want me to declare my lack of intentions in writing and have it served on her like a warrant?"

"I just want you to have some consideration for Anne Abel. She's under a terrible strain anyway, son, and she's nervous. I don't want you upsetting her. Whether you know it or not, you are. Believe me."

"I believe you, Mama, and I'll do everything I can to put her mind at ease. How's that?"

"You don't think there's much to it. Well, we'll see."

So Anne was upset about him?

It occurred to Sam later that what was bothering Gwyneth might be gossip. He knew from the way the men kidded him sometimes about Mag that the town was taking an interest. That was fine. So much dust in their eyes. As for Mag, he wasn't concerned about her. She was cool and unmoved and he even speculated that she was aware of the true situation. Even if she were, she didn't seem at all worked up about it. She was wryly self contained as ever, as thoughtful and skeptical and unmessy. It was almost eerie. She was not cold. He was sure of that. But a little

kissing and fondling in a parked car was not going to be taken as a big thing. Not by Mag, he knew. She was all right.

As for the General, perhaps he knew, too, what was going on between Sam and Anne. Sam wouldn't have been surprised. Abel had been increasingly quiet, lately. Sam found himself being reminded, in the General's presence, that Abel was a dying man--a thing that he'd always found hard to remember earlier. Now, the General always seemed to be holding himself in, speaking, listening, sitting with an air of incredulous expectancy. The wounded Viking, Sam reflected, gripping his cut together with his hands and standing straight for fear his bowels would fall out. Had he had some sort of sign?

All of these things were with Sam as he sat in Bobo's piroque beneath the cypress at the edge of the swamp and ate his greasy sandwiches. Sometimes, these days, he got an uneasy feeling from all of it, a feeling of too many things to watch and calculate and manage. But there beside the swamp all those things he had to think of, that were never completely out of his head, made him feel strong, somehow, and full of purpose.

As they ate, Bobo talked about alligator hunting, about the hunters he'd known and the alligator lore he'd heard. Then he got on the subject of the conservation laws.

"The state says," he declared with an expression of boggling outrage, "that we have to take six foot or better. Last year it was four an a ha'f. Next year maybe it'll be eight foot and then the year after it'll be no limit and the next year they say closed up tight. Don't ask me why. It's like the Army. Nobody knows why."

"Were you in the Army, Bo?"

"I did my time. The Army's what played hell with me that I get so nervous. I got thirty per cent disability."

Sam had a vision of Bobo as a commando or scout, creeping through jungles and woods as silently as the mist.

"They took me up to Jacksonville," Bobo said, "and put me in this camp with a big bunch of other guys. They put me to work in a shop. I told 'em I couldn't and then they went ahead, so it ruined me." He glowered moodily at the trees around the boat. "Seems like they'd listen. I can't take all that stuff, with a lot of noise and a lot of guys around you. I'd got all to shaking and sick to my stomach and sometimes I'd puke. Finally they let me go, but my nerves was shot. They pay me thirty per cent disability for getting me like this. Sometimes I can't do a

lick, but just lie around and feel bad. That's what the Army did for me."

"The way you killed that 'gator?" Sam smiled. "You haven't got any nerves, man."

"If they'd just listened to me," Bobo said angrily.

"The Army did a lot of screwy things," Sam said. "You in?"

"Nearly three years."

"Go over and fight?"

"Africa and Italy. Not much fighting, though, where I was."

"That's what I'd like. Go see those places. What'd you see?"

"Just North Africa and some of Italy."

"No, I mean, what kind of stuff?"

"Oh.. I saw the desert in Africa, and the Arabs. I saw a few Arab towns, was about all."

"How 'bout Italy?"

"I was in Naples and Florence and Rome. Rome's a pretty place."

"Did you see the Pope?"

"No, I didn't."

"They've got a lot of paintings and statues in Rome, too," Bobo declared. "Best in the world, isn't that right?"

"I guess so. Most of it was put away during the war, though."

"I'd like to see stuff like that. That was a great chance you had."

"I guess so."

Bobo finished his tomato and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "Sam," he said, "you been all around and seen those things. You been to school and you worked in Chicago. What the hell you come back here for?"

"I like it here."

"Sure, I like it, too. It's real nice. But all these Crackers! What a bunch of ignorant, shabby-assed bastards! There's your daddy and that little Abel son of a bitch. They got a little money and some property and they know something. What's the rest of 'em? What do they know? Nothing."

"It's my home," Sam shrugged. "I grew up here."

"Lotta kids grow up here. Where are they? Orlando. Tampa. Jacksonville. They clear out."

"I went away," Sam said. "Now I just decided to come back."

Bobo shook his head. "We better get going," he said, but he remained sitting, looking at the water.

"Have you thought about Saturday?" Sam asked. He'd heard from Daniels that there would be cock fights at Reed's Point on Saturday, but Bobo wasn't sure about the stags.

"We'll fight three of 'em," Bobo said. "That slew-footed stag ain't feedin' right yet." He grinned wolfishly. "We gonna make us some money, man. I went up to Ocala the other day and looked at this dog I'm gonna buy."

"What is it?"

"A rough trailer. Just a brush dog. I seen him work, though, and I seen his daddy. He's got the right stuff. I'm gonna go get me a pig one of these days. Your old friend, you remember?"

"That boar that treed me?"

"Yeah. He was gone again a little while. Now he's turned up again. He broke up a hog pen over at the head of the lake and took off three of Boyd Handy's shoats. He's been getting in some gardens again, too."

"You gonna trail him?"

"Not 'til I get a good chance. It's no good cold trailin' that boy. He moves too fast and he knows where he's going. He'll shake loose before you know it. One day I'll put that dog on a trail where the pig just been, and then we'll run him a little."

"He killed one dog of yours, didn't he?"

"He killed my old red dog. But he won't kill this one, I don't think. Anyway, I want to get a shot at him. If I can, maybe I'll rope him and bring him home, but I don't mind shooting him, neither."

"I'll let you know if he turns up around our place."

"Put your own dogs on him. Amos has still got that old Hoot, ain't he?"

"Hoot's getting kind of old," Sam said, "but this boy could give him a run." He nudged Mustard with his boot and the hound sat up and looked at Sam.

"I'm gonna come over to the plant this afternoon and take a look at them chickens. We gotta have 'em right on edge for Saturday. We gonna put it on these knobby-assed bastards, man! Hooooo, Damn!"

All the way home Sam found himself thinking that he hadn't been able to tell Bobo why it was he was home. Had he drifted into this after all? He was getting tied to things. Why? But he forgot about that worry by thinking of Anne, and his fighting cocks, and the work in the groves.

CHAPTER XIII

Saturday morning before the cock fights was a nervous time for all the Trotters. Sam couldn't be calm however he tried, although he managed to keep the air of impassivity. His mother was a little upset, too, for he had dropped the make-believe about his chickens being a secret. She couldn't have told why, but it bothered her a little to sit and listen to him talking openly about the fights. She had heard, too, about what had happened the last time, and she felt that Sam might be getting himself involved in some kind of feud with the Tracys. When Bobo came to the door as Sam was finishing his breakfast, she didn't invite him in, but left him to stand on the porch while she told Sam he was there.

"Ask him to come in and have some coffee," was Sam's response. His mother hesitated briefly with just the least hint of stiffness in her bearing. He knew perfectly well how she felt about Bobo. He buttered another slice of toast without looking at her and she swept out of the kitchen. Amos, at the other side of the breakfast table, looked at Sam and made a small smile. In a moment Gwyneth was back, followed by Bobo. He was done up in his cock fight costume of the purple sateen cowboy shirt, and in his hands he held a wide brimmed tan hat with a rawhide cord for a band. His stiff black hair was weighted down with water.

CHAPTER XIII

Saturday morning before the cock fights was a nervous time for all the Trotters. Sam couldn't be calm however he tried, although he managed to keep the air of impassivity. His mother was a little upset, too, for he had dropped the make-believe about his chickens being a secret. She couldn't have told why, but it bothered her a little to sit and listen to him talking openly about the fights. She had heard, too, about what had happened the last time, and she felt that Sam might be getting himself involved in some kind of feud with the Tracys. When Bobo came to the door as Sam was finishing his breakfast, she didn't invite him in, but left him to stand on the porch while she told Sam he was there.

"Ask him to come in and have some coffee," was Sam's response. His mother hesitated briefly with just the least hint of stiffness in her bearing. He knew perfectly well how she felt about Bobo. He buttered another slice of toast without looking at her and she swept out of the kitchen. Amos, at the other side of the breakfast table, looked at Sam and made a small smile. In a moment Gwyneth was back, followed by Bobo. He was done up in his cock fight costume of the purple sateen cowboy shirt, and in his hands he held a wide brimmed tan hat with a rawhide cord for a band. His stiff black hair was weighted down with water.

"Mama, pour the man some coffee," Sam commanded. "Mornin', Bo. Ready for 'em?"

"Yeah, man," said Bobo. He was nervous, too. He greeted Amos and took a chair. "They run that pig yesterday," he said to Sam.

"The boar? Who did?"

"The Tracy boys and Joel Cranford and a couple of others." He grinned. "Pig chased the preacher's wife. Then a little later one of the niggers down in the quarters heard something in his garden patch and it was a bunch of pigs. He hit the boar with a piece of board and it jumped him. Didn't hurt him none. Anyway, the boys got together some dogs and took off after him"

"What happened?"

"Like I told you, they started too far behind him, on a cold trail. Time they turned up the pig, the men and the dogs was too tired to handle him. He killed a dog. Cranford fell and sprained his ankle and they had to carry him home. Dale Tracy shot something he thought was the pig, but it was one of Boyd Handy's shoats."

"Well, maybe they gave him a scare."

"Shoot, man! He tore up Miss Harriet Trimble's garden early this morning and killed her little fox terrier dog. Scare him!"

Amos cleared his throat and said: "A bad razor back can be dangerous. He might attack one of the children."

"I'm going up Ocala next week," Bobo said, "and buy that hound I want. We'll fix him then."

Sam finished his coffee and said to Amos: "We'll go get the chickens, then we'll come back here to pick you up."

"Oh, don't bother," Amos smiled. "I'll get down there by myself." It appeared he wasn't going to associate himself with their trick, even though he had agreed to keep quiet about where the stags came from.

"Suit yourself. Come on, Bo."

As soon as they headed for the pickup, Mustard ran and jumped into the back, so Sam decided to take him along. He was broken to the chickens, now. They drove through the groves to the plant. Sam had had carrying boxes built for his stags. Before they put them in the truck, though, Bobo took a careful look at each one, feeling their breasts and feet and combs, looking at their skin and their eyes. He nodded grimly and they put the three he'd selected into their boxes.

"How much money you got to bet?" Sam asked.

"Twenty dollars."

"How about betting some for me?" Sam gave him twenty-five dollars. "Think that much will scare anybody away?"

"Not if I spread it around."

"Then I'll bet fifty myself." Bobo set the three chicken boxes gently into the truck and climbed up to sit with them on the way down to the point. Sam looked up at him and tried to keep his voice disinterested as he said: "The boys are liable not to like this, I guess."

"They ain't supposed to like it."

Sam grinned with some difficulty, and got into the truck.

The weighing was nearly done when they got to the pit. Sam tied Mustard to the truck while Bobo unloaded the chickens, then he got in line with one of the stags in his arms. The man just in front of him turned around to peer at Sam's stag.

"I heard you had some roundheads," he said with a grin. Sam and Bobo had decided they'd just call the new chickens "brown roundheads."

"That's right."

"That Madigan line play out on you?"

"That line went sour before it ever got to me," Sam answered dryly, and one or two listeners laughed. They all had their eyes on him, and he thought a couple of them seemed suspicious. Most of the talk, though, was about the pig hunt of the day before. The youngest Tracy boy, Pat, had half a dozen mercurochromed scratches on his face and Joel Cranford,

hobbling with one ankle heavily taped, was the center of a lot of attention.

When the weighing was done, Sam left Bobo to watch the stags while he made some bets. His three roundheads were matched against one of Mayor Kennon's, in the first fight, one of Corey's reds and one of the Tracy grays. He made a ten dollar bet with Corey and one with Kennon and then made thirty dollars in side bets on the first fight. He knew he'd have to get all his bets made before anyone saw the first fight. He went back to the truck and took over while Bobo made his bets. General Abel walked up just as Bobo was leaving. He gave Sam a dour look and said, with a nod toward the boxes beside the truck, "These any good?"

"Better than the last."

"They'd better be."

"Mag here?"

The General shook his head. He seemed very indefinite and uncertain, for a change. With a nod, he went off up to the pit.

Bobo came back. He'd bet the forty-five dollars he had on the first fight. A moment later Dale Tracy came down to the truck, with a message from Al. He wanted to know how much they were betting with him.

"Fifty," Sam said without a wink. Neither he nor Bobo had any cash left. Dale quickly shook Sam's hand to seal the

bet and rushed off to his father, who was sitting as usual at one of the heeling tables with his little notebook.

"They aren't scared of us," Sam said to Bobo.

"Dumb bastards," Bobo murmured.

Amos arrived on foot while Bobo was heeling the first stag. He stopped only long enough to wish them good luck, then he went up to the pit and found a seat by himself.

When Daniels called them to the ring, Sam found that he was sweating, even though it was not yet hot. He wasn't worried about the stag now, he found, but about the stag being too good. The men around the pit seemed awfully serious and cool. As Bobo took the stag into the pit, Sam pushed his way to a standing place at one corner, but he immediately wondered if it might not be wiser to choose a place a little more in the clear.

They billed the stags and went to mark. "Pit 'em!" Daniels cried.

The stags fenced in the center of the ring, feinting with their heads, and suddenly the roundhead flew. Kennon's red tried to go up with him, there was a sound like a beater smacking a rug, and the red came down staggering. Someone near Sam said: "Jesus alive!" The stags clashed again and both missed. Then the roundhead feinted the red into a fly, dodged, and went up as the red came down. The red was knocked reeling and before he got his feet under

him the roundhead had hit again and put out one eye. The red charged, his head turned to his good eye, and shuffled the roundhead in the face. He lost sight of the other stag for just an instant, though, and as he looked frantically around the roundhead hit him three fast blows that everyone heard like three whacks with a stick. The red stumbled and lost his feet. He lay in the sand, dazedly trying to get up, and the roundhead struck so hard that the red chicken was turned halfway over by the force of it. The red stretched his wings, dying, and the roundhead hit him again, very coolly and deliberately.

Only then did Sam realize that the pitside was howling like a pack of fiends. He looked around him and his head went light as he saw the wild grins on the faces that were turned toward him. They knew, now, and they loved it. Bobo pushed through them, the stag in his hands, and he was howling too.

"You see him hit him?" he shrieked. "Son of a bitch!"

He lost hold of one of the stag's legs and the chicken sank the steel gaff into his forearm. He yelped and dropped the stag and men fled in every direction whooping with laughter. The stag jumped to the rim of the pit and crowed and Sam got behind it and picked it up by the tail, grabbing its legs before it could gaff him.

"His blood's up," Sam chuckled.

Corey's red cock was next, killed in a long, drawn-out fight that cost Sam a stag. The roundhead was hurt too badly to live and Bobo wrung his neck. Old Man Corey was outraged. He rushed from one man to the next, trying to tell them he thought this was the damned dirtiest thing he'd ever heard of. All they did was deride his prized reds.

Then there were two other fights before Sam's next one. One was a dull, slow battle between two logy, under-trained cocks and as they fumbled away Joel Cranford leaned over the pit and shouted: "Take them cocks away and let's see another one of them Trotter roundheads!"

The last roundhead was matched with a Tracy Madigan. They fought six fast, hard pittings, with the roundhead slowly outhitting the gray. In the sixth, the roundhead killed the gray with a blow that fixed his gaff into the skull so hard that Bobo had to pry it out.

As Sam was collecting his fifty dollars from Dale Tracy, Stan, who had handled the gray in the pit, came up to him, looking dark. He watched in silence as Sam folded the money and put it into his wallet. At last he said: "Boy, when you mean to fight chickens you don't mean to cut the fool about it, do you?"

"You handling in the next fight?" Sam asked. Stan shook his head. "Come on down to the truck a minute, then. Want to talk to you."

When they got to the truck, where Bobo was stowing the last roundhead back into his box and giving him water, Sam leaned against the fender and motioned Stan closer.

"I need some money," he said.

Stan laughed. "You trying to sell me some chickens?"

"These aren't for sale."

"Where'd you get them chickens, anyway?"

"I picked 'em up."

"Good pickings."

"What I want to talk to you about is land. You still thinking about trying to start a fishing camp?"

"Me and Daddy have talked about it some."

"I'm ready to talk business, if you are."

"That land by the branch?"

"That's right."

"What you asking?"

Sam was ready for that. "It's got a good well on it," he said, "and there's a building site that wouldn't be hard to clear again. Land's worth two thousand dollars."

"Hooo! Not to me, it ain't."

"Talk to Al about it. There's no rush."

He went to the back of the truck and untied his hound. Stan followed him.

"Hear you went huntin' yesterday," Sam said.

"Yeah, we took a little run."

"How many dogs you lose?"

"One of mine and one of Harvey Spicer's ain't turned up yet today."

"Me and Bobo are going to put old Mustard here on that pig one of these days," Sam said.

"You still climb trees as good as you used to?"

"If I've got a good reason to climb," Sam smiled.

"I'll let you know about that little deal," Stan said. "Two thousand is a little steep, but we might make you an offer."

"Two thousand is the price. Tell your Daddy to take it or leave it."

That night, Sam wrote a little note to H. L. Montgomery, telling him which of the stags he'd pitted and how well they'd done. He made it short, putting his reports of the fights in a style he copied from some old gamecock magazines Amos had showed him: Trotter a 4-4 Claret-Rh. Tracy a 4-4 Madigan cross. Fight even until fourth, with Rh. getting the best

of that pitting. Madigan rattled in the fifth and took a gaff through the eye in the sixth, dead. A rough, hard-hitting Roundhead.

* * * * *

The stucco church was warm and drowsy. All the windows were open to let a breeze pass through, and bees hovered at the vines curling on the sills and fumbled at the screens. A green lizard peeped over the ledge, nerved himself and sprang onto the screen, showing his blue-white belly as he scuttled up the rusty wire. A little boy seated at the wall end of a pew saw the lizard and leaned forward to poke the boy in front of him, but his mother, without taking her eyes from the pulpit, put a hand on his shoulder and set him--plop--back into his seat.

Dr. Reed's text was from Ecclesiates: "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might." It was one of his regular sermon topics for the Lenten season. Most of his congregation had heard him deliver it more than once. He always varied his sermons, however, with little exemplary instances taken from Moccasin Branch life. At the moment he was referring to one of his Sunday school students, a girl of twelve, who had walked seven hot and dusty miles to take a puppy to a welcoming home, saving him from drowning. Sam found it difficult to follow the tenuous

moral drawn from this story. He was not in a mood of patience. From the corner of his eye, he was looking at the little boy who was watching the lizard creep across the screen. Amos, two seats down from Sam, was nodding.

There had been a difficult scene with Amos that morning. After breakfast, as Sam and Amos were having their second coffee and Gwyneth was washing the dishes, Sam had said: "I've found us some money, Dad."

"Oh? How'd you do that?" Amos had answered distractedly.

"The Tracys are thinking about opening a fishing camp," Sam said. "But there are only two places on the lake shore where they could build cabins without having to fill in the land. On either side of the branch mouth. They want to buy our property down there."

"Is that so?"

"Abel won't sell his. I understand he doesn't want a lot of tourists cluttering up the landscape."

"What makes you think I'll sell?"

"They want to buy, and we need the money."

"There's more to it than that."

"I talked to Stan at the fights," Sam said. "I told him we'd take two thousand dollars."

Amos set his cup down with a clatter. "You made a mistake. It's not for sale."

Sam was a little surprised at the violence of the response. "Why not?" he said.

"Because I'm not selling it."

"We're not getting any use out of it. You know any other way we can pick up two thousand dollars without stirring?"

"Had you thought I might have plans for that land?"

"Have you?"

"Yes I have," Amos said flatly. He said no more than that.

Gwyneth came from the sink. "Amos," she said, "it sounds like a good idea, if you ask me. What earthly use are we going to get out of that land?"

"I plan to build a house down there, someday."

"A house? What in the world for?"

"For us. When Sam gets married, I think we should move out and give him this place. We could have a nice little home of our own down by the branch."

"Amos, we tore down one house down there," she cried.

"That was not my doing, Gwyneth," he said blandly.

"Well how long have you had this idea?"

"For some little time now."

For a moment, the two of them were baffled. Then Sam said, "Look, I expect to have a home of my own someday, but not this house. When I'm ready, I'll build a place."

Amos shrugged. "Then we can rent this house," he said. "It's too big for just me and your mother."

"Where are we going to get money," Sam asked, "to build all these houses you're throwing up?"

Amos stood up. "The branch mouth property," he said calmly, "isn't for sale." He went out of the kitchen.

Sam had been satisfied to leave it at that, at least until he'd had time to think, but Gwyneth had fussed and argued about it all the time they got ready for church and all the way over. Amos had remained quite bland, saying no more than he had to.

Now after thinking about it all through the sermon, Sam had begun to build a whole new idea. He would build the fishing camp himself. Amos could manage it, with someone hired to do most of the real work. They could put up a house for him and five or six little cabins, to begin with. Why, it was the perfect job for Amos! He'd make a wonderful host, and he knew more about fishing than anyone in town. Maybe Bobo could be their first guide and general handyman. The Tracys wouldn't be eyeing the plan if there weren't money in it. Why turn it over to them? He tried to calculate how much money it would take to start.

Too much, of course. Far more than they could raise.

Perhaps not, though. Sam wasn't yet officially connected with Moccasin Branch Groves. That was still entirely

Amos' business, as far as the papers were concerned. Another firm, run by another man, might be able to borrow money without worrying about the debt hanging over the groves. That was it. Completely separate organizations. If Sam could raise two or three thousand he could probably borrow ten thousand. That would be enough, if he started slowly. The thing was to keep the two businesses separate, as far as the banks were concerned.

All around Sam, the Branchers were drowsy with the close warmth of the church and the soothing voice of the preacher. As he fretted through the last moments of the sermon, he felt like the only man alive in a cemetery. He itched to be out and doing, to get his hands on things and make them jump.

The congregation greeted the naming of the closing hymn with an eager rustle. They rose and sang, took the benediction and flowed toward the door. Reed was there ahead of them smiling and bobbing his head and gripping hands and acknowledging compliments on his sermon. He had a particularly hearty and lingering handshake for Sam and said in his rather arch baritone: "I hope we'll see a lot of you, Sam."

Gwyneth joined one of the clusters of women that gathered under the palms on the church lawn, while Amos was stopped by Mrs. Reed and drawn aside for some question undoubtedly of charity. As Sam stood impatiently on the

church steps he saw Anne Abel walk through the crowd and up toward the line of cars parked beside the road. He went down to his mother and touched her arm.

"You two drive back," he said. "I'm going up to the plant and walk back through the groves. I want to take a look at things."

He brushed aside a greeting from some old lady to follow Anne up the road. Her car was almost the last one in the row, and when he reached it she was already at the wheel. He rested his elbows on the window and grinned.

"Howdy-do, lady."

"Why, Sam. I thought you were an unbeliever."

"I believe in some things. I believe in not outraging my mother too completely."

"Does she scrub your ears and neck and pack you off to Sunday school?"

"Yep. With a nickel for the plate."

"How is your mother? I haven't had a chance to talk to her lately."

"She's well, thanks. How about a ride?"

"Of course! I'm sorry, I thought you'd be riding with your parents."

Sam said simply: "Not today," and went around the car to get in beside her. She had to wait while a car turned in front of them, and he was thankful for even that brief delay.

He was saying to himself: "It's up to you. It isn't going to happen for you. You have to do it." A cloud of dust boiled from the wheels of the car in front and Anne cranked up her window.

"Isn't it a mess?" she said. "It's never been this bad."

"It'll get worse before it gets better."

"And your poor orange trees. How are they?"

"Well, we're getting water to almost all of them now, with the irrigation lines working. You haven't seen the new rig, have you?"

"Why, no."

"Drive on up there, I'll show you around." She hesitated and he said, "or have you got to be someplace?"

"Oh, no. But is it awfully dusty?"

"Not too bad. We can drive right up through the trees. You needn't even get out of the car."

He was already thinking that she would refuse, and wondering if he would try again if she did. But she said: "I can't take too long, Sam."

At the plant, they parked in front of the silent building and he took her down to look at the lath house. He told her all about the young trees, about sowing and budding and transplanting them and what kind of trees they were and why that was the best kind. She listened with a bright,

earnest air and when he stripped off a leaf and crumpled it and held it for her to smell she wrinkled her nose and nodded to agree it was, "one of the most beautiful scents in the world."

He found himself just being friendly--no more, because that was so easy with Anne.

He led her up to the lemon trees where his four cock houses stood in the shade. The chickens were a little logy in the heat, busy fluffing up dust baths and purring lazily, and as they came to the first pen the stag came to the wire and raised his hackles.

"That's one of my winners yesterday," he said.

"Fred told me you won," she said. "He looks like a winner."

"Not a mark on him, you notice."

"Well, I'm surprised, with those knives you put on them when they fight."

"If we fought them in natural spurs it would be a lot messier. The gaffs are clean and they cut deeper. With natural spurs, two cocks can fight all day without either one getting in a killing lick. But they'd both die of nicks and bruises."

"Don't tell me. I've heard Fred lecture on the fine points of the game. And you can still have it."

"Some do and some don't."

"Well, what do they like about it--those that do?"

"What do they like in any contest like that? There's skill to it, and a lot of effort. It takes training and knowlege and brains and experience to breed and pit good fighting chickens. It's a contest."

"With all respect for your brains, Sam, I understand you just went out and bought these."

"Not exactly. They were given to me. In trust, you might say."

"In trust?" she said.

"In trust that I take care of them, and handle them right and breed them right and learn about them."

"Who gave them to you? Oh, yes. The man in Orlando."

"That's right."

"Is he a friend of yours?"

"I'd never seen him before I went out there that day."

"And he just gave these to you?" she asked. "On trust?"

"On trust," he said solemnly. He squatted and teased the stag to peck at his finger through the wire. "Of course," he said, "there is a coarse aspect to cock fighting, too. Money."

"That I can understand, at least."

"So can I. As a matter of fact, there's a very coarse little affair coming up next week. A derby."

"My Lord, you mean you're going to race them?"

Sam guffawed. "Not exactly. Stan Tracy thinks that he and I between us have a good team. He wants to go partners with me for the fights over in Panomee next Sunday. They're having a derby, with teams entering and each team putting up five birds. He's got two cocks he thinks are pretty good and he wants me to put them with my three as an entry. If we win we split on a three-two basis."

"How much could you win?"

"Each team puts up a hundred dollars. That's seven or eight hundred dollars, if there's one winner. If two teams tie, they split the pot."

"Eight hundred dollars?"

"There's a limit of eight entries, but there may be only six or seven."

"But if you lose, your chickens are all dead and you've lost a hundred dollars."

"Just sixty. That's my share of the stake."

She seemed gratifyingly shocked. He showed her the three stags and explained to her about the old hen he was going to set. At first when she'd told him she didn't have much time he'd been afraid she meant it, but she showed no sign of hurry. He reminded himself, though, that he must not let himself throw away this chance by delaying. She seemed more at ease than any time since that day when they

went to Orlando together. She spoke little and smiled little. She simply seemed quite content to be there in the fragrant shade of the lemons, as contented as the hen stretching in her dust bath. He watered the chickens and spread a little grain for them. Then they walked up to the plant.

"That building down on the branch is the pump house," he said, a little nervously. He was wishing he could know what she was thinking. "We draw our water out of the creek and pump it up into that tank. That gives it pressure for the main lines up into the groves. At the highest point of the land we've got three feeder lines. Let's take the car up there and look it over. Better let me drive. It's easy to get stuck in the sand up there."

She surrendered the keys to the automobile and got in beside him without a word. As he fitted the key into the ignition lock his hand trembled ever so slightly. She didn't notice, though, as she sat with her head thrown back upon the seat and looked up at the warm, green trees, waiting.

CHAPTER XIV

From a window in the deserted second floor of her house, Mag could see almost to the branch. The room she was in had been hers, before they closed off the upstairs. They did that when the General was told he should not climb stairs any more. Since then, no one came up here, except Anne on her occasional cleaning-up, and they didn't even talk about the second floor very often, so you could forget there was one.

The view from her window had not changed, Mag found. It was refreshingly _known_, made her feel peaceful and resigned. On the left, as she looked out, the prairies sloped down, studded with dried up pines, to where the thick tangles flourished along the lake shore. Above the cypress tops there she could see three or four sea gulls gliding and turning. Her father said that the gulls had come from the sea to the lake because of all the dead things killed by the drought. That was a thought she put away in disgust as she watched the big white birds soaring against the sky. Straight in front of the window the road ran down toward town and was swallowed by the oaks just where it turned at the aawmill. To the right, across the road, was hammocky scrub country and, farther on, the branch's course was marked by dark trees. Beyond that the highlands rose.

She could make out the even rows of the orange trees in the Trotter groves and the stand of trees around Sam's house and the tall palms that grew beside the church.

She had been standing there looking out for a long time and she was ready to believe that there was no more of hope for her, and that there would never be hope again. How life had betrayed her! She had believed in its candor and simplicity and had trusted herself, and then all appearance had lost its meaning and her understandings failed, and, with one grimace, the world put off a mask and reached for another.

But even with all hope abandoned, she remained looking out at the old view. How does one signal the abandonment of hope? Perhaps just to stand. She felt there was something more than that to be done. And yet! And yet, she thought, it's only guesses. Even her loss was only guessed and vaguely felt and tenuous and confused. What had really happened? Nothing. What could she name that she had believed and then found false? It is too much to abandon hope on guesses and hints. For that, she must know.

Mag knew that what she was reasoning toward was a test, and she knew what the test would have to be. But that was deeper in her mind, so she went methodically on. That the test she had in mind might be cruel, she knew. That did not worry her, even briefly--not with the vision of her

whole hopeless, empty and momentless life stretching before her.

Oh, Sam, Sam! Where was he out there? At the house in the oaks, perhaps? Fishing on the branch or out along the lake shore? Was he there in the groves, among the sweet smelling lemon trees where he'd kissed her once?

She'd lost him. She'd lost when she'd had him so briefly that she could scarcely say: "It lasted from just this moment until just this one." Perhaps she'd had him only very, very fleetingly in the time he kissed her in the grove and in the minutes afterward. There was no blaming Sam. She couldn't have imagined that. No, and she couldn't think of Anne as guilty. She hated Anne, but she knew she should have known her better, should have seen that Anne was capable of this. It was her father she blamed. She saw his face now and heard his voice as he said: "Do you love him with all your tender virginal heart?" and she understood that she would see and hear that just as clearly all her life as she had seen and heard it that day in the palmettoes. And all he'd told her before that! All that she had heard without understanding until too late! All that they had expected her to understand, but that no one had had the courage to name! All her father's words about the "sin of giving." About his life with Anne. He had said: "I haven't known

my wife in the flesh in several years, Mag." She had not realized that was to be an apology.

How had they dared? No, she remembered, there was no blaming any of them for it. Except for covering it all up, believing that she would understand and swallow the nice lie that the four of them shared.

Mag could believe almost anything. She could even believe, and now she did, that Sam was Anne's by some obscure right of compensation. And Fred had said: "I have no choice, really." He meant by that, she reasoned, that he could have saved Sam for her, had he wished, but at the cost of his life. And Margaret was to have no choice, either.

To take her so for granted! Oh, no! There was one thing left to her. She could bring it into the open. It could be their way--Anne's way--but she'd make them say it. She'd put an end to these pretty "understandings." From now on, everything would be named and known. It did not occur to Mag that she was about to ask for a confession. She thought of it only as her right. It was easy, it was in her power, and she would be a coward not to do it. She need only go downstairs and talk to her father. He was down there alone right now. She had heard him moving about. She would sit down and talk to him, and they would call an ugly thing by its name.

Reluctantly, she left the window. Anne would be home before long. She could not wait. She took her handkerchief from the pocket of her skirt and blotted a film of perspiration from her temples. Then she straightened her blouse, cleared her throat, but turned back for one last look out her window.

* * * * *

At his desk, General Abel looked out at the world beyond the glass walls. It was a world half hidden by a film of grayish dust. Despite that, and although the room was growing very hot, he did not open the windows. He rather enjoyed the heat. It gave him a consciousness of his body: moisture cooling on his chest and belly and an agreeable tingling of the skin on his back and arms. He dried his palms on his pants before he took up his pen and turned to the journal, open before him.

Sunday mornings were not as good as they had been. He'd always especially enjoyed these times, with Anne off at church and Mag home all day. He listened for the girl. She was some place upstairs, but he could not hear her moving. Sitting up there mooning for her lover? But why up there? She hadn't been to the deserted second floor of the house, as far as he knew, in three years. Why was she there now? Running from him? he wondered pityingly. She

had stayed out of his way since that morning when he'd left her out in the palmettoes. That would pass, of course. He had expected it to pass before this. He could not really believe in the Mag who had been revealed to him that day, the girl all aquiver with moving picture love. I should never have used the word "love" to her, he thought. That word has been misused.

He turned to the journal and began to write.

> Still very dry, and there's little chance of rain before June. The lake is lower than I've ever seen it, with the shore reeds fallen in windrows along the bank and fish dying in the stagnant pools. Every breeze off the water brings the stink of decay. Gardens (they mean much here) are withering. Our drinking water has taken on a sulphurous taste as the wells thin out, and now and then the faucet spits bits of green slime. I've told Anne to start boiling our drinking water, but there's no one to make that an order for the whole town, although I've warned as many as will listen. There's no doctor nearer than Oaks, eight miles away, and I look for a wave of bowel troubles and then--God knows!
>
> I asked Daniels about the town well. He says there's no chance of it going dry. Still, I'm damned glad we have our own well out here, and that it goes eighty-six feet. The cattlemen, I hear, are taking their stock off the range--those that can.

He sat for some time with the pen poised over the paper, then laid it down and rocked his chair back until the spring creaked. He scowled and scratched his short, bristly hair with the fingers of both hands.

From upstairs he caught a faint sound, a footfall, perhaps.

Maybe I overestimated the young bull, Sam Trotter. I gather from Mag that he does not charge as straight as the torera might wish. I gather, in fact, that he is a rather skittish bull, that possibly he uses his horns for a hat rack. In short, a steer has been turned into the arena. We shall see. Mag grows bored, I suspect.

Trotter's trick with the fancy fighting cocks he brought in as dunghills has won him no friends. He sees himself the cock of the walk, but the aficionados of the sport see a difference between cutting a bumptious know-nothing down to size and using ringers to make a killing. The distinction isn't subtle, but he can't make it. It may cost that young bull dear, one of these days, to find that he really understands very little of Moccasin Branch.

The sound of a car on the road distracted him. It passed the house and he dropped his pen. Anne would be back from church before long. Anne. There should be something to put down here about Anne. He looked at the page and thought about Anne, but nothing came to him. It was the first time, he realized, that she had seemed to demand notice in the journal. And what was it about her now that had him sitting here trying to think of words for her? Finding himself at a loss for those words, and not even knowing why he should need the words, he slammed the book and stood up, grunting angrily.

She'd changed. It was a bitter thing for him to grant her the power of change. But she seemed these past days, to be holding herself together with her hands. All that serenity and poise and bland manner he had hated so were gone. When she listened to him talk or watched him

move or when she sat at the head of the table presiding at dinner or when she cooked or troweled her flowers she seemed looking, listening, waiting. It was as if she waited for a sign, a sign which only she would recognize. Was she waiting for him to die? He found himself thinking seriously about that and had to remind himself that he wasn't going to die--not really.

Anne's hovering, mother hen air with Mag was worse than ever, although the girl paid no more attention to her than she ever had. And yet he wondered how much Anne might have been responsible for the other change, the change in Mag.

He put his finger on the difference in Anne: She acted as if she had some damned secret!

The General sat down heavily. She'd found out that he was all right now, that there was no clot. She'd talked to Reinhardt, of course! He grunted again and shook his head. That was absurd. She'd have come to him. She'd have wanted to know why. The possibility of guile never crossed his mind. Not with Anne. No. It wasn't that. He dismissed that instant of panic contemptuously. She would have come straight to him full of hurt confusion, to wail: "Why? Why?"

He opened the side drawer of the desk and took out a sheaf of letters. He glanced through the envelopes. Nothing there. He couldn't remember what he'd done with that bill

from Reinhardt, but he was quite sure there was nothing in it that might have told her anything. He dropped the letters back and opened all the drawers, one at a time, and went through the desk completely. Nothing. He put the journal away without a glance. There were references to his heart in there, but he knew perfectly well there was no clue that things had changed. He slammed the drawer and again gave that anxious, uneasy grunt, like some animal finding a new scent on the wind. In the first place, it was unlikely that Anne would be going through his things. In the second place, there was nothing for her to find if she did. He had thought all this out before.

No, he had never had to think. It had come to him all of a piece that day driving back from the doctor's, when he'd found himself so alone and baffled and angry at being whole again.

He got up and walked through the living room and down the hall to the kitchen. The big house around him was quite still, although he paused by the stairs and cocked his head to catch any sound from up there. In the kitchen he drank a glass of water and then stood again listening, the glass in his hand. He went back to the sun porch and sat on the couch for a while. Then he went to his desk, again took out the journal and opened it. He began reading near the front.

The General read for quite some while, alone with the dusty world about him, and he felt the silence of the hot day and the huge house deepen around him. He read quickly, turning each page with a neat, dexterous flip of his finger. Now and then as he read he would growl softly in his throat or tap nervously on the desk with his knuckles or pause briefly to narrow his eyes at something he saw, it seemed, behind the page before him. Once he gave a sudden, convulsive shake of his head, like a horse stung by a fly and snorted aloud.

He was in a mood of unaccustomed calm and objectivity, he felt. He watched himself caper through the pages there, just as he might have watched a thing beneath a microscope. The words were mostly concerned with other people--with Mag, with Sam and with Daniels and Tracy and Kennon and all; but General Abel scarcely noticed them. He read himself. He saw only his own attitudes and notions and thoughts and poses. At times a rancorous amusement nudged him. Again he felt a dry, unimpassioned wonder. Once or twice he found the words he read distasteful. The book was full of lies. Having granted that, he relieved himself of facing any one of them and simply speculated why it should be so. Perhaps, he thought, he wrote all this in an effort to make real for himself his public poses. And yet, the "himself" eluded him. The lies could be true enough, and the doubting

"himself" be but a vagrant splinter of mind. Suppose the one there on the pages were Frederick Abel? Why, he wondered, should the thing not comprehend itself?

He read on until he reached recent entries and as the journal drew near to the present, he grew uncomfortable. He scowled and closed the book. Everything had drifted curiously out from under the little General of the book, but he had gone on the same, wrenching all the world around him into a semblance of order, finding reasons which fitted his needs, believing--always believing. A creature of faith, thought Abel, and laughed. Abruptly, he stood up as a shudder of fright swept him. The wry, objective, enclosing intelligence wavered and for an instant left only the little General of the book, confronting himself.

With an effort, he opened the drawer of the desk and dropped the book into it. He stood gripping the wood for a second and then he picked up the dagger that lay before him and slipped it from its sheath. Turning his left hand on the knuckles, he held the dagger with his right and pinned one finger to the desk with the blade, as he might pin a wriggling snake by its head. He increased the pressure until the skin broke and the tip of the blade slid into the flesh. Then he wiped the dagger on his trousers and dropped it to the desk. A smear of blood was on the finger and there was a little pain. And that, he knew, was truly he.

He dropped into his chair and held the wounded finger before him. Pain is felt in the blood. And so are heat, and cold and lust. He sat looking at it for a moment, but when he felt that shudder rise again in him he got up and went quickly into the house. It was gloomy after the sun porch, almost dark. He walked back to the kitchen and washed the blood from his finger. Then he rinsed his mouth with water. As he was coming out into the hall, he heard a footstep overhead and he stopped. Mag came to the head of the stairs and started down.

"Mag?" he said, and his own voice startled him with its tautness.

She came down into the hall and hesitated, looking at him. "Anne back yet?" she said dubiously. He'd startled her too, it seemed, croaking at her out of the darkness like that. As he stared at her, standing uncertainly there in the gloom, the General wanted something that he had never before wanted in his daughter's life--to be kind to her.

"Not yet," he said. "Probably stopped by one of the ladies. Maybe she's out doing good in the blighted sections."

"Yes, maybe," she said. "It's about time for a deserving case, isn't it?"

He came out to where she stood and they smiled together, a little nervously. He realized it was the first time they'd talked together alone in quite a while. They walked together

into the living room. Mag wandered aimlessly through the hulking, leathern furniture, trailing her hands over chair backs and table tops. He went to the cabinet and mixed a wine and soda.

"The dry season's really here for good, I guess," she said.

"Oh, Mag!" he growled. "Not the weather. Anything but the weather."

She stammered and said: "I've been up looking out of my window."

He sat in one of the big chairs and sipped his drink while she leaned over the chair facing him and tried to look nonchalant. Neither of them could find a word.

"Sit down, for Christ' sake!" he barked.

She came around and got into the chair and said: "Does Sam go to church?"

"Damned if I know."

"Well," she said, "I can fix us some lunch if you'd rather not wait."

"I'm not hungry."

"Neither am I." She sighed and made a big display of settling comfortably into the chair. "Fred," she said earnestly, "has Anne changed or have I just started to notice her?"

"She hasn't changed since I've known her," he said, and as he said it he cried out inside himself: Be fair to her! Don't pose! Be open with her, and kind.

"I underestimated her for a long time," Mag went on. She spoke with a casual, judicious tone, pathetically overdone, and again he thought: Be kind! He had to listen to her, to understand what it was she wanted to know, and help her if he could. "I underestimated a great many people, I suppose."

"It needn't be fatal," he said calmly.

"Oh, it could be. But it isn't, this time. I just feel like a fool, that's all. I hate to think that I had to learn anything from Anne."

She was such a child! "What have you learned from Anne?" he asked.

Mag was glad the room was so dark, and that they'd put on no lights. She felt he could have seen the beat of her heart. Upstairs, she'd chosen her words and the way she'd say them, but it all failed her now. She had to think!

"I learned," she said evenly, "some things about illusions, and delusions, you could say."

"Go on."

"I believed what everyone was saying, instead of what was happening. So when I first saw how things really were,

I didn't like it. But now I do. You know, it simplifies things, actually."

"Really?" the General growled. Suddenly, he didn't like all this. He didn't like the way she was talking. In a wink, some word or tone or gesture, or nothing at all, had awakened his fear and all that brief tenderness was fled.

"Yes," she said. "It was really Sam who exploded the lie for me, not Anne herself."

"What lie, Mag?"

"About..." Mag's courage was spent. "About the way things are," she said. "You know." She only wanted this to stop, now. She would believe! She would abandon hope! Nothing need be named!

The General sank into his chair. So he had been right. Anne had found some letter or bill or something from the doctor. Or perhaps she had telephoned him long distance for some damned fool reason. What did that matter? Maybe she'd just guessed. And Anne had told Sam. That was his miscalculation. Instead of coming to him to know why, she'd gone to Sam. A sympathetic shoulder to cry on, of course. But it had to be Sam! And Sam had told Mag. Sam told Mag! Anne wouldn't, of course. Not kind, gentle Anne.

"Tell me," he said, "was Sam amused?"

"Amused?"

"At the.. shall we say, 'exposure'?"

"Yes," she said weakly, "I guess so."

"And Anne?"

"Anne?"

He pinned her with his eyes and insisted: "Was Anne amused?"

"I guess so."

"And are you amused?"

"Not at first," she cried. "And not now. But it's all right. I don't care."

"You're very generous," he said. He stood up very deliberately and looked down at her. "I wonder what's keeping Anne? I'm anxious to see her."

"I suppose she could be with Sam now."

"Yes," he murmured, "I suppose so."

Not for an instant had General Abel guessed Mag was saying that Sam was his wife's lover. Had he understood her, he might have laughed and satisfied her that it was so, and rightly so, but the other thing, the word "lie" had set off all his fears so that he never even thought that he might have misunderstood.

"I was forgetting Sam," he said. "And I, too, child, underestimated your mother. And you, for that matter. I suppose I owe you undying gratitude, of a sort." He went to the sun porch and when he came back with his topee in his hand Mag was standing by her chair with her hand at her throat.

"Where did you pick up that Victorian pose?" he said with a wry smile.

"Where are you going, Fred?"

"I think I'd like a word with Sam. Man to man. There's nothing more frustrating and tiring than female-style intrigue."

"Why don't you wait until Anne comes home?"

"I'll be back. We'll all have a big chuckle together."

As he went out of the house, clapping the sun helmet on his head, General Abel cleared his mind, sweeping all thoughts and doubts and speculations out of it. Above all, he must not think ahead to the meeting with Sam. That, at least, must be pure. As he crossed the brown, crisping lawn, he kept his attention on the real things around him: trees and sky and earth. But he couldn't help wondering a little about poor Mag. Sam had told Mag, and what was little Mag to do, who was she to tell? Poor, simple Mag, who could only throw it in her father's face, to square an old account. She probably meant to marry the boy, now, and flit her skirt at them all. Maybe. But perhaps after today Sam wouldn't have the stomach to marry Mag.

He hadn't walked far before a car came along going into town. It was Harvey Spicer and he was going straight through. He said he'd be glad to give Abel a lift to the Trotter place.

"Wife take the car to church and leave you on foot?" Spicer laughed.

"That's right."

"Mrs. Abel's just like my wife for a church-goer."

"Oh, yes. A great church-goer."

"I wish you'd let me in on how you beat having to go with her."

"I say no. Or rather, I said it once and the subject hasn't come up since then."

Spicer didn't reply. He kept his eyes on the road and whistled to himself the rest of the way.

As Abel toiled up the hill from the road to the Trotter house, the reaction was setting in. But he remembered: Sam told Mag. He knocked and stepped back almost to the steps, facing the door. There were steps inside and Amos pushed open the screen.

"Hello, Fred. I'm glad to see you."

"Is Sam here?"

"Why no, he isn't. After church he was going to walk up through the groves and have a look at his irrigation gear and all. He's like a hen with chicks about the groves these days."

"Do you think he'll be walking back through the groves?"

"I imagine so."

"Maybe if I cut through, I'll meet him."

"Why not come in and wait? You haven't visited with us in some time."

"No, I think I'll go look for Sam."

In the groves, then, he thought as he went around the yard and turned up the path that led through the oranges and down to the plant. At the corner of the back porch, Amos' old hound and Sam's yellow mutt were asleep in the shade. They woke and the pup jumped up and bared his teeth at Abel. They were tied, though, with lengths of clothes line. The General felt an impulse of sheer hatred surge through him as the dog growled, and he quickened his step as he entered the trees.

* * * * *

"These are Temples," Sam said, gesturing at the trees on either side as the car churned up between the rows. "They're good oranges, but they bruise easy and once the skin's nicked the mold gets them. I've started making the niggers wear gloves while they work. It should cut down our spoilage, but we'll start replacing the trees as soon as we can, putting in a hardier variety."

Anne, beside him, straightened up and brushed her skirt down tightly over her knees. She blinked and tried to focus her eyes on the trees. She was a little unnerved at the way she'd been sitting there lolling her head on the

seat, as limp as a doll, but an inexplicable drowsiness possessed her.

"You're giving them gloves," she said. "You know, I tried once to get your father to give his workers gloves because they were getting some kind of infection on their hands. Now you come along and do it to cut down spoilage."

"It just goes to show you something or other," he smiled.

She nodded, and her head fell back against the seat. She tried to assert herself against the pervasive lethargy, but her mind seemed split--half in a trance and the other half, knowing that, whirring like a top. The one half felt only the hypnosis of warmth and quiet and the fragrance of the trees and Sam's open friendliness. The other said: "The boy's in love with you and you've let him be in love with you. And here you go with him someplace where he'll make love to you and force you to humiliate him." She was quite sure it would end that way. She wanted, she knew she wanted, to be kind, to turn him aside while there was still time for it to be done gracefully and without hurting him. And yet she sat, limp and torpid, all will dissolved. What had been begun on that day when she read her husband's journal? She had never yet had that talk with Fred that she had planned. She'd meant to talk to Mag, to warn or frighten her, or whatever it took. She hadn't done that, either. She hadn't done

anything at all, since that day, except listen and watch and grow daily less capable of seeing and hearing. She was so afraid that something dreadful would happen! Something that would hurt Mag or drive her forever beyond Anne's reaching.

But after today, after what was going to happen, it might be all right. Sam might not wish to see her or Mag or Fred, ever again, after today. He was so sensitive, beneath it all, that he might run away from them once he'd been hurt by Anne.

"It's my imagination," he said, "but these trees seem to be looking better already. I'm just afraid it's too late for most of this crop. When they don't get enough water while the fruit's maturing, they have awfully thick skins and the oranges are pulpy. We're going to have to sell some of them for cattle feed, I expect."

"Do cows eat oranges?"

"They dry them and grind them into a meal that's used as feed." He smiled at her in a comradely way and said, "It's nice up here, isn't it?"

Her head nodded slackly. The busy, fearful half of her mind thought: He sees a thin, middle-aged woman sprawling wantonly beside him. He sees all wrong. I'm lying to him. The car bumped and seemed to shake her like a marionette in a great fist. She flopped and bounced and grabbed at the dashboard. Sam took her arm and he said, "I'm sorry. Didn't

see that one coming." She sat straight again by a slow, heavy effort of will, and smoothed her skirt.

"This is the head of the land," he said. The car turned out of the trees and onto a sun baked little clearing between the groves and the scrub woods. A spidery network of pipes ran along the ground. "The pressure here is only about four feet, when the tank's at its low point. This is the highest spot in the groves, though. Anyway, the water comes down from the tank in that line there. These valves in a row control the breakdown so we can send it into whichever sections we want. The big tiled ditch running down the slope there has a wier, a sort of dam, every forty feet. When you close one of them, it diverts part of the water into a subline. When the subline gets to a certain level, it starts spilling, and the water runs by plain dirt ditches through the trees. As it goes it soaks in. If the ground's wet enough, some of the water goes all the way through the row and empties into the next subline."

She nodded, looking at his plain, youthful, eager face. He was good. She didn't want to hurt him!

That thought shook her. She had to hurt him now. She'd let things go that way. She'd left the choice behind her, down there at the church.

He started the car again and drove up into the edge of the woods. He stopped just in the shade of the trees,

where a mat of pine needles rustled beneath the wheels. He hesitated a moment, looking past her out at the trees sloping down toward the plant and the branch. Behind them in the woods a quail called shrilly, startling them both. The effort of lifting her hand was a convulsion, but Anne grasped the door handle and turned it. "Let's get out," she said. Even her voice was thick and drugged.

He came around to help her out and she saw that he was relieved at the delay. She didn't know what she meant to do. She walked across the pine needles to the edge of the trees and paused, but as she felt him come up behind her she stepped out of the shade, into the breathtaking heat and, hearing his steps behind her still, crossed the little clearing and turned down beside the wide, tile lined ditch.

Could she hurt him now? Would she have come this far if she had the power to hurt him? Or would she be kind and passive and stupefied and numbly let this go on? She understood this lethargy, now. She had tricked herself.

The sun was a clamor of brass filling the sky and the far slope of the ditch reflected it into their faces. She looked down at the trickle of water that washed the rough clay at the bottom of the ditch and caught the sun's reflection full in her eyes so that for an instant she seemed to look into the hot heart of a flashing jewel. She stopped

and half turned, lifting her hands, and in that instant of dazzling blindness felt Sam's arm across her shoulders and and his hand upon her waist and his chin brushed her forehead.

She wrenched away, twisting, and heard a thin, painful voice cry: "Sam!" and suddenly the ground slipped under her and a hot flash of pain touched her ankle and she was falling backward. Sam's hand on her shoulder held her for a second so that she could turn and put out her arms. The clay tiles barked skin from her palms and scraped her knees as she toppled down into the ditch. She hit with her arm doubled under her and felt water on her face and hands and her breast. She heard Sam shout and saw him scrambling down after her. She rolled down all the way into the water and simply sat up in it to straighten her clothes. One of her knees was bleeding.

Somehow, she got to the side of the ditch, muddy and dripping with Sam nervously pawing at her. The cut on her knee and the scrapes on her hands began to tingle and then to sear. The pain was a reviving shock through her whole body. She could move and speak again, and her mind was back together. Sam was holding her with an arm about her waist, and she slipped out of his hold and started back toward the car.

"Are you all right?" he called. She walked faster. "Anne?" he said hoarsely. She plunged into the shade and

reached the car. He'd left the key. She backed it out of the trees and turned, expecting him to be after her any minute, jumping in the other door. But when she swung the car around and headed down into the grove, he was still standing beside the ditch, his trousers and the front of his shirt stained with mud and water, staring at her. He did not move at first, but as she clashed the gears and started down into the orange trees she saw him lift his head and raise both his hands and she saw his face tense in some sudden excess of feeling--but whether it was anger or dismay or fear, she could not tell.

CHAPTER XV

The roundhead hen shrilled in agony as she thrashed in the weeds. One leg was torn off at the socket and as she tried to run she flopped helplessly in a circle drawn with her blood. Sam stooped and grabbed at her, but let go as he felt the hot, sticky blood under his fingers. Weakening, she tumbled on her side and lay panting and stirring her wings aimlessly. He got her by the head then, and wrung her neck.

The other hen he had seen running up into the groves. She'd probably find her way back. This one had had too much game in her to run. Just like his fine stags. One of them was dead over by the wrecked lath house, its head crushed flat. One was trampled into the dust beside the tangled wire that had been its pen, a dusty lump of feathers and blood. The third stood alone in its coop, the only coop that hadn't been smashed, and blinked anxiously out at the shambles.

When the hen had quivered out her death, Sam straightened and stared around him at it all. He was trembling all over, in every tiny thread of his body. It had happened so fast. After Anne had left him, he'd walked down through the groves toward the plant. Just as he came out of the trees he'd heard a sound like breaking sticks and what he'd thought was a dog barking. Then as he came

around the packing house he'd seen the herd of pigs trampling the lath house. While he stood gaping, he saw the black boar leading them walk up to one of his chicken pens and calmly tilt it over. The cock flew at him and cut him and the second time it flew he caught its head in his mouth and killed it. By that time the cock in the next pen was squawking at him so he went for that pen and toppled it and stamped the stag and when the hen jumped at him he got its leg.

That was what Sam had seen as he ran for the plant and the ax in the tool room. But the motion caught the boar's eye and it came for him so he had to jump for the loading platform. While the pig stamped beneath, he pulled a loose two-by-four from the railing, came up above it and slammed it on the head with the board, as hard as he could swing.

He'd knocked it down, but it had come up as quickly, squealing murderously. He swung again, but the pig dodged away. He jumped to the ground and flailed at it, but caught it only a glancing blow on the snout. It ran, though, with its band of sows and shoats following up into the orange trees, and Sam was left panting and shaking with the board in his hands and the maimed hen shrieking in the grass.

Now he picked up the two-by-four again. It was the same boar, and he remembered that time on the island in the swamp when it had tricked him down from the tree. There was

dead silence up in the groves where it had headed. He wiped his sweaty temples on his sleeve and went to look at the lath house, still gripping his board. The house was wrecked and about half his little plants, he judged, had been uprooted. The house could be fixed, easily enough, and a lot of the plants could be saved if something were done right away. He could telephone Castle. He felt in his pocket to see if he had the key to the office. He had his hand in his pocket and the two-by-four in his left hand when the crisp, dry weeds by the lemon trees crackled and he whirled, raising the board. General Abel stood at the edge of the trees with his topee in his hand as he wiped his forehead with his handkerchief.

"Hello, Trotter," he said brightly. He didn't seem at all startled by the gesture with the two-by-four.

"Abel. Jesus! Look at this! It was that damn' pig!"

"At what?"

"Look at the lath house! And my chickens! Look at my coops. He killed two stags and a hen."

"A pig?"

"That boar they've been talking about. He killed two stags right in front of me and then the hen."

"You saw it?"

"Hell, yes. I came up just as he tipped over one pen. He was after the grain, I guess. The stag shuffled him and

he grabbed it out of the air and bit its head flat. It must have hurt him because he went straight for the next pen and caught that stag and stomped it. Even the hen! That special hen Montgomery gave me! She flew at him and he bit her leg right off. I had to kill her."

"And you watched?" said Abel.

"I ran for an ax, but he came after me. I got hold of this two-by-four and hit him a couple of times, but it didn't seem to faze him. He took off up into the trees with about a dozen sows and shoats."

As Sam hovered over the ruins, exclaiming and waving his board, General Abel picked his way through the wrecked lath house, looked at the two smashed pens and poked the dead hen with his toe.

"I see," he said. "Very game chickens."

"You should have seen the hen go for him."

"She would have hatched good stags. Hats off to her." The General scowled at Sam and touched the rim of his sun helmet in mocking salute. "What are you doing now? Getting ready to hold a requiem mass?"

"I'm not doing anything but shaking," Sam laughed. "It was all over just before you came up."

"And now?" the General snarled. The virulence of his voice snapped Sam out of his confusion. General Abel, he saw

was his old, wrathy self again, very serious and very positive.

"Now?" Sam said.

"You've got a hot trail on him. You've got dogs. Why don't you go after him?"

"Right now?"

"What were you thinking of waiting for?"

"I don't know. I just haven't got my breath yet."

"He won't wait for you," Abel said.

"Yeah, you're right about that. Hell! I haven't got the car here. Let's go up to the house and I'll telephone Stan to get together a bunch."

"Just what you need. A bunch of howling half-wits stumbling over each other."

"Hell, I can't go alone."

"I'd be glad to join you."

"Well..." Sam's excitement was beginning to pass, to be replaced by a sense that something was wrong. General Abel was once more wearing his mighty anger, it was true, but he seemed peculiarly cool, too. He seemed, as he'd never seemed before, interested in the person before him--curious about what Sam would say or do. He peered up at him with something almost like excitement. "I didn't think you did... things like that," Sam said.

Without knowing, Sam, in that oblique reference to the General's heart, had said the one last thing he should have said. During his walk from the Trotter house, there had been time for doubts to overtake General Abel. He had begun to think, and weigh one side against the other, and to temporize with himself. That taunt about his heart, though, wiped it all out and left him with a simple rage that was almost restful in its directness.

"Things like what?" he said blandly.

"Well," Sam went on, "I was thinking about your heart."

Abel simply stood motionless and silent and stared up at Sam. Just when Sam decided he had to say something, anything, to end that pause, Abel said: "Go get your dogs. You and I'll go see about this pig. We'll see about our hearts, maybe, at the same time."

"Do you think it'll be all right?" Sam asked nervously.

"Yes, I think it'll be fine."

It was not General Abel's heart that Sam was thinking of now. He was thinking of that few moments up there in the groves with Anne, and he was frightened. Then he realized that was foolish. The General's eyes pored bleakly into him.

"Well, my friend?" Abel said lightly. "Let's go. I'll hold your hand if anything happens."

Sam tossed the two-by-four into the bushes and dusted his hands. "What's the matter?" he said gruffly.

"Matter?" Abel echoed with a sarcastic twist of his mouth.

"Yeah. There's nothing to get nasty about."

"Good. Then we're a nice, spanking pair of gentlemen. But I want to go for that pig. I'd like to have you along, Sam. What about it?"

"All right," Sam nodded.

"Then let's go."

They walked in silence up past the plant and took the path through the head of the groves. The General strode along with measured steps, saying nothing and peering about him as if he were an explorer in a strange, new world. He set a sharp pace for the hot day and the rough walking. Sam sauntered beside him, trying to seem just as much at ease as he, but it was difficult. They hadn't gone far before another unsettling thought struck him.

"What brought you all the way over here on foot?" he asked casually.

"Taking a constitutional," the General growled softly. "I like the heat. Heat is the male principle in nature, you know. The sun, for instance, will breed maggots in a dead dog."

Well, it appeared that he _had_ walked. That meant that he had not seen Anne, that she hadn't got home with the car before he left.

But just then they reached the head of the big main ditch, where he'd parked only half an hour before with Anne, and the sight of place plunged Sam back into doubt. She'd been a mess when she left, with her clothes wet and her hands and knees all scratched up. But she'd had all that ride home to calm down, and--after all--it hadn't been one sided, not by a damn sight. And there was the car. Sam tried to guess just exactly how long it had been from the time she left until Abel turned up. Not too long, he was sure.

They turned down into the hollow behind the house and the dogs began barking. As soon as he saw that they were leashed by the back porch still, Sam knew Amos wasn't home. Despite him, that renewed his worry. He would have liked to have Amos step into this thing. He'd probably have insisted on getting together a whole bunch of men for this hunt. At least, God knows, he'd have brought a little sanity into the wierd affair. He could say what Sam knew, without knowing why, he could not: that Abel with his bad heart, couldn't risk this run across the prairies in the heat.

"Amos isn't home, I guess," he said.

"Maybe that's all right," the General answered. "What kind of guns have you?" he demanded.

"There's a carbine. That's the only thing heavy that we have."

"Amos' old Winchester?"

"Yes sir." Sam didn't know how that "sir" popped out, and he ground his teeth angrily. General Abel didn't seem to notice, but that was beside the point.

"You've got shotguns, haven't you?"

"Yeah. We've got a double twelve and a repeater and a twenty-gauge."

"I can take the double then. What kind of loads?"

"Amos has quite a lot of shells. I'm not sure what kinds."

"Maybe he's got some slugs."

"We'll see."

They turned up into the yard and the hounds quieted down, recognizing Sam. The truck was gone and the house was still.

"Has that puppy had any rough work yet?" the General asked.

"Mustard? Not much, I guess. Amos has run 'possum with him."

"Think he'll hold the trail?"

"He's got plenty of wind."

"What about guts?"

"He's out of good stock."

"Has he ever tackled anything tough?"

"Not that I know of."

"That boar roughed up some dogs the last time he was caught."

Sam nodded. He led General Abel in through the back porch and the neat, deserted kitchen. He hesitated very briefly and then walked into the hall and looked first into the dining room and then into the parlor. Gwyneth was nowhere about. He turned and saw Abel standing squarely in the kitchen door, watching him with a thin smile.

"Looks like they've both gone out," Sam said.

"So it seems. Where does Amos keep his arms?

"In the back room."

As they started down the hall Gwyneth's voice came unclearly from the upstairs. "Sam?" she asked.

"Yes ma'am."

"There's some cold chicken in the icebox and some potato salad.

"Mama," he called up the stairs, "I'm going out with General Abel. Where's Amos?"

"He left just a little ago. I think he was going fishing."

"When he comes in, tell him we took a couple of his guns."

"Guns? Where are you going?"

"That razor back boar got into my lath house. He tore up most of it and killed three of my chickens. We're going to take the dogs and go after him."

"Who?"

"General Abel and me."

There was a shuffling sound from her bedroom and in a moment she came down the stairway in her bedroom slippers, brushing the hair from her face.

"Son, don't you think you should get somebody else to go with you?"

The General came up beside Sam and bobbed his head to Gwyneth. "We've got to go now, Mrs. Trotter, while the trail is still hot."

"Why don't you phone the Tracys?"

"We'd rather not."

The two of them stood there for a moment looking up at Gwyneth on the stairs. Sam waited for her to go on, to reason or argue with them. Instead, she stared thoughtfully at the General and then raised her eyebrows in an expression of slightly disdainful resignation. She knew they were being fools, those eyebrows said, but if they chose to find out for themselves--that was her lot.

"Well," she said, "at least you can have a bite to eat before you go."

"We'd better get going," Abel snapped.

"Fix me a sandwich, will you?" Sam said. "I'll carry it with me. And fill Amos' canteen for me."

"All right," she sighed, and she came down past them and went to the kitchen. Sam glanced once into Abel's dry smile, then turned and led him into the back room.

When they came again into the kitchen, Gwyneth was wrapping four sandwiches in waxed paper. Abel stood impatiently by the door as Sam protested briefly and then waited while she put the sandwiches in a sack and added two apples. He took the bag and the cool canteen.

"Sam," Gwyneth said. She stood for an instant staring into her son's eyes with a knowing, martyred look. "Be careful," she said.

"I will, Mama."

Sam gave the sandwiches to Abel and clipped the hunting leashes to the dogs' collars. Delirious with joy, they scrambled in a tangle around his legs, tying him and themselves, and leaped up to lick his hands and arms. When he got them straightened out he took the carbine from General Abel and they set out into the hot, musty lane through the oranges.

By the time they reached the packing house, the dogs had calmed down a bit and weren't towing so hard at the leashes. Sam's legs were already a little tired, though, and his spirit

cringed at the idea of the chase ahead of them. He was glad to see that the General was slowing a bit, too.

The bodies of the dead chickens, already covered with flies, excited the dogs again. He held them away from the blood while Abel loaded the carbine and then the shotgun.

"Which way did he go?"

"Straight up through those rows."

"Circle around this mess and we'll try to pick him up there, then."

He cast the dogs without much trouble, although they weren't interested in the pig scent at first. Their blood was up, though, and they took it. Hoot raised his head and belled the trail and that was all it took to arouse the pup. They put their heads down and lunged into the collars. With Sam leaning against them, twisting his face against the dust they raised, and Abel striding beside, they started after the boar.

To the edge of the grove, the going was bad, and Sam's shoes had filled with sand by the time they reached the scrub-land. The pig was following easy ground, though, and in the palmettoes they stuck to open lanes and detoured around the thick patches. Briars and sandspurs caught at Sam's ankles and his heels were chafing from the sand, but he was ashamed to call for a halt so soon. General Abel seemed intent on the trail. The dogs had settled to their work. Once or

twice they passed places where the little herd of pigs had rooted at young shoots.

"Good!" the General barked. "They're taking it easy, at least as far as this. We may have picked up some time on them."

"Why don't we take a breather?"

"Well..." the General hesitated. He was a little pale. "Let's keep on for a while yet. He may not know we're behind him."

"He'll find out."

"Ten minutes," Abel ordered.

The trail continued open and easy, but the sun, glinting on the glossy palmetto fans, was like a tangible thickening of the air. The dogs weren't crying the scent now. They worked with their tongues almost on the ground and slobbered noisily. They turned up away from the branch and the country was more open and sandy for a stretch. Sam waited until they were in sight of a little, dry oak hammock and then he pointed and said: "There's some shade. Let's break."

"Too far off our trail. We want to keep the dogs close to the scent."

"All right, then, Let's just sit down here."

Without waiting for an answer, he hauled the dogs off into a clearing beside a clump of palmetto tall enough to

throw a little shade. He close-leashed the hounds and sat down with his back against the brush so that he was shaded except for his feet. The dogs fretted for a moment, but then they flopped down by his legs, panting loudly. Abel found a spot across from them and squatted with the shotgun across his legs. He took off his sun hat and wiped his temples. He was pretty pale and there was more of a squint to his eyes than usual.

"We really picked a day for it," Sam said.

"Yes. The scent will cling. And I don't imagine those hogs will be moving very fast. They may even lie up."

"How do we know we're trailing the boar? They may have split up."

"His scent will be strongest. Besides, he'll stay with his women until he knows for sure that we're on to them."

It wasn't much cooler in the sparse shade of the palmettoes than in the open. Sam could feel sweat draining steadily down his chest and back. Feeling his heart thumping against his ribs, he wondered about the General's. He tried to think of something to say, or a way to ask, but he could not do it. What he'd already said was too much. The important thing, he reasoned, was to give Abel a graceful way out if it looked bad. He could simply refuse to go on, of course. He could take the dogs and head back for home. That would be the decent thing. Even as he thought that, he knew he

wouldn't do it. It would be too cruel. The best would be to keep a close eye on the General and if he looked as though the heat was getting to him, pretend to be exhausted himself. He could fake a heatstroke, perhaps.

With that out of the way, Sam rolled his head back and closed his eyes and made the most of this moment in the shade.

"Shall we go?" Abel rasped.

"I've got to get the sand out of my shoes."

"Well get it, then."

When he'd emptied his shoes and brushed his socks, Sam stood up. The General straightened quickly from his squatting position, but when he was standing he blinked and for an instant wavered and almost staggered.

"Let's go back," Sam said.

"Go back? What for?"

"This is too much for you."

"For me? Why for me?" Abel demanded loudly.

"If you have a heart attack out here in the middle of nothing, it'd take an hour to get you to a doctor."

General Abel did not immediately answer. He stood staring into Sam's face with a queer air of uncertainty. Then he gave a quick jerk of his head and snarled: "You're a yellow little son-of-a-bitch."

"Take it easy," Sam cried indignantly. "If you have an attack out here, don't think I'm going to tote you all the way home."

"I expect very little of you, Sam'l my boy."

"If you want to croak out here, that's all right with me."

Again that momentary flash of doubt seemed to cross the General's features. Then he nodded and his eyes narrowed again and he said calmly: "We'll see who croaks out here. Let's go."

With a dull, emotionless shock, Sam understood that the General intended to kill him. All his reasoning and figuring and deduction went tumbling before Abel's wrath. He pictured Anne stumbling home to the General's arms, scratched and wet and hysterical, her clothes torn, stammering out some confused words, saying too much and not enough, and the General calmly setting his topee on his head and going out to find Sam. And Sam had given him a gun and come out here to the wilderness with him.

But that was only a flickering instant of numb panic, and then the dogs tugged at his arm and Abel swung out to the trail, his shotgun over his arm, and they were moving again as reason and deduction returned. But the General's words pounded at Sam's mind, still, as he stumbled behind the whining dogs: "Yellow little son-of-a-bitch," and "We'll

see who croaks." And Sam had taken only a few steps before the one inexplicable piece fitted in and he saw the whole thing so terribly clearly that he stopped still in a flush of real panic, jerking the dogs to their haunches.

"What is it?" Abel scowled.

"Nothing."

There could be only one reason why General Abel had come out here, knowing that his heart couldn't possibly stand it. He was ready to die. Perhaps he meant to wait for some warning sign, for the first twinge of an attack, and then to shoot and see Sam die with him. If it didn't come, if he tired of waiting, he could simply shoot and then keep walking on through the hot brush until he fell and died. They'd both be dead in a hunting accident. No one would have to know why Sam had died. No one but Anne.

The trail led in a wide arc toward the head of the lake. They crossed the Panomee road a couple of miles below the Trotter house and after that they hit a lot of thicker brush and hammocks. There were cypresses in among the oaks. The sun wasn't so bad, but the grapevines and briars made the going a lot rougher even than the palmettoes. Sam stumbled and fell half a dozen times as he tried to follow the dogs, keep his rifle ready and still watch the General.

There were two things to watch for: the first faltering of Abel's heart or ... what would be the other sign? He'd

have to count on Abel's waiting for the attack. If Sam could sense it before Abel, he could be ready. He tried to slow the dogs, dragging him always just ahead of the General, and he tightened his grip on the sweat-slippery stock of the carbine. They came into a big, gloomy hammock where the leaf mold was moistly spongy underfoot, and Abel stopped. He still held the shotgun loosely over his forearm, though.

"Notice anything?" the General rasped. His breath was coming short, and Sam tried to face him while the dogs tugged, hauling him around.

"Notice what?"

"The trail's running a lot straighter. Also, the hogs came right through this juicy little spot and didn't stop to root up any of these stumps and logs. And they're heading for the swamp."

"You think he's onto us?"

"I think so."

"We can slip the dogs," Sam declared with a sudden inspiration. Running behind free dogs in close cover, Abel couldn't stay behind him. They'd be even then.

"Slip 'em? For all we know, that pig's in the next county. But we'd better rest. It won't be long now."

"Okay."

"Sandwich?"

"Yeah, I think I'll have one now. I could use some of that water, too."

Sam made as casual and thoughtless a business as he could of drinking from the canteen and unwrapping a sandwich. Abel tied the dogs to a stump and he and Sam sat side by side on a log to eat. Abel laid his gun against the log, but Sam kept the carbine on his knees.

"Good," Sam grunted as he chewed his sandwich.

"Take it easy. You're going to do some running."

"We both are."

"Right," said Abel cheerily. "How're your legs doing?"

"They'll make it."

"Well, we're not making the best time, but he's got his problems, too."

"The pig?"

"Yep. From the sign, I'd say he's still traveling with his women, and they'll be giving him trouble."

"How's that?"

"He'll have a time getting any speed out of those sows and younguns in this heat. And I don't think he'll desert the harem until we're right on their tails."

"We may be on his tail."

"Maybe," Abel agreed, "but we'll catch the sows before we see anything of him. They'll drop back.

"I suppose so."

"Always the women, isn't it? One way or another, we have to carry them." The General chewed reflectively on his sandwich and watched Sam from lowered eyes. "I'm generally a qualified, moderate, if-and-but woman hater. But sometimes I decide I'll just be a simple, blanket-damnation woman hater. You know, they give us our lives, and no one can ever forget it, least of all them. They always believe they're entitled to demand the return at any time, on any notice."

Hoot fought his leash for a moment, then sat down and wailed. Mustard lay full length in the leaves, panting.

"You don't agree," the General said dryly. Abel's wry good humor and his confidence had returned to him almost in the instant that he had realized that Sam was afraid, that Sam thought he had come to kill him. That amused the General immensely, and it had taken him only a moment to realize why Sam thought he was going to be shot. So Sam had laid little Mag after all, and Mag had proved weaker than her father thought her. That was it. That was what had broken Mag all apart. Abel rather liked the idea of himself as an irate father, shotgun in hand. Perhaps, he mused, he would shoot the seducer. How wonderful! He scarcely wasted one contemptuous thought on Mag, though. Foremost in his mind remained the fact that Sam knew his lie, knew there was no clot of blood next to his heart,

and hadn't been--even though Sam's taunt back there by the packing house now appeared to have been less a taunt than a frightened evasion.

"Do you agree?" the General insisted.

"I don't know."

"Look at you."

Sam stared Abel full in the eyes and said: "All right, look at me." He held the sandwich in his left hand and his right lay on his knee, near the grip of the carbine.

"Once upon a time," Abel said, "you stood up on your hind legs and went off to do as you damned pleased. But you came back to Gwyneth."

"To Gwyneth?"

"Whether you know it or not. You came back to your home. To scenes of your childhood. To your grammar school playmates. To a lot of vague feelings about a place where you belong, or so you say. That's a way of coming home to mother."

"Could be, taking it that way. And I suppose you mean that coming back will be the death of me?"

"Perhaps. In a manner of speaking, perhaps."

"What manner of speaking?"

"You don't belong here, you know. Whatever you think. Being where you don't belong is a kind of death."

"Then the world's full of walking corpses."

"I wouldn't say that it isn't."

"Where do you think I belong?"

"I don't know. I know only what I see."

"What's that?"

"You're a navel-gazer. Whatever you do, you're watching yourself from the sidelines. So you try too hard. You're <u>trying</u> all the time, that's all of it. All this doesn't come naturally to you. It can't as long as it means what it does to you."

"All what?"

"All everything. All your sweaty, man-of-work airs. All your hell-raising, man-among-men pose. A man can look at you and see how much you want to be... something. You know."

"So?" Sam shrugged, wiping his mouth on his cuff. Maybe, he thought, Abel was losing his fire. Perhaps he could be prodded into taking it all out in talk. Still, Sam kept that one hand close to the trigger of the carbine. All this talk might have another side. Perhaps Abel was coming to something pointed. Perhaps there was to be an indictment and a sentence pronounced.

"So," Abel smiled, "you have no feeling for it. The world doesn't just give what you demand of it, young Sam'l."

"Maybe not."

"It comes only to those who take it as it comes. Like the man whom you model yourself on, for example."

"Oh? And who's that?"

"Your uncle, Walker. He took things as they came. And he put on his airs because they amused him. Like never telling where his fortune came from."

"You know?"

"My mother," Abel announced, "was no fool. Walker was in on some deals with her. She didn't risk money in the dark. She had him checked up on, just to be sure." The General smiled knowingly and teasingly, but Sam regarded him as stolidly as ever. "Would you like to know?" he asked.

"Sure, I'd like to know where to go pick up a few thousand."

"Then go to Texas," Abel said. "Go to work as a stationery engineer in the oil fields. Save your money, by living a very frugal life. Invest wisely in big oil companies. Buy oil drilling machinery from bankrupt small outfits and sell it at fancy prices to hopeful small outfits. Save everything and make no deals unless you've got the other man by the short hairs. In eight or nine years you'll be rich. That's what Walker did."

"So what?"

"Then let everybody think you stole it, or smuggled rifles across the border, or made it in the opium trade, and

they'll be scared of you. They'll figure you're a hell of a fellow."

"That's my model?"

"Only superficially. I suppose people have told you that you look like him. Well, the resemblance ends at the skin. Walker, for all that he was a fraud, had a sense of humor." The General chuckled hoarsely. "Shall we get going?" he said.

He started to rise, but Sam remained seated, cradling his carbine on his knees and staring at the General. A sudden, deep doubt possessed him, an inexplicable but reassuring sense of having misread the situation. Abel wasn't an outraged husband. It was absurd. He was saying all the wrong things.

"Well?" the General snorted.

"I'm thinking. About what you said. What's eating you?"

Abel did not so much as blink. "We haven't got time to sit around while you think," he said. "You coming?"

Before Sam could answer they were startled by a sudden clamor from the dogs and Bobo Labeau walked into the clearing. The General spun about at the sound, snatching up his shotgun and leveling it in one motion.

"Bobo," he barked angrily, "You almost drew some buckshot your way."

Bobo approached them with a tolerant smile. His denim clothes were stained and muddied and he too carried a shotgun, an old single barrel. He popped his eyes at them and grinned. "What the hell you two up to?" he asked.

"Working a trail," Abel answered.

"Hell, I know that. I been following you ten minutes. What kind of trail you on?"

Sam answered him. "That pig, Bo. The boar that treed me in the swamp. He got into my lath house today, with a herd of sows, and tore up a lot of plants. He killed two of my stags and that old hen."

"Pig killed your chickens?" Bobo cried.

"I guess he was after the grain in the pens. They fought him and he killed them."

"Son-of-a-bitch! You got a hot trail?"

"We were on him in a half hour."

"Jesus Christ! You been sittin' here five minutes! Why don't you move?"

"We just took a breather. We're going now."

"Listen, I'm going with you for that boy. Son-of-a-bitch!"

"What have you got in that gun?" Abel asked.

"Sixes. You got buckshot?"

"I've got a few buckshot and a few slugs."

"Lemme have some buckshot shells. I pay you back later."

Abel glanced quickly at Sam as he reached into his pocket for the shells. He clearly did not like Bobo's intrusion. Sam hopped up and began untying the dogs. The tables had turned. Now they'd see, when the going got rough. Then he remembered Abel's heart. A man who'd come out here knowing that he was going to die. That was the thing he kept forgetting.

"Lemme take them hounds," Bobo demanded.

Better and better. Sam gave him the leashes and Bobo cast the dogs. Sam fell back beside the General. They were even, now. And there was Bobo as witness and perhaps as help.

CHAPTER XVI

When the door had closed behind her father, leaving Mag alone in the monstrous white house in the palmettoes, Mag's first reaction had been a joy so high and sharp that it was savage. She had been wrong! Her father had not known what was being done. It had all been Anne's doing. She had been tricked by her mother into thinking they were all united against her.

It was when she tried to imagine what her father would do that the immensity of her action struck her. This would not stop, now, with that one magnificent moment of her father's terrible wrath. Why! he'd probably leave Anne. Everything might break up now. She was briefly disconcerted by the idea that she would have to go with one or the other of them and it might be Anne. She had no notion what was involved and tried frantically to remember what she'd heard about divorces. Could they make her go with Anne. It seemed very likely. The mothers always got the children.

Then the one thing she had forgotten came to her and it was as if her heart were suddenly seized and held in a fist. His heart! He was going to look for Sam. He was going to walk all the way to the Trotters'--and she remem-

bered the sun outside, scorching the road. And when he found Sam? If they fought!

Impelled by horror, she ran. Across the room and the hall she ran and clattered up the stairs and ran to her old window. She could see nothing on the road. She could see nothing at all but the dust and the sun so dazzling it paled the sky. She turned from the window and ran back to the stairs and down and across the living room to the sun porch. She looked at the gun cabinet and the two pistols were still there on their pegs. She pivoted and ran wildly back into the house, running now because there was nothing to do but run. Her breath choked her and her eyes blurred with tears and in the front hall she ran head-on into the iron stair rail. She gripped it, blind, and suddenly too weak to stand. She lifted her face and gasped, gagging at the stricture in her chest. Again she gasped and gagged and this time it broke and a sob shook her. She clung to the rail as she sank upon the stairs.

Anne found her there, hysterically sobbing, and took her to the living room, half leading, half carrying. At first Mag was too confused to react at all to her mother. Anne put her on the couch and rubbed her face and slipped her shoes off.

"Don't try to say anything, Mag. Wait a bit. I'm going to get a little whisky. Stay right there, darling."

The moment that was given her was all she needed, and when Anne, at the liquor cabinet, turned back to her with the glass in her hand, Margaret sat up and put her feet on the floor and rubbed her face with the back of her hand and faced her.

"He's gone," she said, trembling to control her voice.

"Who's gone, dear? Gone where?" Ane came toward her and was going to try to sit beside her and put her arm around her, but Mag stood up. She was getting her breath back.

"Fred's gone to look for Sam," she said. "He knows all about it."

"Sit down a little, Mag, and don't try to tell me about it yet. You're still so upset."

"I told him all about it, mother."

"What did you tell him, Mag?"

"About you and Sam."

Anne stiffened, and then she sat down on the couch and pulled Mag down beside her by the arm. "What do you mean? What did you tell him?"

"He's gone to look for Sam. It'll kill him. You know it will."

"What did you tell Fred, Margaret?"

"I told him the truth! I didn't mean to. I thought he knew. I thought he was in on it. But he wasn't. He didn't know--but he would have known anyway before long. He said he'd been wondering."

"Tell me what you told Fred! Tell me, Margaret!"

"I don't know," she screamed. "I don't know what I said. I thought he knew all about it. I thought you'd arranged it between you because he's sick. That's what he told me. I thought that's what he meant!"

Mag was shaking uncontrollably. Anne took her by the shoulders. "Tell me! What did you think we'd arranged?"

"About you and Sam!"

"What about me and Sam?"

"You know!"

"Tell me!"

"I can't!" she shrieked, and she twisted out of her mother's hand and slumped off the couch. She huddled, sobbing and retching, on the floor there, with Anne above her holding her shoulder with one arm, but quite silent.

When it had been so long a time that she'd cried until her throat was dry and aching and head throbbed and her stomach was knotted in a lump of pain, Anne raised her up, unresisting, and made her lie on the couch. She went away and came back in a little while with a cold cloth.

She washed Mag's face and her eyes and made her swallow a little whisky. She was very pale, and her face was set and anguished.

"Now listen to me, Margaret," she said. "This is very important. I've got to know what I can do. Perhaps I can help your father. But you'll have to tell me exactly what you told him. Now, can you tell me?"

"You know."

"Did you tell him I was in love with Sam?"

Mag shook her head weakly. "More than that," she said.

"You told him I was sleeping with Sam?"

"Yes."

"That's not true, Mag. What made you think that?"

"I don't know. I thought... I thought..."

"No. I'm sorry. Don't talk about it. Just lie here a while."

"What about Daddy?"

"I'm going to try to find him. You just rest here."

"Are you going now?"

"In a minute."

"What will he do?"

"Nothing. Don't worry. It's not what you thought. I'm going to find him and talk with him."

"It's too late."

"I don't think so," Anne said. "You mustn't worry."

"Why don't you go?"

"I'm going, dear. In just a minute."

She went out of the room and Mag heard her dialing the telephone in the back hall. She couldn't hear what she said but in a little bit Anne came in the room and said: "Mrs. Craven's going to be over in a little while, Mag. Just lie where you are until she comes, will you?"

She'd changed her dress, Mag saw, and she thought bitterly what a terrible thing it was that she had taken time to change before going to save her husband's life.

"I'm all right," Mag said, but her eyes and her body and her mind were heavy, heavy.

"Promise me you'll lie right where you are, won't you?"

"All right."

"I'll bring Fred back with me. And he'll be all right. You'll see."

Anne drove quite slowly going back into Moccasin Branch, across the bridge and up to the Trotter house. She was not really terribly worried about Fred. She was frightened at what Margaret had done, and stunned that the child could have believed such a thing and, apparently, made Fred believe it. But she did not believe that her husband had stormed out, an offended lord, to fight in defense of the sanctity of his

home. That was completely out of his character. But something nasty was afoot, and she felt that she should talk to him as soon as possible--before he found Sam. If not, then the three of them might as well have it out. She did not flinch from that prospect. She was already humiliated and filled with humble contrition, and she believed that from here on she would be fighting for Margaret.

Gwyneth came to the door as Anne was climbing the steps. She was quite solemn and didn't offer the warm greeting she usually had for visitors. She opened the door and held it for Anne.

"Come in, Anne," she said.

"Gwyn, has Fred been here?"

"He was here, and then he went looking for Sam and the two of them left--hunting, of all things."

"Hunting?"

"Yes, Lord. Come in and sit down." She led toward the parlor. "I tried to get them to wait and get together some more men, but they had to go right away. It's that pig, that razor back that's been hanging around the town. It tore up Sam's young trees, or something, and they took the dogs and went after it."

Anne stood in the doorway, staring bleakly at Gwyneth. She was suddenly not so sure as she had been. Hunting?

"Were they on foot?" she said stupidly.

"Of course."

On foot--in this heat. "You say Fred came here alone first?"

"Yes, then he and Sam came back a little later. They got the dogs and took some guns. It's been about half an hour.. I gave them some sandwiches to carry along."

"Did they say anything?" Anne asked. "I mean... anything unusual?"

Gwyneth surveyed Anne with a gaze of compassion. "It's the General's heart you're thinking about, isn't it?"

"Yes. Yes, it is."

"Men can be such children," Gwyneth sighed, and she saw in an instant that those words had struck Anne the wrong way. "Talking," she went on, "may be a woman's weakness, but it's her strength, too. Pride's a man's weakness. His own pride generally makes him too careful of the next man's. I asked Amos to talk to Sam about your daughter, Anne. Of course he wouldn't."

"About Margaret?"

"Don't think I'm unconscious. I know it's worried you. People do talk, and Sam just doesn't think of Margaret as a child. I wish now that I'd talked to him myself. I'm going to ask you a question that you don't have to answer, if you'd rather not. Did you husband come over here today because of that?"

Anne stared blankly at her. "Because of...? I don't understand."

"Well, we'll leave it at that."

"Really, I don't know. I'm sorry. I'm a little upset." All Gwyneth's words seemed wierdly incomprehensible. Only one thing made sense. Fred had believed what Margaret told him. And it mattered to him. And he and Sam, with guns in their hands, were gone, someplace, together. Maybe Fred was dead by now, she realized. It was so hot.

"You may not think this any consolation, Anne," said Gwyneth, "but just remember Sam's with your husband. My boy is not a fool."

"Of course. I've got to go, Gwyn, Margaret's alone." Gwyneth followed her silently to the door and as she went out Anne hesitated and turned back to put her hand on her arm. "You're very kind," she said. "You've been good to me since I came to this town, Gwyn. I don't want you to think there's anything that should make for... worries between us. You know what I mean."

"Yes, I do. And don't you worry. A man with the right kind of stuff in him may do something foolish now and then, but he's still the same man and it shows in the end."

"Good-by, Gwyn."

"Come to see me soon. I like to see you."

"I will. Good-by, now."

Gwyneth stood at the screen and watched Anne go down the steps and to the car, moving in quick, nervous little motions, and then she watched the car roll under a cloud of dust down to the road. She sensed her failure, but it was not painful. She wanted very sincerely to help Anne, but if she had not, it was simply because there was a limit to the power of human sympathy. In time, Anne would come to understand the curious ins and outs of masculine needs. Right yet, she was not capable of it. First a woman must learn that there is no hope, and no need to hope, that any woman can share those needs or deeply feel them. Her part is to respect them simply because they are there, and to know that she herself is somehow their final resolution.

Anne left the Trotter house in an agony of futility. Gwyn's words and presence had fuzzied everything so that she had to stop and shake herself mentally to think straight. She didn't think for a moment that her husband would kill Sam. But he had gone off to kill himself. For her. For pride. She wouldn't have believed she--or anything--mattered that much to him. She took no hope from Sam's part in it. He wouldn't be able to do anything. He'd just watch, while Fred walked and walked and ran in the hot sun until it was over.

She had to remember, though, that it was not over. She did not know. It hadn't happened yet, even though she was now helpless. And as she turned the car toward town and steered through the winding tunnel of overhanging oaks, Anne's sense of helplessness translated itself into a sort of drunken elation, the limp release of abandoning everything to fate, or chance, or whatever it was. She was briefly quite lightheaded and almost giggly. The idea that Margaret believed she was unfaithful to Fred, the idea that Fred might be dying now because of that, or that he might kill Sam--all that was suddenly only the caricature of a nightmare. Gwyneth's smug concern with petty proprieties had thrown it into a grotesque perspective.

That mood lasted only a moment, though, for she remembered Margaret sobbing, clinging to the stair rail, choking on fear and helplessness. She had been afraid of her child, and then for a moment she had hated her, and those two things were terrible. But her daughter's loneliness and terror could not be compromised, in Anne's heart, by absurdity.

*   *   *   *   *

Amos' eyes opened very slowly and he saw, right there only a few inches from his face, a cricket. It clung to a blade of grass that trembled with its little weight, and as

he watched it shifted its grip and climbed a bit higher, waving its feelers, and its metallic eyes seemed to roll in fear as the grass bent under it. It tumbled down into the leaves and started creeping right toward him. He jerked his head back and that movement brought him back to himself. For a moment there, just before the cricket, it had been another time, and he and Walker had been walking side by side across the palmettoes with the dew still on everything and that little pointer bitch of Walker's working the brush ahead of them. They'd been talking, and it seemed that for once he'd been getting the best of Walker and had made him see how the others felt. Just what he'd said, or how, he couldn't remember. It slid glimmering back into the darkness it had come from and he was left lying on his side in the stiff weeds and grass beside the bricks that had been their old home.

His left arm was stiff and sore and when he tried to sit up that same pain flashed in his arm and side and shoulder and his breath failed so that his sight blurred and he thought he was going to faint again. When his eyes cleared and the pain ebbed, he rolled very carefully to his back and waited to get his wind before he sat up. Overhead, the trees laced the shining sky, unmoved by any wind. The only sounds were the small cries and creakings of insects

and the angry hum of the flies beneath the orange trees. The sweet smell of the dead fruit was very strong.

After a bit he raised his hand and laid it carefully upon his chest. He felt his heart there--thump--da-thump--thump--thump-thump. A ragged, arhythmic beat. He was not afraid. There was a yearning thrill in feeling it surge and struggle, a real, pulsing, living thing. "The heart hath its secret," he thought.

He sat up and looked around him. Nearby lay the machete, its edge glittering among the dead, brown leaves. There was a windrow of creepers and briars along the crumbling bricks of the old foundation--the little toll he'd taken of them before the sunlight sprang into his eyes and the pain burst in his chest. How little it was! Not a tenth of what would have to be cleared before they could get at the bricks and shore them up and break out the bad spots and replace them. The odor from beneath the orange trees nauseated him. He got up very slowly and brushed his clothes with his hands. He could feel the heat upon him and around him, yet he was a little cold. He took up the machete and went out of the clearing, between the huge, choked orange trees, and down to the road. The truck was there, but he went past it, down to the little dock, and sat there in the sun. That was better. He wanted to wait a while, until

he felt perfectly all right again, before he went home to Gwyneth and Sam.

"The heart hath its secret," he thought--in wonder.

* * * * *

Bobo set a hard pace, and the ground was bad. Within minutes after leaving the grove where Bobo had joined the General and Sam, they were all drenched with sweat and their clothes snagged and torn. Sam heard General Abel begin to puff. They fought side by side through the tangles, but they didn't have time or breath to talk.

When they came out once again into palmetto flats, Bobo let the dogs step up their speed. There was no doubt that the pigs were on the run. Two or three times the trail cut straight through heavy clumps of brush. There was no more meandering. They were heading for the swamp beyond Panomee Creek. At a clear patch of firm soil, Bobo had Sam hold the dogs back while he looked over the ground.

"How many did you see at the plant?" he asked.

"Five or six sows and maybe that many shoats."

"They're an easy dozen here. They not so far, I think. Let's move."

The dogs put up a lot more racket than before, and they weren't running so close to the ground. The scent was strong. The heat was still bad, and from the position of

the sun Sam guessed they hadn't been going nearly as long as it seemed. His legs were hurting a little. Abel seemed to be taking it still. Sam didn't bother to keep close watch on the General, now that Bobo was with them, but he was still cautious and he didn't let Abel fall back behind him.

They crossed Panomee Creek before stopping for another rest. The water was low, but they had to wade up to their armpits, nonetheless. The dogs swam delightedly, splashing and yelping. Bobo had a look at the tracks on the muddy bank and decided the herd was still together. The hounds and Bobo took the trail eagerly, but as soon as they were in the shade of a stand of oaks Sam called for a halt and the General, by remaining silent, backed him up. While they sat in the moist leaves, Bobo paced between them, swinging his gun impatiently.

"We gonna get that pig," he exclaimed. "We gonna put it on them boys that went out the other day, man. I want one shot. That's all. Listen. When we let them dogs go, I'll take the middle. Sam, you go left, and Abel, you go right."

"They're Sam's dogs. He should go in the middle."

"You want to go the middle?"

"I don't care," Sam shrugged. Abel wanting to be next to him had alerted Sam all over again. He was so tired he felt he couldn't get up.

"Okay," Bobo declared, "I go middle. Sam on left, you on right."

The General nodded. He'd got his color back, but he looked very tired. He didn't look sick.

Bobo squatted in the leaves. "I never heard of no pig killing chickens," he said.

"I think the first stag hurt him. Probably made him mad."

Bobo chuckled. "I wish I could of seen it," he said.

"They're marvelous things," said General Abel. "Pure heart! Think how it must feel."

"What?"

"When they fight. Think! Pure heart. No thought. No doubts. No calculation. Nothing in them but fight. Selfless, that's what they are. All of one piece. Crazy, deadly things."

"The ones that went for that pig were crazy, all right."

"What a way to die! You see it in the ring. They're never self conscious about dying, no last words, no composing the limbs. They go out without ever noticing themselves, and they go on heart all the way."

"Well, Montgomery can be proud of his chickens, all right. I just hope he's proud enough not to blame me for losing them. I'd like to get some more."

"Montgomery!" said Abel. "Of course. H. L. Montgomery. That's where you got them."

"That's right."

"And you're going to get more?"

"If I can."

"Planning to take them to county fairs and ring them in as dunghills?"

"You didn't lose any money. What's your gripe?"

"I'm a little amused, that's all. You were really set up after that slaughter Saturday. A man would have thought you did the fighting yourself, or, at least, that you raised the chickens yourself."

"What's the matter?" Bobo asked darkly.

The General glanced around at Bobo and it almost seemed he was going to blush. He'd plainly forgotten that Bobo had been in on the trick.

"Damn' good chickens," Bobo said flatly. "It's time we had some real good birds around, and somebody taking some pride. Know what I mean? These raggedy-assed bastards around here! Take some damn' little henhouse chickens down to the point and have some fights! Jesus! Tracy and Sam is the only ones got any good birds. I hope you get some

more, Sam. Maybe we get some good fights around here. Go to Panomee fights and maybe have them guys come out here. Know what I mean? We got a lot of little piss-ant fights. One dollar! Two dollars! Five dollar bets! Big time stuff, man!"

He cocked his head to one side and turned down his mouth in a grimace of disgust. "You wanta go?" he said.

The trail was heading for the swamp for sure, swinging in an arc parallel to the lake shore. They hit a lot of little sloughs and trickling creeks and boggy hollows and after half a mile their shoes were soaked. The young dog began to have some trouble, but Hoot held the scent without faltering.

As they began to come to willow and alder, the going was a lot harder, far worse than the thickest palmetto. The whip-like branches slashed and worried them and often for a hundred feet a man wouldn't see the others. The dogs were yelping a lot.

When they reached a boggy cypress hammock, Bobo called them together.

"It ain't far to the swamp. Once he get in there for good, we lost him. Can you run?"

Sam and Abel nodded grimly, and Bobo slipped the hounds.

They followed by sound from there, straight through the hammock. The hounds' voices told what they were doing. Once

they false-trailed and had to cast for the scent, snuffling and whining in the brush. Now that they were free, the dogs trailed full voice. Hoot had a sharp, excited cry and Mustard belled a deep, drawn out bugle note. They went on out through the hammock and into the alders again. Bobo crashed in just behind them and Sam remembered to take a path to the left. He could hear Abel over beyond Bobo, floundering in the growth.

The trail bent back away from the lake, to the palmetto flats again, and as Sam came out of the trees he got one glimpse of the whole thing: the hounds far out front, running full speed, and Bobo sprinting after them and Abel circling to cut across the loop of the trail. They then were in the palmettoes with the fans slapping and cutting them and the roots rising to trip them. Sam fell twice and he saw Bobo, up ahead, go down and bob up almost without missing a stride.

The trail looped again, this time to the left, and Sam had a chance to gain ground on the dogs. Then it was back into the alders and he was completely lost. He just headed for the sound of the dogs and finally he came out by a muddy slough and Bobo came splashing down to wave at him and shout: "They're splittin' up! I seen a sow running back up there with two little pigs. The dogs are keeping the trail, I hope."

Sam nodded, out of breath.

"Where's Abel?" Bobo asked, but he plunged into the brush without waiting for an answer, and Sam followed him. The dogs had circled by then, and it sounded as if the chase was coming back at them. Sam paused once to look behind him, but Abel was not in sight. Then there was another lost scent and they were heading straight for the swamp.

The three of them got back together at the edge of another big hammock, but nobody had breath to talk. There was nothing to do but try to stay with the dogs. This hammock was lower and there was a lot of muck and standing water. Bobo outdistanced the other two and was soon out of sight again. Sam ran without looking back again, and he could hear the General splashing along off to his right.

They crossed a grassy meadow and hit another hammock, even wetter than the other. The dogs seemed to be turning up away from the lake again. Abel and Sam caught up with Bobo briefly, plunging into a deep slough just as he waded out on the far side. He didn't look back. They waded in water almost to their chins, holding their guns over their heads. On the bank, Sam paused and gasped for his breath. Abel came up beside him and stopped, panting.

"Will we follow him into the swamp?" Sam choked.

"If need be. Come on."

The tangles were thicker every step they took, and they were almost always on slippery, soggy ground that squished under their feet. Sam was no longer more than aware. His arms and his legs ached and his breath stabbed him like a tongue of fire. He stumbled every other step and a dozen scratches burned his face. The General called to him and he came to a staggering stop. He remembered, helplessly and desperately, what was happening. He turned toward Abel wondering, dazedly, if this were it, if he should run or throw himself into the brush or try to shoot first. He could barely lift the carbine. Abel stood in a pool a few yards from him and Sam realized that the General was practically reeling.

"Trotter! Listen!" he cried. Sam gripped the rifle. "Listen," Abel repeated. "They're headed up toward that crown over there. But the hog's bound to be heading for the swamp." He had to take a quick breath after each sentence. "We don't need to follow them. Bobo's with the dogs. We can follow the lake shore and get below them. All right?"

"Okay."

Separating from Bobo, he thought dully. Watch him now. And then he knew that there was nothing he could do. He was going to his death now, without fighting. Just because he could not believe it, because of a fragment of civilized, businessman's doubt. He would do nothing. He

was afraid. They splashed together a little farther and came to the edge of the hammock. They faced another boggy meadow and beyond was the swamp. At first it looked like just another hammock, but the bare, white cypress trunks ran back into impenetrable shadows, and the black water at the roots was unbroken, oily and dark, as far as they could see. They stood and listened. The dogs were working far up on a ridge to the right and then, just as the General had said, turning back down toward them, into the hammock they'd just left.

"Are you loaded?" Abel asked.

Sam worked the lever of the carbine, cocking it, and clicked the safety. They waited, their thick breathing the only sound in the clearing. The sound of the dogs came nearer in the hammock and then they heard hurried splashing sounds and the hounds' voices passed and the dogs turned below them, toward the lake.

"Down below!" Abel cried, and they ran again, heavily, for the willows by the lake.

The dogs' voices were frantic now, and as they ran for the willows they heard them go into the thicket and saw the bank of green tremble. They were almost to the willows when Bobo came out of them sideways, crashing through the tangle with his head twisted back over his shoulder.

The hounds snarled and yelped in the thicket and over their voices was the squealing of the pig. Bobo stopped at the edge of the meadow and turned to face the swaying willows where the hounds were baying the boar. One of the hounds shrieked in pain. Abel came up between Bobo and Sam, raising his shotgun, and for an instant the three of them were poised, motionless, waiting.

"Get around!" Bobo yelled, and Sam saw he was waving at him. "Get around behind! On the other side!" But then the pig came out of the thicket.

He stopped at the edge of the brush for just a second, trying to see them with his deepset little eyes. He looked surprised, but not afraid. The dogs were right behind him. Abel fired and missed, tearing the turf just under the hog's snout. Then the dogs jumped the boar and Sam was afraid to shoot for fear of hitting one of them Hoot sprang and tore the pig's ear, jerking him off balance, and then dodged back while Mustard took him on the other side. But when Hoot went back in, seeing Mustard start an attack on his side, the pup faltered for a second, flinching from the black snout, and the boar turned in time to lift Hoot on his nose, as if he were balancing him in a trick, and the old dog screamed. Bobo was right on top of it, aiming his shotgun as if shooting at his own feet, but before he shot he was down on his back

in the bog, his gun across his chest, and the pig turned and ran for the willows.

Hoot was dead. The tusk had cut straight up into his belly and ripped him to the heart. Bobo was hurt, too. He sat in the muck with his gun across his lap and gripped the calf of his leg with both hands. A little blood ran from between his fingers.

"He hooked me one. Why didn't you shoot?"

"We'd have got you or the dogs, as easy as the boar," Abel snapped angrily. He was stamping back and forth beside the dead hound, now and then stopping to stare down at the carcass. "You see what that puppy did?" he demanded.

"It wasn't his fault," Sam said.

"The old dog was counting on him."

"The old dog bit off more than he could chew."

"And your yellow cur let him get killed."

"How's your leg, Bo?" Sam asked, kneeling beside the man on the ground.

"It's okay. He swiped me one, though." He carefully turned up the leg of his pants. The cut was a neat, curving gash about four inches long. Not deep apparently. It was right in the edge of that old scar Bobo had showed Sam, where the 'gator got him. The bleeding was stopping already.

"Where'd your Mustard run to?" Abel asked.

"Damned if I know! What the hell does it matter?"

"I'd like to put a slug in his head."

"Do, and I'll put one in yours. Why don't you shut up?"

"I can imagine you've got a lot of sympathy for him."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Where were you when it all happened?" the General rasped. "Bobo and I had scatter guns. We couldn't shoot."

"I was right beside you," Sam said.

"With your eyes bugging out like a kid at the fair. Collecting anecdotes for the village store, Sam'l?"

Just as Sam straightened up, the yellow pup came out of the willows and stood looking at them. One ear was shredded and the blood ran slowly across his chest and down his foreleg. He looked at Sam and then up at the General and wagged his tail and whimpered. The General shot from only a few yards and the buckshot hit the dog in the head and breast and hurled him clawing back into the brush. He thrashed there for only an instant. The shot had smashed his head and ribs and his backbone. Blood had spattered and drenched the hanging willow twigs and now it dripped--tap-tap--into the leaves.

"You sadistic little bastard."

"You said you'd shoot me, Sam'l."

"I might."

"Not you," the General smiled. "Not you." He opened the shotgun and, very coolly, still watching Sam with the trace of a smile, he fished two shells from his trousers pocket and reloaded. "How about you, Bobo," he said, "Think you can make it back okay?"

"Whatta you mean?"

"Our late friend Hoot cut that pig up a little. I think he'll leave a blood trail. I believe I'll follow it a ways."

"You're goofy," Bobo said. He stood up slowly, testing his leg. "You gotta have some dogs. That pig'll turn around and catch you and you ain't got no chance without dogs. You gotta have something to hold him up 'til you get a shot."

"We'll see. How about you, young Sam'l? Want to come along and bay the boar for me to get a shot?"

"You can't trail that pig," Sam said.

"No. I didn't think you'd be interested. You'll want to carry your yellow pup home for Christian burial."

"How are you, Bo?" Sam asked.

"I'm okay, I guess. I'll tie this up. You got a handkerchief?"

Sam gave Bobo his handkerchief and they watched while he knotted it around his calf. Then he rolled his

pants down and shrugged. "Okay," he said, "but you better not try to go in there. That pig's hurt. He's mad."

"Well, Sam?"

"I'm game," Sam answered coldly.

"We'll see," the General smiled. "We'll see."

CHAPTER XVII

The General, in the dark willows, felt: the close, still air warm against his face and hands; his khakis in moist folds upon his skin; the tremulous murmur of the gnats that hovered about him; the slimey earth slipping beneath his feet; the sour odor of wet rot; a tentative ache in his tired thighs and knees; the weight of the hot, oily gun in his hands.

Off to his right a twig cracked under Sam's foot, but the General kept his eyes on the dark, sun-splashed runways in the trees ahead. A gobbet of red lay against the black of a muddy root. Past it he found the next soaking into the mud and beyond that was a hanging leaf smeared lightly. Farther apart all the time. The bleeding was slowing and each drop was smaller than the one before.

"Still got it?" asked Sam's whisper.

"It's thinning out," the General said. "He's healing fast."

They came out of the willows onto a grassy bog where water gurgled somewhere out of sight. The tracks of the pig were clear where he had walked across. Each mark held a spoonful of water now. On the far side of the clearing were six or eight blood spots together. He'd stood to look back before going into the cypresses. To think? To plan?

"It must be around four," Sam said. "We've got about three hours of sun."

"It's enough."

"I'd hate to try to find my way back home in the dark."

The General shook his head impatiently as if to say: "That's no concern at all." They went into the woods half a dozen yards apart and after a little searching Sam whispered that he'd found the blood trail. It turned to the right, heading up away from the lake and angling into the swamp. In ten minutes of trailing, though, they couldn't have told just which way they were heading, for the track of the pig twisted and rambled confusingly and the cypresses rising all about shut out any sight of landmarks.

General Abel walked slowly, deliberately, hanging back just a bit on Sam's flank where the best shot would be if the pig confronted them suddenly. He moved bent slightly forward, his gun ready, his eyes aching with the strain of probing each shadow and every clump of brush, waiting the sudden movement in the tangles.

It had come clear for him, all of it. Sam mattered very little to the General now, and Anne and Mag and all the rest. Even the pig was not of great importance. When he had stepped into the thicket, following the way marked with blood, it had been as if he had come together again, miraculously, from fragments. Like the fighting cock that died

without noticing its death, he was all of a piece. Not that he had dispelled the onlooker, the knowing, pitying General Abel who held the other in the palm of his hand or watched him on the pages of a book. No, he still saw himself, detached and thoughtful, but the two selves were on even terms now.

That, he thought, is the power of truth. Somewhere there ahead of him in the dark forest, at the end of the trail of blood, the moment of truth awaited; and as he came to it, the truth was already in him. He thought back, wondering, to his journal. He saw with compassion, now, and even with love, how terribly unreal that book had become. It had come to be a world in which to justify himself. And why? He could scarcely believe that he had ever been so fearful of a flawed world as to create a perfect one of childish lies. The flaws were not his and never had been. This proved it: the ache in his wrists and knees and thighs, the cottony touch of heat on his skin, the smell of rot, the knowing that in a moment a patch of ferns would tremble up ahead and the black boar would come to meet them and there would be time for one shot, perhaps two. These things were true.

He was able to think, frankly and honestly, about all the things that were not true. He had told a great many lies, but he had believed a great many, too. He thought of what he

had told Sam, back there in the hammock, about Walker Trotter. That was a lie, but should he lie about Walker? He supposed he resented Walker's silence himself, having thought himself Walker's friend. And there was his mother and Walker, too. But that was another thing he really knew nothing about. And what if they had been lovers? What of that?

He could think about all those things, and even about how he'd refused to believe his heart was all right, very calmly and bravely, because that was all behind. He had his heart back now, for always. Without knowing or thinking he had taken it back when he and Sam had cast the hounds upon the scent of the pig and started across the blistered prairies. One touch of the real, one white hot instant of selfless feeling--like the moment of truth that lay ahead--brought it all back: things in themselves. Life in itself.

Sam's eyes were hot and all the tension of his tired body seemed to have settled in an intolerable itching just at the back of them. To close them, shutting out the heat and the light and the watching, watching, fearing one instant of rest! He kept his eyes open, though, and on the ground, searching out the flecks of blood the pig had left. He looked ahead, testing the shadows and the dappled trees and the pale ferns and lilies. And he watched the General. The General, gliding beside and just behind him through the

cypress trunks, his face as blank as death except for the flush on his cheeks and the glint of purpose in his dark little eyes. Once or twice, from the corner of his eye, Sam saw the briefest, vaguest beginning of a grim smile upon his mouth. Abel was ready.

Sam thought of all the moments when he could have stopped this. There at the groves he could have laughed and turned away and sneered back at Abel's vicious smile. And when Bobo was hurt and the two dogs dead, who would have seen anything wrong with turning back? But he had come on. He'd let Abel bait him and shame him, and partly he had come because--just as the General had said--he wanted to be something he did not know how to be. If he really believed in himself and in the things he'd brought upon himself, he'd know what to do now. He clutched the carbine until his knuckles ached. It wasn't over. He was younger and stronger and he could shoot. He remembered that Abel carried buckshot. But only two barrels--Sam had six shots. That could make a difference. Abel had missed the hog at fifty feet. He was using a strange gun.

But what did all that matter? Sam thought despairingly. He wouldn't fight. It would never come to that. He couldn't believe it until Abel proved, by killing him, that this was real and true and deadly.

Sam marked quickly a spot of crimson on the mud ahead, scanned the brush beyond for a dark shape, a movement, a possible hiding place, then glanced quickly at Abel. The General had dropped back again. Trying to stay behind him. Sam slowed his steps slightly. He watched the tangles and, locating Abel by the soft sounds of his steps, tried to keep trees between them.

Sam saw now what had done it, what had mattered to the General. In even reaching for Anne, Sam realized, he had said to Abel and to the world: "You are dead. You do not matter. Not to me or to her." And he had even thought that Abel might agree! He had believed the General's face of cruel, calm resignation, all his wry talk of abdication from life. Abel was willing to die, all right, but he meant to show Sam, at least, that he was still not without power.

Why can't you believe that enough to turn now and kill him before he kills you?

To his right there was a sound, one quick splashing noise, and he saw the edge of a brush-fall tremble and then the boar came around it at a run, coming fast--too fast!--with his ears back and his tail stiff as a twig over his back. Sam glimpsed his red eyes and the blood on his ear and his foreleg and the mud plastered on his sides and then the pig was coming through the brambles as though they were shadows. Sam had to turn almost full to the right to raise

the carbine, and he was off balance when he shot, simply putting the gun sight between his eye and the charging hog. He staggered as the butt jarred his shoulder and from behind him came the crash of Abel's gun and something burned his cheek and his ear and then another crash and the sound of the shot ripping the brush beside him.

Sam ran, throwing himself hysterically into the hanging vines and the ferns. Behind him the pig grunted loudly and there was a sound like the breaking of a branch. He fell over a cypress root and came up with hot mud on his arms and chest and sprinted, bent double, toward the roots of a fallen tree. He reached the cover and crouched for a moment to look back. He realized with a shock of horror that he'd dropped the carbine. For a moment there was no sound back there, and then came the unmistakable click-clack of the General breaching the shotgun. It snapped again as he closed it, and there was silence. Sam glanced behind him. He had to be careful now. He had to know what he was doing. He didn't know exactly where Abel was, or the boar. He was pretty sure he hadn't hit with that one wild shot. From the angle of the sun's rays, he guessed that he had run up away from the lake. Fine. Straight back and he'd come out on the flats above Panomee Creek. He chose a path, breathed deeply, and dashed into the brush.

* * * * *

In the grove of pines just above Panomee Creek, Bobo stopped to rest. He sat down in the warm, dusty needles and pulled up the leg of his trousers. The bandage made with Sam's handkerchief had slipped loose, so he took it off and tried to untie the knot to readjust it. The cloth was sticky, though, and he couldn't handle the knot. To see the cut he had to twist his knee around beside him. It was crusted with dried blood, but some was still trickling from around the clot. Not much, but it kept coming. His shoe was full of it and the sock was gummed to his ankle. He wondered about washing the blood away with creek water, but suddenly he didn't want to fool with it at all. He didn't even want to look at it. It had started hurting as he walked and now a steady pulse of pain beat in his calf. He thought perhaps it wouldn't hurt so if it were bandaged tightly, so he slipped off his shirt and then his undershirt. He cut the neckband with his knife and ripped the undershirt into two pieces. He wadded one half and laid it on the cut. With the other he tied it there, pulling it tight, and found he was right. It felt a little better immediately.

He put on his shirt, picked up his gun and stood up. When he put his weight on the leg a pain shot so sharply up through his knee that he gasped aloud. He stood for a

moment, though, and it didn't return, so he set out again, walking quite slowly and concentrating on his path. The compress made it better.

He crossed the creek and began climbing the sandy fields up into the scrub and hammock lands. From somewhere behind him, toward the swamp, came the sound of a shot, then two more very quickly. It sounded like a shotgun. He paused for a moment, cocking his head, but there was not another shot, or any other sound except the crying of a flock of crows somewhere out in the palmettoes. Well, they must have found their pig, he thought. Damn fools. One of them would have yelled, though, if anyone had been hurt. Maybe they'd got him, and maybe he'd got away again. He found himself hoping that the pig had got away. The pig had better sense than the pair of them.

The sand made hard walking, and although his leg didn't hurt as much as it had there was a peculiar tight, hot feeling to it. When he reached a stand of oaks he hesitated and to his surprise realized that he was standing there thinking about taking a rest. His own confusion shocked him. He'd stopped just a few yards back! Well, it was a good hot day, all right. That sun took it out of a man.

He went through the hammock walking slowly, but the cool didn't give him much relief. No doubt about it. He was tired. It had been a long day. In the palmettoes he

stumbled a couple of times, once with the hurt leg. As he was getting up the second time he was startled to see a rabbit hop out of the weeds a few feet away, sit down and look right at him. The drought was making all the animals a little goofy, he thought. He walked a long time, and all the while that tight, hot feeling in his leg got worse until it was a kind of pain itself. He rested. Looking around him he estimated that he must be within half a mile of the road. Whoo! That would be good. The way he felt now he'd just sit down and wait for a lift into town.

He stumbled again in a moment, crashing down in the dusty palmetto roots and clumsily smacking his head on his shotgun. He cursed out loud, nervously, and spit out the dust on his tongue. It was the bad leg again. He sat up on the root that had tripped him and stretched the leg before him. His pants clung wetly to his calf and as he looked he saw blood drip from the heel of his shoe. While he watched the drops came faster and faster until the blood was pattering in a thin stream onto the sand. He jerked at the sticky cloth and pulled the pants up. His undershirt bandage was soaked and blood welled steadily from around it. He grabbed it with his hand and pressed and felt the hot blood come between his fingers and run down his wrist and drip to the ground.

He threw his shotgun angrily aside as it tangled in his legs. Pressing the bandage into the cut didn't seem to help much. It was too soaked, he decided. Too much blood in it. He could think of nothing else to use except his shirt and that was... too much, too serious. He didn't like that idea a bit. He squeezed as hard as he could and the blood still pattered into the dust. He remembered the road, just a half a mile or so away, and decided the best thing was to get over there as quick as he could. He'd have to go to a doctor, all right. That was sure. He didn't like that. He hated doctors.

He retrieved his shotgun and used it as a cane getting up. Standing, he saw how much blood there was. It was all over both his legs and smeared on his shirt and hands and drying on the palmetto fans beside him and pooling on the ground. A lot of it. A sickening lot of it. His hands began to tremble, but he remembered the road. He'd have to get there quick, all right.

He got out to the first clearing, walking with blood squishing between his toes, and there he tripped again and went down on his face in the hot, dried weeds. It seemed to knock the breath out of him, although he hadn't really fallen hard, and he took a minute to clear his head before he tried to get up. When he did roll over and sit up he was surprised at how much blood had spilled. It was bad stuff.

Real bad, he realized. He clutched for a moment at the dripping bandage before he remembered that that wasn't doing any good. The road.

He got up and got going, leaving the gun behind him now. When he came to palmettoes again it seemed almost more than he could do to lift his feet over the thick roots. He went into them quite a way before it came to him that he wasn't even looking where he was going. The brush was too high to see good, though. He looked up for the sun. He was headed right. He thought he was headed right. His mouth was terribly dry and there was a hot, black pressure at the back of his eyes. His knees ached awfully and his breath came hard. He walked a few more steps and fell, going down slowly, first to his knees and then toppling and catching himself on his hands and then finding the dust on his lips and the ground against his head. Bad. Bad.

He raised himself a little. It seemed that before every movement, even the tiniest, he must take a moment to catch his breath. The thought of trying to turn over was an agony in itself.

He said into the dust: "Hail Mary, full of grace, blessed art Thou among women." He took a breath and started again: "Hail Mary, full of grace." There was no priest. No priest. "Priest," he said softly. Then he lifted himself

on his hands, raised his face to the gleaming green fans of the palmetto and shrieked at them: "Priest!"

* * * * *

General Abel stood motionless, half crouched, and listened. There was no sound but the rustle of the moss overhead as a breeze sprang up. He was in a little opening in the cypresses, facing a lane choked with fern and wild azalea. The thick greenery was still. He raised the butt of the shotgun to his shoulder and moved cautiously into the lane. The ferns were knee deep, and thick. Enough to cover the pig completely. He went all the way through, though, without seeing or hearing anything, and came out on the edge of a slimey pool of still water. There was blood on the far side. He waded in, sinking so deeply in mud that he had to step, then stand and draw one foot out to move it ahead, shift his weight and haul up the other foot, and start another step. All the while he kept his eyes on the brush ahead.

He stood on the bank and listened again. The breeze had stopped. Flies hung in the air before him. Theirs was the only sound he heard. He walked a few feet on into the swamp. There was an inch of water underfoot. A bank of fern ahead of him seemed to move. He stopped. The fronds trembled, swayed, and then were still. He waited. There

was another slight movement. He slid forward another step. The pig grunted.

He was there. Well back in the ferns and out of sight. Abel hadn't seen the pig since that glimpse he'd had as it came at Trotter. One of them must have hit it, though, for there was more blood than there had been before. So there it waited, hurt. Enraged, in pain, and hidden. Over the barrel of the shotgun, the General kept his eyes on that place where the ferns had stirred, and he moved forward. The fronds were still. Thirty feet. He paused for a moment and gave it a chance to come to him if it would. The pig grunted angrily and Abel moved again. Twenty feet now. Fifteen feet. Too close. One shot, probably. The General paused. The ferns were still. He lifted one foot and stamped, splashing mud. The pig grunted. The General started forward again and he felt an odd, admiring smile pull at his mouth. Twelve feet, ten. Why hesitate?

He was within four or five feet of the boar before he saw it. It was standing among the ferns with its side to him, its snout uplifted as if it were testing the air. It moved one ear slowly. Flies swarmed about the blood drying on its head.

"Hi!" he said. "Hi, pig!" It turned its head aimlessly, swaying a little. It didn't see him. One eye was smashed to a bloody hole and the other was barely open.

The flies walked on the stiff, clotted bristles of its snout. He took two more steps. The pig turned its head again and shifted one forepaw as if feeling uncertainly for the earth. "Hi!" the General bellowed. "Hi, Hi!" The pig did not move. He reached for a dry cypress branch and broke off a stick. Holding his shotgun ready, he threw the stick. It hit the pig on the rump and for the first time it tried to move. It took two steps forward and its forelegs crumpled and it went down in a ludicrous slump with its tail in the air. As if debating whether or not to get up, it held that position for a moment, then it rolled heavily on its side and lay among the ferns with that ear twitching slightly.

General Abel breached his gun and drew the two buckshot shells he was carrying. He loaded with slugs and stepped up behind the carcass of the pig. Its ribs heaved slowly. He bent and held the muzzle a few inches from its head, aiming just behind the ear. The shot echoed through the trees and the stunned flies swirled up in a buzzing cloud.

As Sam came up at last into pine woods, he heard behind him somewhere deep in the swamp, the hollow, echoing sound of a shot. It was a long way off. He sat down heavily in the pine needles and rested his arms on his knees. He'd come a long way, misjudging his direction and paralleling the edge of the swamp instead of coming straight out. His

legs to the knees were plastered with mud which, in the sun, began to harden and crumble and give off a sharp stink. His hands and face were slashed by twigs and vines and his sweat burned the cuts.

He looked down toward the swamp and thought: it was the pig he wanted all the time. Just the pig. He probably didn't even know anything. It was just something I saw in him. He's been obsessed so long by being helpless that he finally broke and had to do something even if it killed him.

It was terrible to think he'd been afraid of that little man--so terrible that Sam wanted to jump up and shout or run or do anything but sit and think about it. So afraid that he had run. He had actually run from him.

And yet, Abel had come out here for something that mattered more than any razor back boar. He'd come to die, and to die in a special way, the only way he'd have it. Suddenly, Sam wondered about that single shot. Had it been for the pig after all? He'd come to die. He must have come to die. Sam tried to remember, in a new light, the General's words and that glint in his eyes. But had that shot been for the pig? Had even Abel's heart cheated him when at last he would limp no more? He had tired of waiting for it to make good the years of sitting and lying and walking slowly and avoiding the sun he loved, perhaps.

Sam stood up and peered down into the darkness of the cypress swamp. He would have to go back, he decided helplessly.

But he stood for quite a while watching, as if some shape would step out of the shadows there at any moment and sign to him what he must do. The breeze was freshening. The pines behind him cast long shadows. He did not go back to the swamp. He turned and started through the pines, leaving the Big Black Hole behind him, with no sign given and the sound of that shot hanging questioning in the air.

And that's the end of it, he thought. However the question might be answered, he was done with it. The General would not come back, he was sure. But not sure enough to go back and search the forest for him. And what good would that do? With an awful finality Sam saw that there could be no staying on in Moccasin Branch now, whatever the need or the wish. He had been a brash and foolish man, grasping greedily at a place, a name, a word, to be his own--to stand for himself in his own eyes. And he saw himself now as one alone and ever going on, without a place, a name, or a time. Always. A man outside. A man against the sky.

CHAPTER XVIII

"Well then," said the young man, "the arrangements are complete."

"I think so," Dr. Reed replied with a warm smile. He wished to be as nice as possible, out of remorse for having earlier thought ill of the young man, simply becaause he was young. Youth, particularly rather callow youth, struck the preacher as an impropriety in an undertaker; but the young man had turned out to be a fine undertaker with a decent humility. Dr. Reed despised unctuous undertakers. It seemed a sneaking presumption. It offended his sense of office.

"I don't suppose I'll see you after the funeral," he said, "so I'd like to tell you that I've been pleased with your handling of things, quite pleased."

The young undertaker did not blush, but he wriggled in a puppyish way.

"Well," he said, "you folks have been nice to work for. You've been real understanding, Dr. Reed. You really have. Now you take some people, they have a way of expecting the impossible. I mean, there's limits to what can be done, if you know what I mean."

The minister's voice and a slight tightening of his brow should have told the young man that Dr. Reed was not interested in this line of talk, but he persisted. "I

haven't been in business for very long," he said modestly, "but I never saw anything like that before."

"I suppose not."

"It was pretty awful."

"It was a terrible, terrible thing."

"Yes sir, it sure was."

"And if you'll excuse me, I'd like to lie down for a few minutes before the service."

"Of course," said the young undertaker, standing up abruptly, brought back to his place. "It's an hour, no, less than an hour. About half an hour. I'll just get over to the church. Everything's all arranged, I guess. I'll just get over there and have a last minute check."

"Good-by, Mr. Hornsbeck."

"Well, good-by, Dr. Reed. I'll see you over at the church." He started for the door and then stopped and faced the minister with a dutiful smile, as if he'd just remembered to make his manners. "Anytime I can do anything for you, sir, just call on me. I'll always be ready to come out to Moccasin Branch. You've got my phone number."

"Thank you."

So, thought Dr. Reed, as the young man left the house, you will always be ready to come to Moccasin Branch, will you? The phrase struck him with curious force, the callow and humble young man seeming to characterize himself with those words as

Death itself. What an inept and futile figure of Death! the preacher thought. Timorous, foolish, self effacing Death, waiting nervously by his telephone, conscious of his unpopularity, unsure of his trade.

Dr. Reed went to his desk and took up the few sheets of paper on which he'd sketched his talk. It had been difficult to write. He really knew little about the man. He had not even known until he saw the death certificate that his name was really Charles Louis Labeau. It was hard to imagine the black and surly fellow possessing a name like Charles Louis. Another trouble was that Bobo hadn't been a churchgoer, except for Christmas and Easter and outings. He'd been, apparently, godless. It was always tempting in such cases to preach something on the order of: "Who dares to question the heart of any man?" He didn't like that approach, and had always avoided it. It was, he thought, condescending. Nor did he like to imply that the externals of faith did not really matter, that the deceased had been a Christian in his life whether or not he'd ever made a profession. That was a lie, and it was heretical. He doubted if any of his congregation would know a heresy when they heard it, but Dr. Reed had his pride.

And what to say of Charles Louis Labeau? The circumstances of his death raised another problem. There would be those in the church who might read pointed meanings into his

words. And that would not be fair, for Dr. Reed judged not lest he be judged, even though his life was as clear of the obvious sins as a man's life can be. He knew, or guessed, that there might be subtler sins than any man had dreamed of.

His wife called from the bedroom: "Wallis, have you seen the letter from the Tylers?"

"It's here on the desk."

"Oh, good. I was afraid I had lost it, and I want to write out the address. Is it time to go?"

"A few minutes."

"Did you finish your sermon?"

"Yes, it's done."

And yet, to take the easy way, to speak fifteen minutes of pious, mournful sounds, was a base and cowardly way out. Of that he was sure. Be strong in thy faith! Dr. Reed knew that faintheartedness was his danger, a certain tendency to spare the world its debt to Christ, and to justify that as Christian tolerance and mercy. Thine the mercy, O Lord!

He sat down and took the sermon up. Across the top of the page was written: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay his head."

* * * * *

"A cripple and a damn-fool kid bite off more than they can chew, and a man dies for it. Ain't that the way?"

"I wouldn't say that," answered Mr. Daniels, his watery eyes bulging in astonishment. "No sir, it's not for me to say. Fred Abel is no man's fool and Trotter isn't either. It's not for us to say what happened."

Stan Tracy, choked by a collar and tie, cased in a shiny suit, sat stolidly behind the counter of the store as if it were the bar of judgment, puffing his cigar as he listened to the two who argued. Old Man Corey (his concession to the funeral was a clean but unpressed shirt and a fuzzy hat) gestured passionately with his soft drink bottle and declared: "I ain't saying I know more than anybody else. Don't put that on me. I'm saying this: Bobo was one man that could take care of himself. He run around alone in the swamp for years without no trouble. It's funny he got killed when he was with two grown men."

They both looked to Tracy, who bent thoughtfully over the counter, scrutinized his cigar and said solemnly: "I'm the last man alive that'll ever call Fred Abel a liar."

"I ain't calling nobody liar," Corey yelped.

A car stopped in front of the store and Stan's two younger brothers, Dale and Pat, came in, as elegantly packaged as he.

"Ready to go?" Dale asked.

"In a little."

"Well now," Daniels said, "tell me this: exactly what did Abel say?"

"Abel said they ran up on the pig and Bobo got knocked down. He got up and was walking around and looked at his leg and it didn't look too bad. He says they didn't even think about it, him and Trotter. The pig was hurt and they just kept right on after him. He said Bobo didn't act like he needed no help, and they didn't wait."

"And what does Trotter say?" demanded Corey.

"Pretty much the same. If there was any difference between what they say, I'd wonder. But there ain't."

"You know how it would be," said Daniels, "Running a trail like that, you don't think about much but the trail."

"That's what Abel says."

"Well, I can only say that I'd like have done the same," Daniels said with a nod.

"I ask you this," squeaked the old man, "How come there was all this hullabaloo about getting permission to bury him?"

"Because of the way the body was," Stan answered calmly.

A respectful silence greeted that reminder that he had been there, had seen the body.

"Stan found him," young Pat declared from the door.

"There's two dead buzzards out there that know I found him," Stan admitted.

"The casket gonna be closed?" said Corey quietly.

"I reckon so, unless that undertaker worked a miracle."

They all stood brooding for a moment, and then Daniels said: "You know, it's downright spooky, in a way."

"What is?"

"Well, that pig come and hung around here and made every kind of trouble. People went out to kill him, and they couldn't. Now he's dead, and a man's dead too, like that's what it took to kill him."

"Bullshit," said Old Man Corey. "It's a plain shame."

Stan said: "I reckon most will go along with that."

"It's near time," said Dale.

"Y'all want a ride over?" Stan asked.

"I'm going with Corey," Daniels replied.

"Well, get out and let me close up."

* * * * *

"Are you ready, son?" Amos asked from the hall.

"Ready as I'll ever be," Sam answered, and he was instantly sorry he'd said that, for Amos looked quite stricken and came in and sat down on the bed. Knotting his tie, Sam remarked over his shoulder: "Hot as hell, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's right warm," Amos agreed lugubriously. "Your mother's upset, Sam."

"Oh? What's the matter?"

"About the funeral."

"What about it?"

"She thinks we're doing wrong to have Bobo buried here, because he was a Roman Catholic."

Sam finished his tie and turned around. There were fresh scars on his cheek and ear and the side of his neck. His mother had put bandages on them the night he came back from the swamp, but he'd taken them off. "You know," he said, "I'll bet he was Catholic."

"He was, all right. No doubt about it."

"Well, does Dr. Reed know that?"

"I don't know. He hasn't said anything about it."

"Someone should have thought of it before this."

"What could we have done?"

"We could have got a priest to bury him."

"Not here. It would have had to be in a Catholic cemetery."

"You sure?"

"Well, I'm sure he couldn't have been buried here," Amos said. "He'd have been buried somewhere at a Catholic church. And I don't think that would have been right. I think he should be here, in Moccasin Branch."

"It's too bad you couldn't find any of his people."

"I tried," said Amos with a sigh. "Perhaps there aren't any."

"He must have someone somewhere."

"Well, he has friends here, and that's sure."

"If you ask me, it doesn't make any difference where he's buried, but maybe it would have to him."

"That's what worries me."

"It's too late now."

"Should I tell Wallis Reed?"

"I wouldn't. What good would it do?"

Amos seemed greatly relieved. He clapped his hands on his knees, smiled and stood up. Sam took his jacket from the closet and when he turned back again he found Amos just standing there smiling at him in a glow of warmth and pride that was almost embarrassing.

"Let's go."

Gwyneth awaited them in the parlor, her hat on her head, silent and thoughtful, her face saying: I have done my best, and you will find that I know best.

"Ready, Mother?"

She came past them without a word and let them follow her out. The house, cool and dark, had been like a foretaste of the funeral, but the outdoors was all wrong--the sky clear

and pale and everything shining in the sun. Amos paused on the porch steps to look up at the sky.

"Not a cloud," he said.

"There hasn't been a cloud for two months," Sam observed. Does he think Bobo was a sacrifice to the rain god? Sam wondered. Yes, I'll bet he does, in a way.

They could see, as they came up the road beside the branch, a cloud of dust hanging beside the church up on the mound, raised by all the cars. They had to park quite a little way from the church. As they got out Sam was momentarily startled to hear, from the bend of the branch, the steady throb of the diesel turning the pump.

"I didn't know you were watering today," said Amos.

"I'd forgotten it. I went down before breakfast and opened up number three. I'll go down and cut it off later. It won't do any harm."

"That's true."

"Let's not worry about that just now," Gwyneth said in a flat tone. Sam thought: her sense of tragedy is offended.

They followed her down the road, covering their faces with their hands as other cars pulled up, to the front of the church, where some forty or fifty people stood in nervous little groups beneath the palms. They had separated by sexes. The women were clustered around the steps, talking quietly with conscientiously anxious faces. The men had

scattered in threes and fours, murmuring to each other, smoking a little guiltily, and now and then someone winning quick grateful smiles for a daring, saving laugh. New arrivals drifted up and mingled and from time to time a family or a little group would move self consciously toward the door, hesitate, removing hats and composing faces, and enter into the darkness and the music.

The three Tracy brothers nodded formally to Sam. Gwyneth went to the women on the steps and Amos and Sam joined the mayor and his son by the corner of the church. After a bit Daniels came up and spoke to them all, hovered for a moment and left, and then old Jeff Corey and then Joe Tilley and Joel Cranford. Each would come up to the four by the corner and speak first to the mayor and his son and then to Amos and last of all to Sam, some of them reaching for a sweaty handshake.

The mayor looked at his watch and smiled at Davis and the two of them started inside. Amos drifted after them, but Sam held him with a hand on his arm.

"They act like I'm the widow," he said angrily.

"What? What? Who?"

"All of them. Every damned one of them."

"That's a funny thing to say, Sam."

"Well, you saw them."

"They were just being friendly."

"Oh, yes. They're just fine. Everybody running up to show me that they don't hold it against me."

"Hold what against you?"

"Oh, for Christ' sake, Amos".

"Sam! Sam! Get a hold on yourself."

"Oh, I'm touched. I'm deeply touched."

"There's nothing to hold against you."

"I'm glad to see you agree with them."

"Let's go inside, Sam."

He started to follow Amos inside, but the Spicers came up and he had to stop and have his hand shaken again. He knew that his stony expression gave just the idea he didn't want to give, and he had an insane desire to laugh or whoop or dance a jig. When the Spicers were gone it was Hartley Trimble, and then he tried to get into the church. Amos was standing looking out at the road. The Abels had arrived. The mourners eyed them covertly as Anne and Mag helped the General from the car. He had a cane. A soft, gray suit made him, for some reason, much older than in his khakis. He came up the walk in a curious shuffle, Anne's hand under his forearm. As he came toward them he peered angrily around with his black little eyes and seemed to be pleased by what he saw, although his scowl never wavered. Men and women, as he passed, turned to speak to him, to smile or to nod respectfully. At the steps, Anne was taken from him by the

insistent, solicitous hands of the women, and he stood alone, leaning on his cane and cocking his eyebrow pugnaciously at the world. Stan Tracy, flanked by Dale and Pat, came up to speak to him and Sam smiled as he saw others in the background shuffling their feet and clearing their throats. He waited while half a dozen men offered General Abel their respects, and then strode briskly up to the little man himself.

"Hello, Abel," he said, "how are you feeling?"

The General smiled with warmth and sincerity. "It's not my funeral," he growled. "How've you been since last we met?"

"Pretty well."

"I killed the pig, you know."

"So I heard."

"What happened to you? You disappeared."

"When you started spraying the woods with that scattergun, I left. I thought you were trying to kill me."

The General rolled back his head and laughed his thick, grunting laugh. "Did you, now?"

"That's a fact."

"I guess I put that first one pretty close to you. I barked a tree and some of the splinters hit you."

Sam touched the left side of his face. "Some of them are still there."

"Fred?" Anne said. She glanced once at Sam with a perfectly expressionless face. "Let's go inside."

"Hello, Anne," Sam said loudly.

"Hello, Sam. Come on, Fred."

"So long, young Sam'l," the General rasped. He let Anne take his arm as he started up the steps. Just then Mag came up from the parked car and got under his other arm. She did not even glance at Sam. The crowd at the door parted nervously and let the Abels through.

"Shall we go in?" asked Amos.

"The other guest of honor," Sam said, nodding at Abel.

"Come on, Sam."

"Go ahead yourself. I'll be in in a minute."

Amos turned without a word and pushed abruptly through the mourners. Sam remained a moment on the steps, looking down upon the crowd in the churchyard. When Dr. Reed and his wife appeared he turned and went into the church.

Dr. Reed cleared his throat and the murmuring, rustling, waiting congregation fell silent. The church was full and a few mourners stood along the back wall. He surveyed them for a full minute, as if accounting for them all, before he began to speak.

"Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head." He paused.

"Those are the words of Christ, spoken as a warning to a man who wished to follow Him. But the words, I think, were also spoken as a warning to men of all times and places, who wish to follow Christ. A warning to us: 'The Son of Man hath not where to lay His head.'"

Under the preacher's words, the congregation settled into dutiful semi-somnolence. General Abel, in the second pew between his wife and daughter, contemplated the casket that lay before the altar. It was pitifully bare. A bunch of gladioli lay upon the closed lid. At the feet of the trestle sat half a dozen pots and baskets of petunias, nasturiums, azalea and oleander.

Abel paid little attention to the words that flowed over them. Reed he knew for a pathetic sort of fool, ever painfully compromising with the town which so fitfully suffered his ministry. He looked at Mag beside him, not at her face, but at her hands crossed limp and moist in her lap, dark and rough against her sheeny brown skirt. As he watched them, the hands writhed, shifting slightly the embrace in which they held one another. Her knees moved as she stirred her feet. One hand stole up the other forearm to scratch lightly and surreptiously and then crept back to its place.

And Mag was as far from his understanding, as far from his ever knowing and touching, as those brainless, bestial, crawling, writhing hands. He had to smile. In a way, he

reflected, he admired her now as he never had before. The picture of her telling Anne he had gone off to fight Sam a duel over Anne's faithlessness was more than he could contain without grinning. What a scene that must have been! And Anne! Anne had nearly wept with rage when he laughed as she told him of it.

This affair had brought out in each of them a depth of character he'd never suspected. Ruefully, but without bitterness, he acknowledged Anne's shrewdness. He'd never have credited her with the guts it must have taken for her to trap him in his famous bad heart; blithely to pretend that that myth had never been exploded. Well, if that was what she chose, it left him little choice. He could gallop around town, frisking like a colt, and tell everyone he was recovered, that the famous heart had been well for--how long? five months now. And what would that win him? No. She had a rein on him now. Quite clever of her to see the advantages for her of forcing him to swallow his lie or to spit it out in the market-place. But perhaps she had not thought deeply enough of the disadvantages. The chase through the woods had left the General's muscles drawn and sore. His walk would be a painful shuffle for a few days. Then the kinks would work out. Suppose he continued to shuffle? Suppose it seemed the old heart was worse than ever? She might face the prospect of helping him, for the rest of her life, in

and out of chairs and into the car. Suppose he became the vilest tempered, crankiest invalid who ever pounded the floor with his cane and yelled for attention? They'd see then who had a lie to swallow. The three of them would eat it together, as a matter of fact: he and Anne and young Sam'l Trotter. Sam would never spill it, of course, not on his life, after what had happened in the swamp. The General shifted his weight on the wooden seat, easing his tender buttocks and thighs to a new position. Anne stirred solicitously and he smiled at her kindly. Then he sat and stared attentively up at Dr. Reed, with only the faintest sign on his face of the happiness within him.

"He came as a stranger among us," said the preacher. "What brought him here? What kept him here? Although he was our friend, we knew little of him and he seemed to have little in common with us. For all his strangeness and his different ways, he was one of us. What made him one of us?"

Beside her Anne felt the General stir uneasily and shift in his seat. She turned anxiously toward him. He was all right. He gave her a tired smile. She hadn't wanted him to come at all, but she had not even bothered to tell him that. She knew he had to be here today. She could picture him hurrying the same way to the Last Judgment, pushing through the stumbling sinners right up to the bar of Heaven, ever anxious for the sternest test, ready to stand up for

his life. Her mistake had been in believing that he expected the same readiness of everyone, and in not seeing how many and often were the tests he found before him, in what curious things he saw challenges. They would be less, now, perhaps. There was no guessing how close he'd come to not returning from that last one, and no imagining what issues had been tested out there in the woods the day Bobo died. Bobo's death assumed the awesome proportions of a martyr's ascension in Anne's eyes as she felt in Fred the terrible change it had cost him. But she sensed in his quiet, wry air of contentment that it had somehow been worth the change.

She only regretted, actually, that Mag had been hurt. Well, she was young, and though she might not understand she would remember and perhaps all this would make a kind of sense some day. There was no more to hope for her than that, but it seemed to Anne perhaps the greatest hope that one could hold. Mag had not smiled since that day, but now at least she needed her mother and knew it. She had a lot of girlhood to suffer before she would be a woman, or be happy. She'd tried to skip it. Defeat in that might be strength in the end. She--and Anne--owed the saving defeat to Sam, it seemed. But if it had not been he it would have been some other smiling, cocksure young man with his youth too big for the world to hold. There would always be such young men to

teach girls the terrible, humbling necessity of knowing themselves vulnerable.

Through the open door of the church and down the musty aisle, came an uproarious bumblebee. Ignored, he found his way to the flowers upon the casket and began to crawl about in the blossoms.

"Christ said: 'In My Father's house there are many mansions.' Our homes are there, in those mansions of the spirit," cried the preacher, "and our hearts are ever yearning toward our homes."

Margaret, full of grief and childish impotence, watched the bumblebee. She wished this were over. She wished for the time when she would be home again in the cool, high-ceilinged house in the palmettoes. She wished time would only get on with it. She toyed with visions of the future, near and far. Her father was lost to her. That was her own doing. And if he were lost, then she could only wish for the time when he would be lost in full, dead and gone. The terror of finding that the strongest wish alive in her was more, it seemed, than she could bear. And yet she bore it, moment to moment.

She bore that awful wish. She bore the yoke of love that Anne had set upon her. She bore the shame that came whenever the name or sight or thought of Sam came to her.

Sam! Sam! To have loved Sam and to see the world and Sam go on afterward!

All this she bore. A year, perhaps, or two, and she'd be old enough to leave this place. She was resigned to carry with her, wherever she went, fear and hate and shame. But out of the sight of them. Out in some other world she'd live, set off a little from everything she touched, walking always in an exclusive bitter memory. She rather fancied that.

The bumblebee rose from the flowers, gorged, smugly humming. Amos blinked his eyes and sat up straight. He'd almost dozed. Perhaps he had. He glanced guiltily about him. Gwyneth sat with her head to one side, her lips pursed, nodding ever so slightly as the preacher spoke. A pious picture. She was always so formidably in character. Beyond her sat Sam, relaxed and confident, casually stroking the point of his chin with his thumb. As Amos watched him, Sam's eyes turned from the minister to the brass coffin. He regarded it coldly, matter-of-factly. He shifted his legs impatiently and ran his tongue around his teeth. He seemed bored with all this. He seemed to know he had no need of ritual to intervene between life and him, to define, to filter, to formalize. He was a grown man. He was not a man who'd ever ask help or sufferance. He was a man to pick

up and carry, unquestioning, the strange bundle of people and things and sins and hopes and duties his father would leave him. And to add to it.

"And so we build our earthly mansions," said the preacher, "and if we build well, we build upon the model Christ gave us. We try to make our mansions as like as we can unto those heavenly mansions where we hope to dwell. We seek to build, all of us together, a place where the Son of Man may lay his head. A world in which he will not be forced to wander."

Wallis was preaching a strange sermon. Of course, there was devilish little anyone could say about Bobo. Never came to church, never really had any close friends. And what a way to die! Probably the way he'd have had it, though.

Amos stole another glance at Sam. He was still looking at the coffin. There was no aversion in his gaze, no fear, no doubt, no equivocation. He knew what was there and what it would mean to him, let preachers and old women talk and talk. He would do.

Amos turned his face politely up into the falling drone of words from the pulpit. After a bit he nodded, drowsing. He no longer heard the words or the song of the bee or the soft sounds of the uneasy congregation or the rustle of the wind in the palm fronds outside or the distant

chug-chug of the pump beside the branch. The sound he heard was within: the fretful, impatient, bounding and struggling of his heart.

"Then let us not question God. Let us not question the world about us or the men with whom we share it. Let us not ask of a man: who was he? or what was he? or what does he owe to me? or how did he live? Let us ask of ourselves: have we made a place where he could lay his head, and know peace?"

The voice of the preacher rose in terrible urgency to the final question, and then fell. There were the sounds of women gathering themselves together, finding their Bibles and their handbags, prodding their children; of men stretching their cramped legs and shaking out their sticky sleeves and picking up their hats.

"Let us pray."

Stillness returned, except for the drunken bee trying to find his way out the screened window in back of the choir seats. "Almighty God, show us, we pray, Thy will. Teach us to build upon the plan which Thou has given. Help us..."

During the prayer, Sam's attention wandered. He had listened closely to the sermon, curious at what the old man would find to say to them. He was mildly amused at the notion of Bobo as a Christ figure. He wondered if he were supposed to think of himself as Pilate or as Judas. Probably as Judas.

No one had ever felt much pity for Pilate, and they seemed to have chosen to pity him.

The prayer had ended and the pall bearers came forward. The Tracy brothers, Spicer and Daniels and Joe Reed. Flushed and self conscious, they milled around the casket until the pimply young undertaker marshalled them on the two sides. "All right," he said in a sepulchral undertone, "just lift it off."

They set their jaws firmly and strained at the weight. Gently, the coffin slid from the trestle. They lowered it to an easier grip and began shuffling toward the aisle, the undertaker dancing along behind. The minister came down from his pulpit and stiffly fell in behind him. Gwyneth nudged him gently, Sam signed to Amos, and they filed out of the pew and started the slow procession. As they passed up the aisle, each pew waited for the end of the line. There stood Abel between his women. He twinkled at Sam in good-natured contempt, and Sam returned him the courtesy.

We will be friends, Sam thought in amusement. We will never be able to stay away from each other now, as if each knows a joke on the other and must always go back to watch the joke rankle. We have nothing at all in common, really, but we will be friends because there is something in each of us for the other to know and wonder at and sometimes to tease--something to shed on every act and word a light which only

the other can see. The others in town will help, too. They'll make it us against them.

Margaret stared coldly through him, and he wondered disinterestedly what could be eating her. Some kind of loyalty that had to have him black or white, he supposed. She was actually a rather simple-minded girl.

Anne saw him, he was sure, although she did not look at him. She'd never look him square in the eye again. He'd seen to that when he stared her down out there on the steps. All in all, Sam was quite pleased with that.

Bobo's casket gleamed, emerging into the sunlight. There was a tense struggle down the steps, then they turned toward the graveyard. As he came from the church, Sam saw with surprise that a crowd was waiting out on the road. It looked as though every Negro in the town had dressed up and come down to watch the coffin carried past. Hats came off. The blank, black faces were running with sweat. Some of them must have stood there through the whole damned service, he thought. For what? What of theirs was here?

What was Bobo to any of us? Nothing, then, when he lived. A misty grief touched Sam as he thought of Bobo, who had been so careful, who had not wanted to die. To Bobo, the pig had been flesh and blood and nothing more, and they had proved him right. But he and Abel had hunted something grander than flesh and blood. And killed a pig. A pig.

Past the toiling pall-bearers, Sam saw the three Negroes with their spades beside the new grave. They frowned as the coffin bore down upon them, and retreated toward the oaks. The grave was toward the back of the church, Sam noted, not far from the Trotter lot.

The burden was laid down. The mourners gathered silently about. The preacher formally returned dust to dust, and the final prayer was offered. Dr. Reed closed his Bible and stood for a moment by the casket, looking around in confusion. Of course! The custom now was for him to go to the bereaved, to the widow or the mother or the eldest child. Here there was no one. He swung his eyes pathetically over them all. Then he nodded, almost bowing, to them all. He reached for his wife's arm and led her away from the grave, his eyes downcast. As he hurried through the crowd he drew his handkerchief from his pocket and blotted unhappily at his brows and cheeks. The mourners milled uncertainly about. No one wished to do Bobo the unkindness of being the first to leave him here. At last some stout soul marched glumly off and another followed and another. Soon the automobiles were starting up down on the road, doors slamming and children yelling.

Beside Sam, still at the edge of the grave, Gwyneth said: "I don't think he's going to rest easy here."

"You think he'll haunt us?"

"That's not a very nice thing to say, Sam."

"I mean it."

"All I think is that he should have been buried where he would have chosen: in his own kind of place with his own kind of services."

"I don't agree. We couldn't have let him go."

"You and your father."

A few of the Negroes who had been by the road began to drift up for a look at the casket and the flowers, which the young undertaker had fetched from the church. Sam and his mother stepped away politely.

"Where's Amos?" he asked.

"Over in the lot."

They saw him there, gazing meditatively down at his mother's grave and with the toe of his shoe digging out a nettle that had taken root upon it.

"Look at that," she said. "Only a couple of weeks since we cleaned everything up perfectly. Amos. Oh, Amos. Let that go. We'll come up here next Sunday and straighten up a little. Let it go for now."

Sam walked to the Trotter grave lot and his mother followed. Amos looked up at them, shaking his head, "It seems the weeds grow while you look at them."

"We'll take care of it."

Sam looked at the family graves. The sight of Walker's marker, with its cryptic epitaph, reminded him of what Abel had told him about the Trotter fortune. He had been thinking that he would have to tell Amos about that. Maybe not, though. It might upset the old man.

As they started toward the road, Amos sighed deeply. "I thought it was a fine sermon Reed preached," he said.

"If you ask me," said Gwyneth, "his mind's beginning to wander. He's a good old soul, but you just couldn't make out what he was getting at."

"Why, I thought it was a fine sermon."

"Well, then, what did it mean?"

"Like he said. When a man dies, we should ask ourselves what we did to make his life on earth easier."

"Fiddle!"

"Gwyneth!" Amos cried in horror.

"Sam, what do you think?"

"Oh, I don't know. Something like that."

Sam was paying little attention to them. Their talk about that damned grave lot had upset him. He tried not to think about what it brought to mind, about himself coming up here in springs to come, to rake the fallen leaves from Amos' grave, to dig a nettle from Gwyneth's. And with those two graves he'd inherit all the rest: Walker's and his brother's

and his grandfather's and his grandmother's and his aunt's and all of them.

And there'd be Bobo's grave, too. Whether Bobo rested easy or not, there'd be his grave to care for. And he'd do it, too, by God! He'd see no one else did it but him. Let them shake their heads and murmur their pity and vow they'd never judge him or hold it against him! They wanted it forgotten. Well, he'd show them about that. He'd toil over Bobo's grave every spring. He'd see that the stone was clean and clear. Why! he'd plant it with flowers and water and care for them until it bloomed like a garden!

And he saw ahead of him years in which he'd stand above them all because he was not ashamed or afraid, because he knew how easy it was to stand up for his life and let theirs break like waves around it. He saw his groves and his house flourishing and growing, the biggest thing around. And he saw his fighting cocks crowing over their dead, his hounds baying terrible trails. He'd have all that, and stride through them as a man who could look any man in the eye because his heart held more than theirs could dare enclose. And he would be remembered!

AUTHOR'S NOTE

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Although the actual writing of <u>In a Dry Season</u> began in January, 1953, the germ of the novel was a short story written in 1947 while I was a student at the University of Chicago. This story, <u>The Pig</u>, concerned a hunt, by three men and a boy, for a rogue razor back boar. In the course of the hunt the boy was endangered and his father, frozen with horror, did nothing to save him, while a Negro farmer rescued the child at the cost of a painful injury to himself. The nub of the story was the attempt of the boy to apologize to the Negro for imperilling him and for the father's failure to thank the Negro publicly. The Negro, however, refused the boy's apology, letting him know that he (the Negro) and the boy's father are men and understand each other.

For background to this story, I used a small, inland Florida town where I spent a great deal of my boyhood hunting, fishing and wandering in the palmettoes and swampland.

The story went through many revisions in the two years after I wrote it, until I realized that the characters were stereotypes, the sentiments banal and the writing itself completely derivative: debased Hemingway. Further, I

developed a strong distaste for race stories and little boy stories.

During the winter of 1951-52, I abandoned a first, abortive attempt at a novel and decided to use the action of The Pig as the climax of my next try. Discarding the race angle, I retained the boy, the pig, the boy's father and, with a change, the Negro. As planned, this book was to deal with the boy's escape from a mystic obsession with violence and raw nature, symbolized by the swampland around his Florida home, by a half demented Negro hunter and by the hunt for the boar. The instruments of his salvation were to include a neighbor, a retired general dying of heart disease. This benign and sighing character was the beginning of the angry General Abel who appears in In a Dry Season. Also plotted for this novel was an anti-climactic death scene wherein the boy killed the hog. This scene, with the General as protagonist rather than the boy, is present in the later novel, as are several others. However, very little of this project ever actually reached paper. I abandoned the idea, finding it all pretty leaden and obvious, and feeling that I could not imagine the proper motivation for the boy.

In 1953, at Woman's College, Robie Macauley suggested that I try another novel as my Master's thesis and as an entry in that year's Putnam Prize competition. I had no

definite plan, but went through my files in search of the kernel of a book length story. I decided that the earlier plan, with vast changes, might work. The infatuated boy was to be made an over enthusiastic, world-weary young man; the General into a psychopathic liar and emotional _Doppelganger_. Families were provided for both, and the town of Moccasin Branch was created modeled upon a backwoods community near Coleman, Florida, which I had visited. The legendary Uncle Walker was invented as receptacle and godhead for the cult of violence, of which the General was made high priest. The Negro hunter was changed into Bobo, the realist and man of caution, although the earlier character has a brief appearance in Sam's memory of filthy old Potts.

The first draft of the book opened with the scene in the cemetery, now in chapter four, and introduced Sam's parents and the town. Sam entered, met the General, discussed the past, and was struck with nostalgia. However, after Sam's entrance, three full chapters passed before his decision to stay in Moccasin Branch. This was found to be a major flaw.

The first half of the book was extensively rewritten. Sam's decision was brought closer to the opening, characters were fed more slowly into the story, and Bobo and the hog were given early appearances. The history of Moccasin Branch was given detail, the mystery of Uncle Walker was amplified

and the characters of Anne and Margaret Abel expanded. The final six chapters of the novel, however, are almost unaltered from the first draft.

In plotting this novel, my first consideration was to limit the book very carefully. The earlier attempted novel had suffered from lack of planning and pointing, and I wished to be sure just what this one was about, and to keep it to the point. I vowed to hold to a straight line of action, a single theme and one leading character. This did not work out. My "straight line of action" was to be: Sam wants to have his home in Moccasin Branch, to belong; Sam is frustrated and struggles; Sam finds that he has his place, he does belong, but against his will and in a role he does not relish. My theme was to be the price paid for belonging. My character, of course, was to be Sam Trotter. All this went far astray. Secondary actions, such as Amos' abdication and General Abel's jealousy and impotence, gained in importance as I wrote. The fighting cocks contributed a reference which could not be ignored. General Abel grew steadily as I worked with him shouldering other characters aside. Finding it impossible to integrate and select as I worked, I let the various stories struggle among themselves, and the plot grew more and more diffuse. One result of this

was a hopeless splintering of point of view, which I had not planned, and which necessitated a lot of drawing together in the final revision.

The creation of my characters began, in every case but one, with living models. The exception was General Abel, who was originally drawn as a sort of parody of the General Cantrell of Hemingway's Across the River and into the Trees. However, as Abel assumed a larger part in the novel, it became clear that he had to be purified and realized, and made less a figure of fun. Eventually, all that remained of the original parody was his characteristic "humour" of choler, and his bull fight references. His traits were selected as needed for the action. Thus, it seemed reasonable that a man of his inward, contorted nature would be a man of implicit faiths and even thoughts. This led naturally to writing him as a man without introspection--without true introspection, that is--and, I hope, added poignance to his attempt, toward the end of the novel, to examine everything frankly, himself included. In this sort of work I found, with all my characters, that plot created character which subsequently altered plot, and so on. For instance, the General's house was described because I happened to know of such a house and wanted to write about it. But the house had a subtle effect on the people in it and became, in fact, a comment upon General Abel, inasmuch as he couldn't

believably inhabit the place without having an opinion of it and an attitude toward it.

This same process took place with all sorts of minor stage business, settings, and so forth. Sam's dog, Mustard, was invented for the specific needs of the plot, but the dog was found a convenient point of reference for certain of Sam's thoughts--which flavored those thoughts. One line of action, Amos' plan to restore his father's house, arose out of a single line dropped into the early writing to establish Amos as a sentimentalist.

My greatest problem of character (and perhaps the root of my greatest problem of theme) was the protagonist, Sam. Originally, I attempted a faithful transcription of a friend, an accountant of approximately Sam's years and background. However, this man did not fit the plot and when he'd been crammed into it he appeared very pale and unreal. I next attempted pure invention of an "enthusiast" _a la_ Conrad, and that did little better. I was advised by Mrs. Lettie Rogers to attempt greater identification with Sam, to give him my thoughts and reactions and to speak through him. This, too, had its difficulties. I found, first of all, that I could not sympathize with Sam's desires. To a certain extent, I was patronizing him. I was trying to portray a man confused by values he has seen, heard about and imagined; a man failing to make distinctions which I

fancy, at least, that I can make. I had great difficulty conceiving, to my own satisfaction, Sam's motives.

The basic problem was that I was trying to write about confusion. Sam I intended as a man attempting to embrace all sorts of "positive" images and diverse ideas of potency, not realizing, until too late, that all these things he lumped under the symbol of Mars were at war among themselves. The "pointless" fighting cocks, for instance, Sam puts in the same emotional category as the very pointed and constructive orange trees. The isolated and asocial Bobo he views much as he views the hard working Walker: as a man's man. In short, Sam imagines a universal male element, rather than antagonistic male elements present in all sorts of things. Sam's confusion was to be presented as a lack of balance, a sort of anarchy of imagination.

All this, of course, had implications for the other characters, and that multiplied the problems. If I was to think of, and write about Sam in these terms, then these terms must be considered when dealing with General Abel.

Sam's parents, Amos and Gwyneth Trotter, began as depictions of my mother and my step-father. However, I found it impossible to deal freely with them as long as I felt my mother looking over my shoulder. These two were used at first almost solely for their effects upon Sam, but Amos assumed a story and a significance of his own.

Anne Abel was drawn from life, also, and as a compound of two women. Unfortunately, her part in the story tended toward a rather passive and put-upon personality--as witness her lethargy just before the attempted seduction. My own feeling is that Anne is the least successful character in the book. She may be rivaled in this by her daughter, another essentially passive character upon whom, however, a great deal depends, dramatically.

In general, I dealt with the characters on the bases of their several power, or potency, orientations. Sam seeks a sort of moral potency in being decisive, a prime mover. General Abel feels safe in proclaiming potency only after he has removed himself from the possibility of being tested. Anne seeks to maintain the frail stereotypes of love as a shield against strife. Amos abjures all exercise of his powers through the fear of infringing on another. Gwyneth exercises, she thinks, magical powers of divination. Mag, the adolescent, looks to the power of romantic love.

This question of the sources of individual power was intended to be the central moral concern of the book. My comment, expressed in the fates of Sam, Amos and General Abel, was intended to be: He who thinks to assume greater-than-ordinary potency must assume, deliberately or by accident, greater-than-ordinary guilt. This has its sexual

level, of course, which provided a veritable nightmare of confusion in the paradox of General Abel's "potency through impotence."

It is tempting to talk at length about this "moral concern", to trace out the symbols and the varied conflicts, but I feel that any such outline, coming after the fact, would be playing on fortuitous connections. I will only note my awareness (and claim premeditation) of the factor of religious symbolism. Unfortunately, I got over my head in this.

The principal influences on my writing, so far as they are conscious, have been Conrad and Hemingway. The conflict apparent in this statement may lie behind the criticism that the book displays two markedly different "tones." My earliest writing, as I have indicated, was a highly romantic kind of mock Hemingway. In reaction against it, I turned several years ago to the Edwardians, bowled over (or is "inundated" the word?) by Galsworthy and Conrad. This is no place for a statement of my objections to Mr. Hemingway's work, but I must say that I believe his style imposes limitations which I cannot accept and I distrust his philosophy. In imitators, infatuation with this attractive writer leads to mannered style. In short, I have tried to rid myself of this very early influence,

without losing sight of the virtues of conciseness and vigor. I want to write seriously, but not solemnly, and I now find Hemingway too humorless.

As for Conrad, I have sought to learn from him the knack of making a story's setting enlarge and inform its characters. Also, I feel that Conrad is an intensely social, even political, writer, and this I consider a mark of greatness. In a way, it is an extension of his ability to utilize setting, for society, of course, should be the grand setting of all stories. It is this that I find lacking in most American writing since Hemingway--even in the vehemently political protest novels and the time-and-place conscious Southern writing. Most of it seems to me to be intensely personal and narrow.

My thinking about writing has been strongly influenced by the Chicago critics, naturally, with their Aristotelian vocabulary, and more particularly by Mr. Elder Olson.

My own feeling about the book is that it suffers from my inability to deal in one clear set of terms with all the varied and diffuse themes which I unwittingly invoked. Another flaw I can see is my tendency to write in abstract terms when convincingly concrete terms are needed.

I wish to acknowledge my great debt to Mrs. Lettie Rogers, who, without trying to influence me, made me face up to the questions which the book presented.