



Centaur in Brass, William Faulkner

Centaur in Brass

IN OUR TOWN Flem Snopes now has a monument to himself, a monument of brass, none the less enduring for the fact that, though it is constantly in sight of the whole town and visible from three or four points miles out in the country, only four people, two white men and two Negroes, know that it is his monument, or that it is a monument at all.

He came to Jefferson from the country, accompanied by his wife and infant daughter and preceded by a reputation for shrewd and secret dealing. There lives in our county a sewing-machine agent named Suratt, who used to own a half interest in a small back-street restaurant in town — himself no mean hand at that technically unassailable opportunism which passes with country folks — and town folks, too — for honest shrewdness.

He travels about the county steadily and constantly, and it was through him that Snopes's doings first came to our ears: how first, a clerk in a country store, Snopes one day and to everyone's astonishment was married to the store owner's daughter, a young girl who was the belle of the countryside. They were married suddenly, on the same day upon which three of the girl's erstwhile suitors left the county and were seen no more.

Soon after the wedding Snopes and his wife moved to Texas, from where the wife returned a year later with a well-grown baby. A month later Snopes himself returned, accompanied by a broad-hatted stranger and a herd of half-wild mustang ponies, which the stranger auctioned off, collected the money, and departed.

Then the purchasers discovered that none of the ponies had ever had a bridle on. But they never learned if Snopes had had any part in the business, or had received any part of the money.

The next we heard of him was when he appeared one day in a wagon laden with his family and household goods, and with a bill-of-sale for Suratt's half of the restaurant. How he got the bill-of-sale, Suratt never told, and we never learned more than that there was somehow involved in the affair a worthless piece of land which had been a portion of Mrs. Snopes's dowry.

But what the business was even Suratt, a humorous, talkative man who was as ready to laugh at a joke on himself as at one on anyone else, never told. But when he mentioned Snopes's name after that, it was in a tone of savage and sardonic and ungrudging admiration.

"Yes, sir," he said, "Flem Snopes outsmarted me. And the man that can do that, I just wish I was him, with this whole State of Mississippi to graze on."

In the restaurant business Snopes appeared to prosper. That is, he soon eliminated his partner, and presently he was out of the restaurant himself, with a hired manager to run it, and we began to believe in the town that we knew what was the mainspring of his rise and luck. We believed that it was his wife; we accepted without demur the evil which such little lost towns like ours seem to foist even upon men who are of good thinking despite them. She helped in the restaurant at first.

We could see her there behind the wooden counter worn glass-smooth by elbows in their eating generations: young, with the rich coloring of a

calendar; a face smooth, unblemished by any thought or by anything else: an appeal immediate and profound and without calculation or shame, with (because of its unblemishment and not its size) something of that vast, serene, impervious beauty of a snowclad virgin mountain flank, listening and not smiling while Major Hoxey, the town's lone rich middle-aged bachelor, graduate of Yale and soon to be mayor of the town, incongruous there among the collarless shirts and the overalls and the grave, country-eating faces, sipped his coffee and talked to her.

Not impregnable: impervious. That was why it did not need gossip when we watched Snopes's career mount beyond the restaurant and become complement with Major Hoxey's in city affairs, until less than six months after Hoxey's inauguration Snopes, who had probably never been close to any piece of machinery save a grindstone until he moved to town, was made superintendent of the municipal power plant. Mrs. Snopes was born one of those women the deeds and fortunes of whose husbands alone are the barometers of their good name; for to do her justice, there was no other handle for gossip save her husband's rise in Hoxey's administration.

But there was still that intangible thing: partly something in her air, her face; partly what we had already heard about Flem Snopes's methods. Or perhaps what we knew or believed about Snopes was all; perhaps what we thought to be her shadow was merely his shadow falling upon her.

But anyway, when we saw Snopes and Hoxey together we would think of them and of adultery in the same instant, and we would think of the two of them walking and talking in amicable cuckoldry.

Perhaps, as I said, this was the fault of the town. Certainly it was the fault of the town that the idea of their being on amicable terms outraged us more than the idea of the adultery itself. It seemed foreign, decadent, perverted: we could have accepted, if not condoned, the adultery had they only been natural and logical and enemies.

But they were not. Yet neither could they have been called friends. Snopes had no friends; there was no man nor woman among us, not even Hoxey or Mrs. Snopes, who we believed could say, "I know his thought" — least of all, those among whom we saw him now and then, sitting about the stove in the rear of a certain smelly, third-rate grocery, listening and not talking, for an hour or so two or three nights a week. And so we believed that, whatever his wife was, she was not fooling him. It was another woman who did that: a Negro woman, the new young wife of Tom-Tom, the day fireman in the power plant.

Tom-Tom was black: a big bull of a man weighing two hundred pounds and sixty years old and looking about forty. He had been married about a year to his third wife, a young woman whom he kept with the strictness of a Turk in a cabin two miles from town and from the power plant where he spent twelve hours a day with shovel and bar.

One afternoon he had just finished cleaning the fires and he was sitting in the coal-bunker, resting and smoking his pipe, when Snopes, his superintendent, employer and boss, came in. The fires were clean and the steam was up again, and the safety valve on the middle boiler was blowing off.

Snopes entered: a potty man of no particular age, broad and squat, in a clean though collarless white shirt and a plaid cap. His face was round and smooth, either absolutely impenetrable or absolutely empty. His

eyes were the color of stagnant water; his mouth was a tight, lipless seam. Chewing steadily, he looked up at the whistling safety valve.

“How much does that whistle weigh?” he said after a time.

“Must weigh ten pound, anyway,” Tom-Tom said.

“Is it solid brass?”

“If it ain’t, I ain’t never seed no brass what is solid,” Tom-Tom said.

Snopes had not once looked at Tom-Tom. He continued to look upward toward the thin, shrill, excruciating sound of the valve. Then he spat, and turned and left the boiler-room.

II

He built his monument slowly. But then, it is always strange to what involved and complex methods a man will resort in order to steal something. It’s as though there were some intangible and invisible social force that mitigates against him, confounding his own shrewdness with his own cunning, distorting in his judgment the very value of the object of his greed, which in all probability, had he but picked it up and carried it openly away, nobody would have remarked or cared.

But then, that would not have suited Snopes, since he apparently had neither the high vision of a confidence man nor the unrecking courage of a brigand.

His vision at first, his aim, was not even that high; it was no higher than that of a casual tramp who pauses in passing to steal three eggs from beneath a setting hen. Or perhaps he was merely not certain yet that there really was a market for brass.

Because his next move was five months after Harker, the night engineer, came on duty one evening and found the three safety whistles gone and the vents stopped with one-inch steel screw plugs capable of a pressure of a thousand pounds.

“And them three boiler heads you could poke a hole through with a soda straw!” Harker said. “And that damn black night fireman, Turl, that couldn’t even read a clock face, still throwing coal into them! When I looked at the gauge on the first boiler, I never believed I would get to the last boiler in time to even reach the injector.

“So when I finally got it into Turl’s head that that 100 on that dial meant where Turl would not only lose his job, he would lose it so good they wouldn’t even be able to find the job to give it to the next misbegotten that believed that live steam was something you blowed on a window pane in cold weather, I got settled down enough to ask him where them safety valves had gone to.

““Mr. Snopes took um off,’ Turl says.

““What in the hell for?’

““I don’t know. I just telling you what Tom-Tom told me. He say Mr. Snopes say the shut-off float in the water tank ain’t heavy enough. Say that tank start leaking some day, and so he going to fasten them three safety valves on the float and make it heavier.’

“‘You mean—’ I says. That’s as far as I could get: ‘You mean—’

“‘That what Tom-Tom say. I don’t know nothing about it.’

“But they were gone. Up to that night, me and Turl had been catching forty winks or so now and then when we got caught up and things was quiet. But you can bet we never slept none that night. Me and him spent that whole night, time about, on that coal pile, where we could watch them three gauges. And from midnight on, after the load went off, we never had enough steam in all three of them boilers put together to run a peanut parcher.

And even when I was in bed, at home, I couldn’t sleep. Time I shut my eyes I would begin to see a steam gauge about the size of a washtub, with a red needle big as a shovel moving up toward a hundred pounds, and I would wake myself up hollering and sweating.”

But even that wore away after a while, and then Turl and Harker were catching their forty winks or so again. Perhaps they decided that Snopes had stolen his three eggs and was done. Perhaps they decided that he had frightened himself with the ease with which he had got the eggs. Because it was five months before the next act took place.

Then one afternoon, with his fires cleaned and steam up again, Tom-Tom, smoking his pipe on the coal pile, saw Snopes enter, carrying in his hand an object which Tom-Tom said later he thought was a mule shoe.

He watched Snopes retire into a dim corner behind the boilers, where there had accumulated a miscellaneous pile of metal junk, all covered with dirt: fittings, valves, rods and bolts and such, and, kneeling there,

begin to sort the pieces, touching them one by one with the mule shoe and from time to time removing one piece and tossing it behind him, into the runway.

Tom-Tom watched him try with the magnet every loose piece of metal in the boiler-room, sorting out the iron from the brass: then Snopes ordered Tom-Tom to gather up the segregated pieces of brass and bring them in to his office.

Tom-Tom gathered the pieces into a box. Snopes was waiting in the office. He glanced once into the box, then he spat. "How do you and Turl get along?" he said. Turl, I had better repeat, was the night fireman; a Negro too, though he was saddle-colored where Tom-Tom was black, and in place of Tom-Tom's two hundred pounds Turl, even with his laden shovel, would hardly have tipped a hundred and fifty.

"I tends to my business," Tom-Tom said. "What Turl does wid hisn ain't no trouble of mine."

"That ain't what Turl thinks," Snopes said, chewing, watching Tom-Tom, who looked at Snopes as steadily in turn; looked down at him. "Turl wants me to give him your day shift. He says he's tired firing at night."

"Let him fire here long as I is, and he can have it," Tom-Tom said.

"Turl don't want to wait that long," Snopes said, chewing, watching Tom-Tom's face. Then he told Tom-Tom how Turl was planning to steal some iron from the plant and lay it at Tom-Tom's door and so get Tom-Tom fired. And Tom-Tom stood there, huge, hulking, with his hard round little head.

“That’s what he’s up to,” Snopes said. “So I want you to take this stuff out to your house and hide it where Turl can’t find it. And as soon as I get enough evidence on Turl, I’m going to fire him.”

Tom-Tom waited until Snopes had finished, blinking his eyes slowly. Then he said immediately: “I knows a better way than that.”

“What way?” Snopes said. Tom-Tom didn’t answer. He stood, big, humorless, a little surly; quiet; more than a little implacable though heatless. “No, no,” Snopes said. “That won’t do. You have any trouble with Turl, and I’ll fire you both. You do like I say, unless you are tired of your job and want Turl to have it. Are you tired of it?”

“Ain’t no man complained about my pressure yet,” Tom-Tom said sullenly.

“Then you do like I say. You take that stuff out home with you tonight. Don’t let nobody see you; not even your wife. And if you don’t want to do it, just say so. I reckon I can get somebody that will do it.”

And that’s what Tom-Tom did. And he kept his own counsel too, even when afterward, as discarded fittings and such accumulated again, he would watch Snopes test them one by one with the magnet and sort him out another batch to take out home and hide.

Because he had been firing those boilers for forty years, ever since he was a man. At that time there was but one boiler, and he had got twelve dollars a month for firing it, but now there were three, and he got sixty dollars a month; and now he was sixty, and he owned his little cabin and a little piece of corn, and a mule and a wagon in which he

rode into town to church twice each Sunday, with his new young wife beside him and a gold watch and chain.

And Harker didn't know then, either, even though he would watch the junked metal accumulate in the corner and then disappear over night until it came to be his nightly joke to enter with his busy, bustling air and say to Turl: "Well, Turl, I notice that little engine is still running.

There's a right smart of brass in them bushings and wrist pins, but I reckon it's moving too fast to hold that magnet against it." Then more soberly; quite soberly, in fact, without humor or irony at all, since there was some of Suratt in Harker too: "That durn fellow! I reckon he'd sell the boilers too, if he knowed of any way you and Tom-Tom could keep steam up without them."

And Turl didn't answer. Because by that time Turl had his own private temptations and worries, the same as Tom-Tom, of which Harker was also unaware.

In the meantime, the first of the year came and the city was audited.

"They come down here," Harker said, "two of them, in glasses. They went over the books and they poked around everywhere, counting everything in sight and writing it down. Then they went back to the office and they was still there at six o'clock when I come on. It seems that there was something wrong; it seems like there was some old brass parts wrote down in the books, only the brass seemed to be missing or something.

It was on the books all right, and the new valves and things it had been replaced with was there. But be durn if they could find a one of them

old pieces except one busted bib that had got mislaid under the work-bench someway or other. It was right strange.

So I went back with them and held the light while they looked again in all the corners, getting a right smart of soot and grease on them, but that brass just naturally seemed to be plumb missing. So they went away.

“And the next morning early they come back. They had the city clerk with them this time and they beat Mr. Snopes down here and so they had to wait till he come in in his check cap and his chew, chewing and looking at them while they told him.

They was right sorry; they hemmed and hawed a right smart, being sorry. But it wasn't nothing else they could do except to come back on him, long as he was the superintendent; and did he want me and Turl and Tom-Tom arrested right now, or would tomorrow do? And him standing there, chewing, with them eyes like two gobs of cup grease on a hunk of raw dough, and them still telling him how sorry they was.

“‘How much does it come to?’ he says.

“‘Three hundred and four dollars and fifty-two cents, Mr. Snopes.’

“‘Is that the full amount?’

“‘We checked our figures twice, Mr. Snopes.’

“‘All right,’ he says. And he reaches down and hauls out the money and pays them the three hundred and four dollars and fifty-two cents in cash, and asks for a receipt.”

Then the next Summer came, with Harker still laughing at and enjoying what he saw, and seeing so little, thinking how they were all fooling one another while he looked on, when it was him who was being fooled. For in that Summer the thing ripened, came to a head. Or maybe Snopes just decided to cut his first hay crop; clean the meadow for reseeding. Because he could never have believed that on the day when he sent for Turl, he had set the capital on his monument and had started to tear the scaffolding down.

It was in the evening; he returned to the plant after supper and sent for Turl; again two of them, white man and Negro, faced one another in the office.

“What’s this about you and Tom-Tom?” Snopes said.

“‘Bout me and which?” Turl said. “If Tom-Tom depending on me for his trouble, he sho’ done quit being a fireman and turned waiter. It take two folks to have trouble, and Tom-Tom ain’t but one, I don’t care how big he is.”

Snopes watched Turl. “Tom-Tom thinks you want to fire the day shift.”

Turl looked down. He looked briefly at Snopes’s face; at the still eyes, the slow unceasing jaw, and down again. “I can handle as much coal as Tom-Tom,” he said.

Snopes watched him: the smooth, brown, aside-looking face. “Tom-Tom knows that, too. He knows he’s getting old. But he knows there

ain't nobody else can crowd him but you." Then, watching Turl's face, Snopes told him how for two years Tom-Tom had been stealing brass from the plant, in order to lay it on Turl and get him fired; how only that day Tom-Tom had told him that Turl was the thief.

Turl looked up. "That's a lie," he said. "Can't no nigger accuse me of stealing when I ain't, I don't care how big he is."

"Sho'," Snopes said. "So the thing to do is to get that brass back."

"If Tom-Tom got it, I reckon Mr. Buck Conner the man to get it back," Turl said. Buck Conner was the city marshal.

"Then you'll go to jail, sure enough. Tom-Tom'll say he didn't know it was there. You'll be the only one that knew it was there. So what you reckon Buck Conner'll think? You'll be the one that knew where it was hid at, and Buck Conner'll know that even a fool has got more sense than to steal something and hide it in his corn-crib.

The only thing you can do is to get that brass back. Go out there in the daytime, while Tom-Tom is at work, and get it and bring it to me and I'll put it away somewhere to use as evidence on Tom-Tom. Unless maybe you don't want that day shift. Just say so, if you don't. I reckon I can find somebody else that does."

And Turl agreed to do that. He hadn't fired any boilers for forty years. He hadn't done anything at all for as long as forty years, since he was just past thirty. But even if he were a hundred, no man could ever accuse him of having done anything that would aggregate forty years net.

“Unless Turl’s night prowling might add up that much,” Harker said. “If Turl ever gets married, he wan’t need no front door a-tall; he wouldn’t know what it was for. If he couldn’t come tom-cattin in through the back window, he wouldn’t know what he come after. Would you, Turl?”

So from here on it is simple enough, since a man’s mistakes, like his successes, usually are simple. Particularly the success. Perhaps that’s why it is so often missed: it was just over-looked.

“His mistake was in picking out Turl to pull his chestnuts,” Harker said. “But even Turl wasn’t as bad as the second mistake he made at the same time without knowing it. And that was, when he forgot about that high yellow wife of Tom-Tom’s.

When I found out how he had picked out Turl, out of all the niggers in Jefferson, that’s prowled at least once (or tried to) every gal within ten miles of town, to go out to Tom-Tom’s house knowing all the time how Tom-Tom would be down here wrastling coal until seven o’clock and then have two miles to walk home, and expect Turl to spend his time out there hunting for anything that ain’t hid in Tom-Tom’s bed, and when I would think about Tom-Tom down here, wrastling them boilers with this same amical cuckoldry like the fellow said about Mr. Snopes and Colonel Hoxey, stealing brass so he can keep Turl from getting his job away from him, and Turl out yonder tending to Tom-Tom’s home business at the same time, sometimes I think I will die.

“It was bound to not last. The question was, which would happen first: if Tom-Tom would catch Turl, or if Mr. Snopes would catch Turl, or if I would bust a blood vessel laughing some night. Well, it was Turl. He seemed to be having too much trouble locating that brass; he had been hunting it for three weeks already, coming in a little late almost every

night now, with Tom-Tom having to wait until Turl come before he could start home.

Maybe that was it. Or maybe Mr. Snopes was out there himself one day, hid in the bushes too, waiting for it to get along toward dark (it was already April then); him on one side of Tom-Tom's house and Turl creeping up through the corn patch on the other. Anyway, he come back down here one night and he was waiting when Turl come in about a half hour late, as usual, and Tom-Tom all ready to go home soon as Turl got here. Mr. Snopes sent for Turl and asked him if he had found it.

“Find it when?’ Turl says.

“While you was out there hunting for it about dusk tonight,’ Mr. Snopes says. And there's Turl, wondering just how much Mr. Snopes knows, and if he can risk saying how he has been at home in bed since six-thirty this morning, or maybe up to Mottstown on business. ‘Maybe you are still looking for it in the wrong place,’ Mr. Snopes says, watching Turl, and Turl not looking at Mr. Snopes except maybe now and then. ‘If Tom-Tom had hid that iron in his bed, you ought to done found it three weeks ago,’ Mr. Snopes says. ‘So suppose you look in that corn-crib where I told you to look.’

“So Turl went out to look one more time. But he couldn't seem to find it in the corn-crib neither. Leastways, that's what he told Mr. Snopes when Mr. Snopes finally run him down back here about nine o'clock one night.

Turl was on a kind of a spot, you might say. He would have to wait until along toward dark to go up to the house, and already Tom-Tom had

been grumbling some about how Turl was getting later and later about coming to work every night. And once he found that brass, he would have to begin getting back to the plant at seven o'clock, and the days getting longer all the time.

“So Turl goes back to give one more go-round for that brass evidence. But still he can't find it. He must have looked under every shuck and thread in Tom-Tom's bed tick, but without no more success than them two audits had. He just couldn't seem to find that evidence nohow.

So then Mr. Snopes says he will give Turl one more chance, and if he don't find that evidence this time, Mr. Snopes is going to tell Tom-Tom how there is a strange tom-cat on his back fence. And whenever a nigger husband in Jefferson hears that, he finds out where Turl is at before he even sharpens his razor: ain't that so, Turl?

“So the next evening Turl goes out to look again. To do or die this time. He comes creeping up out of the woods about sundown, the best time of day for brass hunting, specially as there is a moon that night.

So here he comes, creeping up through the corn patch to the back porch, where the cot is, and pretty soon he can make out somebody in a white nightgown laying on the cot. But Turl don't rise up and walk even then; that ain't Turl's way. Turl plays by the rules.

He creeps up — it's dust-dark by then, and the moon beginning to shine a little — all careful and quiet, and tom-cats up on to the back porch and stoops over the cot and puts his hand on nekkid meat and says, ‘Honeybunch, papa's done arrived.’”

IV

In the very quiet hearing of it I seemed to partake for the instant of Turl's horrid surprise. Because it was Tom-Tom on the cot; Tom-Tom, whom Turl believed to be at the moment two miles away, waiting for Turl to come and take over from him at the power plant.

The night before, on his return home Tom-Tom had brought with him a last year's watermelon which the local butcher had kept all Winter in cold storage and which he had given to Tom-Tom, being himself afraid to eat it, and a pint of whiskey. Tom-Tom and his wife consumed them and went to bed, where an hour later she waked Tom-Tom by her screaming. She was violently ill, and she was afraid that she was dying. She was too frightened to let Tom-Tom go for help, and while he dosed her as he could, she confessed to him about herself and Turl.

As soon as she told it she became easier and went off to sleep, either before she had time to realize the enormity of what she had done, or while she was still too occupied in being alive to care.

But Tom-Tom wasn't. The next morning, after he convinced himself that she was all right, he reminded her of it. She wept some, and tried to retract; she ran the gamut of tears to anger, through denial and cajolery back to tears again. But she had Tom-Tom's face to look at all the while, and so after a time she hushed and she just lay there, watching him as he went methodically about cooking breakfast, her own and his, saying no word, apparently oblivious of even her presence. Then he fed her, made her eat, with the same detachment, implacable and without heat.

She was waiting for him to leave for work; she was doubtless then and had been all the while inventing and discarding practical expedients; so busy that it was mid-morning before she realized that he had no intention of going to town, though she did not know that he had arranged to get word to the plant by seven that morning that he would take the day off.

So she lay there in the bed, quite quiet, her eyes a little wide, still as an animal, while he cooked their dinner and fed her again with that clumsy and implacable care. And just before sundown he locked her in the bedroom, she still saying no word, not asking him what he was about, just watching with her quiet, still eyes the door until it closed and the key clicked.

Then Tom-Tom put on one of her nightgowns and with a naked butcher knife beside him, he lay down on the cot on the back porch. And there he was, without having moved for almost an hour, when Turl crept on to the porch and touched him.

In the purely reflex action of Turl's turning to flee, Tom-Tom rose, clutching the knife, and sprang at Turl. He leaped astride of Turl's neck and shoulders; his weight was the impetus which sent Turl off the porch, already running when his feet touched earth, carrying with him on the retina of his fear a single dreadful glint of moonlight on the blade of the lifted knife, as he crossed the back lot and, with Tom-Tom on his back, entered the trees — the two of them a strange and furious beast with two heads and a single pair of legs like an inverted centaur speeding phantomlike just ahead of the boardlike streaming of Tom-Tom's shirt-tail and just beneath the silver glint of the lifted knife, through the moony April woods.

“Tom-Tom big buck man,” Turl said. “Make three of me. But I sho’ toted him. And whenever I would see the moon glint that butcher knife, I could a picked up two more like him without even stopping.” He said that at first he just ran; it was only when he found himself among the trees that it occurred to him that his only hope was to rake Tom-Tom off against a tree trunk. “But he helt on so tight with that one arm that whenever I busted him into a tree, I had to bust into the tree too. And then we’d bounce off and I’d catch that moonglint in that nekkid knife, and I could a picked up two more Tom-Toms.

“‘Bout that time was when Tom-Tom started squalling. He was holding on with both hands then, so I knowed that I had done outrun that butcher knife anyhow. But I was good started then; my feets never paid Tom-Tom no more mind when he started squalling to stop and let him off than they did me.

Then Tom-Tom grabbed my head with both hands and begun to haul it around like I was a runaway bareback mule, and then I seed the ditch. It was about forty foot deep and it looked a solid mile across, but it was too late then. My feets never even slowed up. They run far as from here to that door yonder out into nekkid air before us even begun to fall. And they was still clawing that moonlight when me and Tom-Tom hit the bottom.”

The first thing I wanted to know was, what Tom-Tom used in lieu of the butcher knife which he had dropped. He didn’t use anything. He and Turl just sat there in the ditch and talked. Because there is a sanctuary beyond despair for any beast which has dared all, which even its mortal enemy respects. Or maybe it was just nigger nature.

Anyway, it was perfectly plain to both of them as they sat there, perhaps panting a little while they talked, that Tom-Tom's home had been outraged, not by Turl, but by Flem Snopes; that Turl's life and limbs had been endangered, not by Tom-Tom, but by Flem Snopes.

That was so plain to them that they sat there quietly in the ditch, getting their wind back, talking a little without heat like two acquaintances meeting in the street; so plain that they made their concerted plan without recourse to definite words on the subject. They merely compared notes; perhaps they laughed a little at themselves.

Then they climbed out of the ditch and returned to Tom-Tom's cabin, where Tom-Tom unlocked his wife, and he and Turl sat before the hearth while the woman prepared a meal for them, which they ate as quietly but without loss of time: the two grave, scratched faces leaned to the same lamp, above the same dishes, while in the background the woman watched them, shadowy and covert and unspeaking.

Tom-Tom took her to the barn with them to help load the brass into the wagon, where Turl spoke for the first time since they climbed together out of the ditch in Harker's "amical" cuckoldry: "Great God, man, how long did it take you to tote all this stuff out here?"

"Not long," Tom-Tom said. "Been working at it 'bout two years."

It required four trips in the wagon; it was daybreak when the last load was disposed of, and the sun was rising when Turl entered the power plant, eleven hours late.

"Where in hell you been?" Harker said.

Turl glanced up at the three gauges, his scratched face wearing an expression of monkeylike gravity. "Been helping a friend of mine."

"Helping what friend of yours?"

"Boy named Turl," Turl said, squinting at the gauges.

V

"And that was all he said," Harker said. "And me looking at that scratched face of hisn, and at the mate of it that Tom-Tom brought in at six o'clock. But Turl didn't tell me then. And I ain't the only one he never told nothing that morning. Because Mr. Snopes got there before six o'clock, before Turl had got away. He sent for Turl and asked him if he had found that brass and Turl told him no.

"'Why didn't you find it?' Mr. Snopes said.

"Turl didn't look away, this time. 'Because it ain't no brass there. That's the main reason.'

"'How do you know there ain't?' Mr. Snopes says.

"And Turl looked him straight in them eyes. 'Because Tom-Tom say it ain't,' Turl says.

"Maybe he ought to knew then. But a man will go to any length to fool himself; he will tell himself stuff and believe it that he would be downright mad with a fellow he had done trimmed for believing it. So now he sends for Tom-Tom.

"'I ain't got no brass,' Tom-Tom says.

"'Where is it, then?'

“‘It’s where you said you wanted it.’

“‘Where I said I wanted it when?’

“‘When you took them whistle valves off the boilers,’ Tom-Tom says.

“That’s what whipped him. He didn’t dare to fire neither one of them, you see. And so he’d have to see one of them there all day long every day, and know that the other one was there all night long every night; he would have to know that during every twenty-four hours that passed, one or the other of them was there, getting paid — paid, mind you, by the hour — for living half their lives right there under that tank with them four loads of brass in it that now belonged to him by right of purchase and which he couldn’t claim now because now he had done waited too late.

“It sure was too late. But next New Year it got later. Come New Year’s and the town got audited again; again them two spectacled fellows come down here and checked the books and went away and come back with not only the city clerk, but with Buck Conner too, with a warrant for Turl and Tom-Tom. And there they were, hemming and hawing, being sorry again, pushing one another in front to talk.

It seems how they had made a mistake two years ago, and instead of three-hundred-and-four-fifty-two of this here evaporating brass, there was five-hundred-and-twenty-five dollars worth, leaving a net of over two-hundred-and-twenty dollars. And there was Buck Conner with the warrant, all ready to arrest Turl and Tom-Tom when he give the word, and it so happening that Turl and Tom-Tom was both in the boiler-room at that moment, changing shifts.

“So Snopes paid them. Dug down and hauled out the money and paid them the two-hundred-and-twenty and got his receipt. And about two hours later I happened to pass through the office. At first I didn’t see nobody, because the light was off. So I thought maybe the bulb was burned out, seeing as that light burned all the time.

But it wasn’t burned out; it was just turned out. Only before I turned it on I saw him, setting there. So I didn’t turn the light on. I just went on out and left him setting there, setting right still.”

VI

In those days Snopes lived in a new little bungalow on the edge of town, and, when shortly after that New Year he resigned from the power plant, as the weather warmed into Spring they would see him quite often in his tiny grassless and treeless side yard.

It was a locality of such other hopeless little houses inhabited half by Negroes, and washed clay gullies and ditches filled with scrapped automobiles and tin cans, and the prospect was not pleasing. Yet he spent quite a lot of his time there, sitting on the steps, not doing anything.

And so they wondered what he could be looking at there, since there was nothing to see above the massed trees which shaded the town itself except the low smudge of the power plant, and the water tank. And it too was condemned now, for the water had suddenly gone bad two years ago and the town now had a new reservoir underground.

But the tank was a stout one and the water was still good to wash the streets with, and so the town let it stand, refusing at one time a quite liberal though anonymous offer to purchase and remove it.

So they wondered what Snopes was looking at. They didn't know that he was contemplating his monument: that shaft taller than anything in sight and filled with transient and symbolical liquid that was not even fit to drink, but which, for the very reason of its impermanence, was more enduring through its fluidity and blind renewal than the brass which poisoned it, than columns of basalt or of lead.

The end