



Fool About a Horse, William Faulkner

Fool About a Horse

Scribner's, August 1936. Later revised for 'The Hamlet'

I

YES, SIR. It wasn't Pap that bought one horse from Pat Stamper and then sold two back to him. It was Mammy. Her and Pat jest used Pap to trade through. Because we never left home that morning with Mammy's cream separator money to trade horses with nobody.

And I reckon that if Pap had had any notion that he was fated to swap horses with Pat Stamper, they couldn't even have arrested him and taken him to town. We never even knowed it was Pat Stamper that had unloaded that horse on whoever it was Beasley Kemp got it from until we was halfway there.

Because Pap admitted he was a fool about a horse but it wasn't that kind of a fool he meant. And once he was away from our lot and the neighbor men looking through the fence at whatever it was Pap had traded some more of Old Man Anse Holland's bob-wire and busted tools for this time, and Pap lying to them to jest exactly the right amount about how old it was and how much he give for it; — once Pap was away from there I don't reckon he was even the kind of a fool about a horse that Mammy claimed he was when we come up to the house that noon after we had shut the gate on the horse we had jest traded outen Beasley Kemp, and Pap taken his shoes off on the front gallery for dinner and Mammy standing there in the door, shaking the cold skillet at Pap and scolding and railing and Pap saying, "Now Vynie; now Vynie.

I always was a fool about a good horse and it ain't no use you a-scolding and jawing about it. You had better thank the Lord that when He give me a eye for horse-flesh He give me a little judgment and gumption along with it."

Because it wasn't the horse. It wasn't the trade. It was a good trade, because Pap swapped Beasley a straight stock and fourteen rods of bob-wire and a old wore-out sorghum mill of Old Man Anse's for the horse, and Mammy admitted it was a good swap even for that horse, even for anything that could git up and walk from Beasley Kemp's lot to ourn by itself. Because like she said while she was shaking the skillet at Pap, even Pap couldn't git stung very bad in a horse trade because he never owned nothing that anybody would swap even a sorry horse for and even to him.

And it wasn't because me and Pap had left the plows down in the bottom piece where Mammy couldn't see them from the house, and snuck the wagon out the back way with the straight stock and the wire and the sorghum mill while she thought we were still in the field. It wasn't that.

It was like she knowed without having to be told what me and Pap never found out for a week yet: that Pat Stamper had owned that horse we traded outen Beasley Kemp and that now Pap had done caught the Pat Stamper sickness jest from touching it.

And I reckon she was right. Maybe to hisself Pap did call hisself the Pat Stamper of the Frenchman Bend country, or maybe even of all Beat Four. But I reckon that even when he was believing it the strongest, setting there on the top rail of the lot fence and the neighbor men

coming up to lean on the fence and look at what Pap had brung home this time and Pap not bragging much and maybe not even lying much about it; I reckon that even then there was another part of his mind telling him he was safe to believe he was the Pat Stamper of Beat Four jest as long as he done it setting on that fence where it was about one chance in a million of Pat Stamper actually passing and stopping to put it to a test.

Because he wouldn't no more have set out to tangle with Pat Stamper than he would have set out to swap horses with a water moccasin. Probly if he had knowed that Pat Stamper ever owned that horse we swapped outen Beasley, Pap wouldn't have traded for it at no price. But then, I reckon that a fellow who straggles by acci-dent into where yellow fever or moccasins is, don't aim to ketch fever or snakebite neither.

But he sholy never aimed to tangle with Pat Stamper. When we started for town that morning with Beasley's horse and our mule in the wagon and that separator money that Mammy had been saving on for four years in Pap's pocket, we wasn't even thinking about horse trading, let alone about Pat Stamper, because we didn't know that Pat Stamper was in Jefferson and we didn't even know that he had owned the horse until we got to Varner's store. It was fate.

It was like the Lord Hisself had decided to spend Mammy's separator money for a horse; it would have had to been Him because wouldn't nobody else, leastways nobody that knowed Mammy, have risked doing it. Yes, sir. Pure fate. Though I will have to admit that fate picked a good, quick, willing hand when it picked Pap. Because it wasn't that kind of a fool about a horse that Pap meant he was.

No, sir. Not that kind of a fool. I reckon that while he was setting on the porch that morning when Mammy had done said her say for the time being and went back to the kitchen, and me done fetched the gourd of fresh water from the well, and the side meat plopping and hissing on the stove and Pap waiting to eat it and then go back down to the lot and set on the fence while the neighbor men come up in two's and three's to look at Pap's new horse, I reckon maybe in his own mind Pap not only knowed as much about horse trading as Pat Stamper, but he owned head for head as many of them as Old Man Anse hisself.

I reckon that while he would set there on the fence, jest moving enough to keep outen the sun, with them two empty plows standing in the furrow down in the bottom piece and Mammy watching him outen the back window and saying, "Horse trader! Setting there bragging and lying to a passel of shiftless men, and the weeds and morning glories climbing that thick in the corn and cotton that I am afraid to tote his dinner to him for fear of snakes"; I reckon Pap would look at whatever it was he had traded the mail box or the winter corn or something else that maybe Old Man Anse had done forgot he owned or leastways might not miss, and he would say to hisself: "It's not only mine, but before God it's the prettiest drove of horses a man ever seen."

II

It was pure fate. When we left for town that morning with Mammy's separator money, Pap never even aimed to use Beasley's horse at all because he knowed it probably couldn't make no twelve-mile trip to Jefferson and get back the same day. He aimed to go up to Old Man Anse's and borrow one of his mules to work with ourn; it was Mammy herself that done it, taunted him about the piece of crowbait he had bought for a yard ornament until Pap said that by Godfrey he would show Mammy and all the rest of them that misdoubted he knowed a

horse when he seen it, and so we went to the lot and put the new horse in the wagon with the mule.

We had been feeding it heavy as it would eat for a week now and it looked a heap better than it did the day we got it. But even yet it didn't look so good, though Pap decided it was the mule that showed it up so bad; that when it was the only horse or mule in sight, it didn't look so bad and that it was the standing beside something else on four legs that hurt its looks.

“If we jest had some way to hitch the mule under the wagon where it wouldn't show and jest leave the horse in sight, it would be fine,” Pap said. But there wasn't no way to do that, so we jest done the best we could. It was a kind of doormat bay and so, with Pap standing about twenty foot away and squinching first one eye and then the other and saying, “Bear down on it. You got to git the hide hot to make the har shine,” I polished it down with croker sacks the best I could.

Pap thought about feeding it a good bait of salt in some corn and then turning it to water and hide some of the ribs, only we knowed that we wouldn't even get to Jefferson in one day, let alone come back, besides having to stop at ever creek and load it up again. So we done the best we could and then we started, with Mammy's separator money (it was twenty-seven dollars and sixty-five cents; it taken her four years to save it outen her egg- and quilt-money) tied up in a rag that she dared Pap to even open to count it before he handed it to Uncle Ike McCaslin at the store and had the separator in the wagon.

Yes, sir. Fate. The same fate that made Mammy taunt Pap into starting out with Beasley's horse; the same fate that made it a hot morning in July for us to start out on. Because when we left home that morning we

wasn't even thinking about horse trading. We was thinking about horse, all right, because we were wondering if maybe we wasn't fixing to come back home that night with Beasley's horse riding in the wagon and me or Pap in the traces with the mule. Yes, sir.

Pap eased that team outen the lot at sunup and on down the road toward Frenchman's Bend as slow and careful as arra horse and mule ever moved in this world, with me and Pap walking up ever hill that was slanted enough to run water down the ruts, and aiming to do that right on into Jefferson. It was the weather, the hot day, that done it. Because here we was, about a mile from Varner's store, and Beasley's horse kind of half walking and half riding on the double tree, and Pap's face looking a little more and a little more concerned ever time our new horse failed to lift its feet high enough to make the next step, when all of a sudden that horse popped into a sweat.

It flung its head up like it had been teched with a hot poker and stepped up into the collar, teching the collar for the first time since the mule had taken the weight off the breast yoke when Pap'd shaken out the whip inside the lot; and so here we come down the last hill and up to Varner's store and that horse of Beasley's with its head up and blowing froth and its eyes white-rimmed like these here colored dinner plates and Pap sawing back on the reins, and I be dog if it not only hadn't sweated into as pretty a blood bay as you ever see, but even the ribs didn't seem to show so much.

And Pap, that had been talking about taking a back road so as to miss Varner's store altogether, setting there on the wagon seat exactly like he would set on the lot fence where he knowed he would be safe from Pat Stamper, telling Jody Varner and them other men that Beasley's horse come from Kentucky. Jody Varner never even laughed.

"Kentucky, hey?" he says. "Sho, now. That explains why it taken it so

long. Herman Short swapped Pat Stamper a buckboard and a set of harness for it five years ago, and Beasley Kemp give Herman eight dollars for it last summer. How much did you give Beasley? Fifty cents?"

That's what done it. From then on, it was automatic. It wasn't the horse, the trade. It was still a good trade, because in a sense you might say that all Pap give Beasley for it was the straight stock, since the bob-wire and the sorghum mill belonged to Old Man Anse. And it wasn't the harness and the buckboard that Herman Short give Pat Stamper: it was that eight dollars that Beasley give Herman. That's what rankled Pap.

Not that he held the eight dollars against Herman, because Herman had done already invested a buckboard and a set of harness. And besides, the eight dollars was still in the county, even if it was out of circulation, belonging to Herman Short, and so it didn't actually matter whether Herman had it or Beasley had it. It was Pat Stamper that rankled Pap.

When a man swaps horse for horse, that's one thing. But when cash money starts changing hands, that's something else; and when a stranger comes into the country and starts actual cash money jumping from hand to hand, it's like when a burglar breaks into your house and flings your clothes and truck from place to place even though he don't take nothing: it makes you mad.

So it was not jest to unload Beasley's horse back onto Pat Stamper. It was to get Beasley's eight dollars back outen Pat some way. And so it was jest pure fate that had Pat Stamper camped right on the road we would take to Jefferson on the very day when me and Pap went to get Mammy's separator.

So I reckon the rest of it don't even hardly need to be told, except as a kind of sidelight on how, when a man starts out to plan to do something, he jest thinks he is planning: that what he is actually doing is giving the highball to misfortune, throwing open the switch and saying, "All right, Bad Luck; come right ahead." So here was Pat Stamper and that nigger magician of hisn camped in Hoke's pasture, right on the road we would have to pass to git to town, and here was Pap on the way to town with two live animals and twenty-seven dollars and sixty-five cents in cash, and feeling that the entire honor and pride of the science and pastime of horse trading in Yoknapatawpha County depended on him to vindicate it.

So the rest of it don't even need to be told. I don't need to tell whether me and Pap walked back home or not, because anybody that knows Pat Stamper knows that he never bought a horse or a mule outright in his life; that he swapped you something for it that could at least walk out of sight. So the only point that might interest you is, what was pulling the wagon when we got back home.

And what Mammy done when she said, "Where is my separator?" and Pap saying, "Now Vynie; now Vynie—" Yes, sir. When it come down to the trade, it wasn't Pat Stamper after all that Pap was swapping horses with. It was the demon rum.

Because he was desperate. After the first swap he was desperate. Before that he was jest mad, like when you dream you are right in the middle of the track and the train a-coming; it's right on you and you can't run or dodge because all of a sudden you realize you are running in sand and so after a while it don't even matter if the train catches you or not because all you can think about is being mad at the sand.

That's how Pap was. For ever mile we made toward Jefferson, the madder Pap got. It wasn't at Beasley's horse, because we nursed it on toward town the same way we nursed it to Varner's store until it begun to sweat. It was them eight cash dollars that that horse represented. I don't even recollect just when and where we found out that Pat Stamper was at Jefferson that day. It might have been at Varner's store.

Or it might have been that we never had to be told; that for Pap to carry out the fate that Mammy started when she taunted him about Beasley's horse, Pat Stamper would jest have to be in Jefferson. Because Pap never even taken time to find out where Pat was camped, so that when we did roll into town we had done already swapped.

Yes, sir. We went up them long hills with Pap and me walking and Beasley's horse laying into the collar the best it could but with the mule doing most of the pulling and Pap walking on his side of the wagon and cussing Pat Stamper and Herman Short and Beasley Kemp and Jody Varner, and we went down the hills with Pap holding the wagon broke with a sapling pole so it wouldn't shove Beasley's horse through the collar and turn it wrong-side-outward like a sock and Pap still a-cussing Pat Stamper and Herman and Beasley and Varner, until we come to the three-mile bridge and Pap turned off the road and druv into the bushes and taken the mule outen the harness and knotted one rein so I could ride it and give me the quarter and told me to git for town and git the dime's worth of saltpeter and the nickel's worth of tar and the number ten fish hook.

So we didn't git to town until that afternoon. We went straight to Pat Stamper's camp in Hoke's pasture where I had done already passed it twice on the mule, with Beasley's horse laying into the collar sho enough now and its eyes looking nigh as wild as Pap's looked a hour later when we come outen McCaslin's back door with the separator,

and foaming a little at the mouth where Pap had rubbed the rest of the saltpeter into its gums and with a couple of as pretty tarred bob-wire cuts on its chest as you could want and another one on its flank where Pap had worked the fish hook under its hide where he could tech it by drooping the rein now and then; yes, sir, turning into Hoke's pasture on two wheels and Pap sawing back on the reins and Pat Stamper's nigger running up and grabbing the bridle to keep Beasley's horse from running right into the tent where Pat slept and Pat hisself coming outen the tent with that 'ere cream-colored Stetson cocked over one eye and them eyes the color of a new plow point and jest about as warm. "That's a pretty lively looking horse you got there," Pat says.

"Hell fire, yes!" Pap says. "It durn nigh killed me and this boy both before I could git it into that ere gate yonder. That's why I got to git shut of it. I expect you to beat me, but I got to trade. So come on and beat me quick and give me something I won't be skeered to walk up to."

And I still believe that Pap was right, that it was the right system. It had been five years since Pat had seen the horse, or anyway since he had unloaded it on Herman Short, so me and Pap figured that the chance of Pat's recognizing it would be about the same as for a burglar to recognize a dollar watch that happened to snag onto his clothes in passing five years ago.

And it was the right system, to rush up and say we jest had to trade instead of jest drifting up and hanging around for Pat to persuade us. And Pap wasn't trying to beat Pat bad. All he wanted was to vindicate that ere eight cash dollars. That was it: the eight cash dollars' worth of the pride of Yoknapatawpha County horse trading, and Pap the self-appointed champion and knight doing it not for profit but for honor.

And I be dog if I still don't believe it worked, that Pap did fool Pat, and that it was because of what Pat aimed to swap to Pap and not because Pat recognized Beasley's horse, that he refused to trade anyway except team for team.

Or I don't know. Maybe Pap was so busy fooling Pat that Pat never had to fool Pap, like a man that has jest got to do something, who no matter how hard he tries he jest half does it, while a man that don't care whether he does it or not, does it twice as good with jest half the work.

So there we was: the nigger holding the two mules that Pat wanted to swap for our team, and Pat chewing his tobacco slow and gentle and steady and watching Pap with them plow point eyes, and Pap standing there with that look on his face that was desperate not because he was skeered yet but because he was having to think fast, realizing now that he had done got in deeper than he aimed to and that he would either have to shet his eyes and bust on through, or back out and quit. Because right here was where Pat Stamper showed how come he was Pat Stamper.

If he had jest started in to show Pap what a bargain he would be getting in them two mules, I reckon Pap would have backed out. But Pat didn't. He fooled Pap exactly like one first-class burglar would purely and simply refuse to tell another first-class burglar where the safe was at.

"But I don't want to swap for a whole team," Pap said. "I already got a good mule. It's the horse I don't want. Trade me a mule for the horse."

“No,” Pat said. “I don’t want no wild horse neither. Not that I won’t trade for anything that can walk, provided I can trade my way. But I ain’t going to trade for that horse alone because I don’t want it no more than you do. What I am trading for is that mule. And besides, this here team of mine is matched. I aim to get about three times for the pair of them what I would get trading either of them single.”

“But you will still have a team to trade with,” Pap says.

“No,” Pat said. “I aim to get more from you for them than if the team was broken. If it’s a single mule you want, you better try somebody else.”

So Pap looked at the mules again. That was it. They looked all right. They looked jest exactly all right. They didn’t look too good and they didn’t look too bad. Neither of them looked quite as good as our mule, but the two of them looked jest a leetle mite better than Beasley’s horse and one mule of anybody’s. That was it.

If they had looked like a bargain, I reckon even I, a twelve-year-old boy, would have had sense enough to tell Pap to come on and let’s git outen there. But Lord, I reckon we was doomed from the very second when Jody Varner told about that eight dollars.

I reckon Pat Stamper knowed we was doomed the very second he looked up and seen the nigger holding Beasley’s horse outen the tent. I reckon he knowed right then that he wouldn’t have to try to trade, that all he would need to do would be jest to say No long enough.

So that’s what he done, leaning against our wagon bed with his thumbs hooked into the top of his pants, chewing his tobacco and watching Pap

going through the motion of examining them mules again. Because even I knowed that Pap had done already traded, that he had done walked out into what he thought was a spring branch and then found it was quicksand, and now he knowed he couldn't even stop long enough to turn back. "All right," he said. "I'll take them."

So the nigger taken Beasley's horse and the mule outen the wagon and put our new team in, and me and Pap went on to town. And before God, them mules still looked all right. I be dog if I didn't think that maybe Pap had walked into that Stamper quicksand and then got out again. Or maybe it was jest getting outen Stamper's reach with the harness left. Because when we got back into the road and outen sight of Stamper's camp, Pap's face begun to look like it would when he would set on the lot fence at home and tell the fellows how he was a fool about a horse but not a durn fool.

It wasn't easy yet; it was jest watchful, setting there and feeling out our new team. We was right at town now and so he wouldn't have much time to feel them out, but we would have a good chance to on the road home. "By Godfrey," Pap said, "if they can walk home a-tall, I have got that ere eight dollars back, durn him."

Because that nigger of Pat Stamper's was a artist. Because I swear to Godfrey them mules looked all right. They jest looked like two ordinary not extry good mules you might see in a hundred wagons on the road.

I noticed how they had a kind of jerky way of starting off, first one jerking into the collar and then jerking back and then the other jerking into the collar and then jerking back, and even after we was in the road and the wagon rolling good, one of them taken a spell of some sort and snatched hissself crossways in the traces like he aimed to go back, but

then Stamper had jest told us that they was a matched team; he never had said they had worked together as a matched team, and they was a well matched team in the sense that neither one of them seemed to have any idea as to jest when the other one aimed to start moving or what direction it was going to take. But Pap got them straightened out and we went on; we was jest starting up that ere big hill into town, when they popped into a sweat jest like Beasley Kemp's horse done back yonder on the other side of Varner's store.

But that was all right; it was hot enough; that was when I first taken notice that that rain was going to come up before dark; I mind how I was jest thinking how it was going to ketch us before we got home when this here sweat taken them mules.

And that was all right; I didn't blame them for sweating; the trouble was, it was a different kind of sweat from the kind Beasley's horse had given us to expect. I mind how I was looking at a big hot-looking bright cloud over to the southwest when all of a sudden I realized that the wagon had done stopped going forward up the hill and was starting down it backward and then I looked in time to see both them mules this time crossways in the traces and kind of glaring at one another across the tongue and Pap trying to straighten them out and his eyes looking a right smart like the mules' eyes, and then all of a sudden they straightened out and I mind how I thought it was a good thing they happened to have their backs toward the wagon when they did, because I reckon they moved at the same time for the first time in their lives, for the first time since Pap owned them at least; and, gentlemen, here we come swurging up that hill and into town like a roach down a rathole, with the wagon on two wheels and Pap sawing back on the lines and hollering, "Hell fire, hell fire," and folks scattering, and Pap jest managed to swing them into the alley behind McCaslin's store and stopped them by locking our nigh front wheel with another wagon's and the other mules (they was hitched) help to put the brakes on.

So it was a good crowd by then, helping us to git untangled, and Pap led our team on to Uncle Ike's back door and tied them up close to the door handle and me and him went in to get the separator, with the folks still coming up and saying, "It's that team of Stamper's" and Pap kind of breathing hard and looking a right smart less easy in the face than when we had left Stamper's camp even, besides most all-fired watchful, saying, "Come on here. Let's git that durn separator of your mammy's loaded and git outen here." So we give Uncle Ike the rag with Mammy's money in it and me and Pap taken up the separator and started back out to the wagon, to where we had left it.

It was still there. I mind how I could see the bed of it where Pap had drawed it up to the door, and I could see the folks from the waist up standing in the alley, and then I realized that it was about twice as many folks looking at our team as it had been when we left. I reckon Pap never noticed it because he was too busy hurrying that 'ere separator along. So I jest stepped aside a little to have a look at what the folks was looking at and then I realized that I could see the front of our wagon and the place where me and Pap had left the mules, but that I couldn't see no mules.

So I don't recollect whether I dropped my side of the separator or if Pap dropped hisn or if we still carried it when we come to where we could see out the door and see the mules. They were still there. They were just laying down.

Pap had snubbed them right up to the handle of Uncle Ike's back door, with the same rein run through both bits, and now they looked jest exactly like two fellows that had done hung themselves in one of these here suicide packs, with their heads snubbed up together and their

tongues hanging out and their necks stretched about four foot and their legs folded back under them like shot rabbits until Pap jumped down and cut the harness. Yes, sir. A artist. He had give them to the exact inch jest enough of whatever it was, to get them into town and off the square before it played out.

And this here is what I meant when I said it was desperation. I can see Pap now, backed off into that corner behind Uncle Ike's plows and cultivators and such, with his face white and his voice shaking and his hand shaking so he couldn't hardly hand me the six bits. "Go to Doc Peabody's store," he says, "and git me a pint of whiskey and git it quick."

Yes, sir. Desperate. It wasn't even quicksand now. It was a whirlpool, and Pap with jest one jump left. He drunk that pint of whiskey in two drinks and set the empty bottle careful in the corner of Uncle Ike's warehouse, and we went back to the wagon. The mules was still up all right, and we loaded the separator in and Pap eased them away careful, with the folks all watching and telling one another it was a Pat Stamper team and Pap setting there with his face red now instead of white and them clouds were heavy and the sun was even gone now but I don't think Pap ever noticed it.

And we hadn't eaten too, and I don't think Pap noticed that neither. And I be dog if it didn't seem like Pat Stamper hadn't moved too, standing there at the gate to his stock pen, with that Stetson cocked and his thumbs still hooked into the top of his pants, and Pap setting on the wagon trying to keep his hands from shaking and the team stopped now with their heads down and their legs spraddled and breathing like starting up a sawmill on a Monday morning. "I come to trade back for my team," Pap said.

“What’s the matter?” Stamper says. “Don’t tell me these are too lively for you, too. They don’t look it.”

“All right,” Pap said. “All right. I jest want my team back. I’ll give you four dollars to trade back. That’s all I got. And I got to have them. Make your four dollars, and give me my team.”

“I ain’t got your team,” Stamper says. “I didn’t want that horse either. I told you that. So I got shet of it right away.”

Pap set there for a while. It was all clouded over now, and cooler; you could even smell the rain. “All right,” Pap said. “But you still got the mule. All right. I’ll take it.”

“For what?” Stamper says. “You want to swap that team for your mule?” Sho. Pap wasn’t trading.

He was desperate, setting there like he couldn’t even see, with Stamper leaning easy against the gate and looking at him for a minute. “No,” he says. “I don’t want them mules. Yours is the best. I wouldn’t trade that way, even.” He spit, easy and careful, before he looked at Pap again. “Besides, I done included your mule into another team, with another horse. You want to look at it?”

“All right,” Pap said. “How much?”

“Don’t you even want to see it first?” Stamper says.

“All right,” Pap said. So the nigger led out the horse, a little dark brown horse; I remember how even with it clouded up to rain and no sun, how the horse shined; a horse a little bigger than the one we traded

Stamper, and hog fat. Yes, sir. That's jest exactly how it was fat: not like a horse is fat but like a hog: fat right up to its ears and looking tight as a drum; it was so fat it couldn't hardly walk, putting its feet down like they didn't have no weight nor feeling in them. "It's too fat to last," Pap said. "It won't even git me home."

"That's what I think myself," Stamper said. "That's why I am willing to git shet of it."

"All right," Pap said. "But I got to try it."

"Try it?" Stamper said. Pap didn't answer. He jest got down from the wagon careful and went to the horse. It had a hackamore on and Pap taken the rein outen the nigger's hand and started to git on the horse. "Wait," Stamper says. "What you fixing to do?"

"Going to try it," Pap said. "I done traded a horse with you once today." Stamper looked at Pap again for a minute. Then he spit again and kind of stepped back.

"All right," he said. "Help him up, Jim." So the nigger holp Pap onto the horse, only the nigger never had time to jump back because as soon as Pap's weight come onto the horse's back it was like Pap had a live wire in his britches. It throwed Pap hard and Pap got up without no change on his face a-tall and went back to the horse and taken the hackamore again and the nigger holp him up again, with Stamper standing there with his hands hooked into his pants tops, watching.

And the horse slammed Pap off again and Pap got up again with his face jest the same and went back and taken the hackamore from the nigger again when Stamper stopped him. That was exactly how Pap did it, like he wanted the horse to throw him and hard, not to try to hurt

hissself, but like the ability of his bones and meat to feel that 'ere hard ground was all he had left to pay for a horse with life enough in it to git us home. "Here, here," Stamper says. "Are you trying to kill yourself?"

"All right," Pap says. "How much?"

"Come on into the tent and have a drink," Stamper says.

So I waited in the wagon. It was beginning to blow a little now, and we hadn't brought no coats with us. But there was some croker sacks in the wagon that Mammy made us bring to wrap her separator in and so I was wrapping the separator up in them when the nigger led out a horse and buggy and then Pap and Stamper come outen the tent and Pap come to the wagon. He never looked at me.

He jest reached in and taken the separator outen the sacks and put it into the buggy and then him and Stamper got in and druv away. They went back toward town and then they went out of sight and I seen the nigger watching me. "You fixing to git wet fo you git home," he said.

"I reckon so," I said.

"You want to eat a snack of dinner until they git back?" the nigger said.

"I ain't hungry," I said. So he went on into the tent and I waited in the wagon. Yes, sir, it was most sholy going to rain; I mind how I thought that anyway now we could use the croker sacks to try to keep dry in. Then Pap and Stamper come back and Pap never looked at me neither. He went into the tent and I could see him drinking outen a bottle and then putting the bottle back into his shirt. I reckon Stamper give him that bottle.

Pap never said so, but I reckon Stamper did. So then the nigger put our mule and the new horse in the wagon and Pap come outen the tent and got in. Stamper and the nigger both help him now.

“Don’t you reckon you better let the boy drive?” Stamper says.

“I’ll drive,” Pap said. “By Godfrey, maybe I can’t swap a horse with you, but I can still drive it.”

“Sho now,” Stamper said. “That horse will surprise you.”

III

It did. Yes, sir. It surprised us, jest like Stamper said. It happened jest before dark. The rain, the storm, come up before we had gone a mile and we rode in it for two hours before we found a old barn to shelter under, setting hunched under them croker sacks (I mind how I thought how in a way I almost wished Mammy knew we never had the separator because she had wanted it for so long that maybe she would rather for Uncle Ike to own it and it safe and dry, than for her to own it five miles from home in a wagon in the rain) and watching our new horse that was so fat it even put its feet down like they never had no feeling nor weight, that ever now and then, even in the rain, would take a kind of flinching jerk like when Pap’s weight came down onto its back at Stamper’s camp.

But we didn’t catch on then, because I was driving now, sho enough, because Pap was laying flat in the wagon bed with the rain popping him in the face and him not even knowing it, and me setting on the seat and watching our new horse change from a black horse into a bay.

Because I was jest twelve and me and Pap had always done our horse trading along that country road that run past our lot. So I jest druv into the first shelter I come to and shaken Pap awake. The rain had cooled him off some, but even without that he would have sobered quick.

“What?” he says. “What is it?”

“The horse, Pap!” I hollered. “It’s done changed color!”

Yes, sir. It sobered him quick. We was both outen the wagon then and Pap’s eyes popping sho enough now and a bay horse standing there where he had went to sleep looking at a black one.

Because I was jest twelve; it happened too fast for me; I jest mind seeing Pap tech the horse’s back at a spot where ever now and then the backband must have teched it (I tell you, that nigger was a artist) and then the next I knowed that horse was plunging and swurging; I remember dodging jest as it slammed into the wall and then me and Pap heard a sound like when a automobile tire picks up a nail: a sound like Whoosh! and then the rest of that shiny fat black horse we had got from Pat Stamper vanished.

I don’t mean that me and Pap was standing there with jest our mule left. We had a horse too. Only it was the same one we had left home with that morning and that we had swapped Beasley Kemp the sorghum mill and the bob-wire and the straight stock for two weeks ago.

We even got our fish hook back, with the barb still bent where Pap had bent it and the nigger had jest moved it a little. But it wasn’t until we was home the next day at daylight that we found the hand pump valve behind its off fore leg.

And that's about all. Because Mammy was up and seen us pass, and so after a while we had to go to the house, because me and Pap hadn't et since twenty-four hours ago. So we went to the house, with Mammy standing in the door saying, "Where's my separator?" and Pap saying how he always had been a fool about a horse and he couldn't help it and Mammy couldn't neither and that to jest give him time, and Mammy standing there looking at him and then she begun to cry and it was the first time I ever seen her cry.

She cried hard, standing there in her old wrapper, not even hiding her face, saying, "Fool about a horse! Yes, but why the horse? why the horse?"

"Now, Vynie; now, Vynie," Pap said. Then she turned and went back into the house. We didn't go in. We could hear her, but she wasn't in the kitchen, and Pap told me to go around to the kitchen and see if she was fixing breakfast and then come down to the lot and tell him, and I did but she wasn't in the kitchen.

So we set on the lot fence, and then we seen her coming down the hill from the house; she was dressed and had on her shawl and sunbonnet and her gloves, and she went into the stable without looking at us and we could hear her saddling the mule and Pap told me to go and ask her if she wanted him to help her and I did and she didn't answer and I saw her face that time and so I come back and set on the fence with Pap and we saw her ride out of the barn on the mule.

She was leading Beasley Kemp's horse. It was still black in places where the rain had streaked it. "If it hadn't been for that durn rain, we might could have got shet of it," Pap said.

So we went to the house then, and I cooked breakfast and me and Pap et and then Pap taken a nap. He told me to watch for her from the gallery, but me and him neither never much thought to see her soon. We never seen her until next morning. We was cooking breakfast when we heard the wagon and I looked out and it was Odum Tull's wagon and Mammy was getting outen it and I come back to the kitchen jest before Pap left for the stable. "She's got the separator," I told Pap.

"I reckon it didn't happen to be our team in Odum's wagon," Pap said.

"No, sir," I says. So we saw her go into the house with the separator.

"I reckon likely she will wait to put on her old wrapper first," Pap said.

"We ought to started breakfast sooner." It did take about that long.

And then we could hear it. It made a good strong sound, like it would separate milk good and fast. Then it stopped. "It's too bad she ain't got but the one gallon," Pap said. "You go and look in the kitchen." So I went, and sho enough, she was cooking breakfast. But she wouldn't let us eat it in the kitchen. She handed it out the door to us.

"I am going to be busy in here and I don't aim to have you all in the way," she said. It was all right now. Her face was quiet now; it was jest busy. So me and Pap went out to the well and et, and then we heard the separator again.

"I didn't know it would go through but one time," Pap said.

"Maybe Uncle Ike showed her how to do it," I said.

"I reckon she is capable of running it right," Pap said. "Like she wants it to run, anyhow." Then it stopped, and me and Pap started down to the barn but she called us and made us bring the dishes to the kitchen

door. Then we went down to the lot and set on the fence, only, like Pap said, without no stock to look at, it wasn't no comfort in it. "I reckon she jest rode up to that durn feller's tent and said, 'Here's your team.

Now you git me my separator and git it quick; I got to ketch a ride back home,' " Pap said. And then after a while we heard it again, and that afternoon we walked up to Old Man Anse's to borrow a mule to finish the lower piece with, but he never had none to spare now. So he jest cussed around a while and then we come on back and set on the fence. And sure enough, pretty soon we could hear Mammy starting it up and it running strong and steady, like it would make the milk fly. "She is separating it again," Pap said. "It looks like she is fixing to get a heap of pleasure and comfort outen it."

The End