



Lizards in Jamshyd's Courtyard, William Faulkner

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I

ALONG TOWARD MID-AFTERNOON the wagons, the saddle horses and mules would begin to arrive. From both directions they came up the valley, each in its own slow dust, with a quality profound and dramatic, like the painted barge which they hauled across the stage in Ben Hur.

They came, slow, deliberate, behind the bobbing mule ears, with upon their occupants — the men, the women, the young and the old — a quality not festive, since it was too profoundly undivergent, but of holiday, of escape and of immolation like that of people going to the theater to see tragedy, to turn from the broad valley highway into the old road, the peaceful and healing scar.

So peaceful the road was, so healed of the old scars of man's old restlessness, that almost with the turning the road appeared to have run immediately into another land, another world; the weathered wagons, the plow-galled mules, the men and the women in overalls and awkward gingham, into another time, another afternoon without time or name.

For almost sixty years the road had been unmarked by wheel or hoof, so that now, where the sand darkened into the shallow water of the branch, the recent thick marks of rims and iron shoes were as startling as shouts in a church.

Beyond the branch, where there was now no trace of the vanished bridge, the road began to mount. It ran straight as a plumb line, bordered by a shaggy hedgerow of spaced cedars three and four feet

thick now, the boughs locked and massed now, mounting to where, out of a jungle of formal cedars, a fading dilapidation of broad formal grounds and gardens, the gaunt and austere skeleton of a huge house lifted its broken roof and topless chimneys.

It was known as the Old Frenchman's place, after its builder, who had straightened the river bed and reclaimed four thousand acres of jungle bottom land for his slaves to raise cotton on — a huge square house which the anonymous builder's nameless and unrecorded successors had been pulling down for firewood since the Civil War, set in grounds laid out by an imported English architect a hundred years ago, upon a knoll overlooking the broad acres parceled now into small shiftless farms among his shiftless and illiterate heirs at large.

They did not even remember his name. They did not know for certain if his anonymous dust lay with that of his blood and of the progenitors of saxophone players in Harlem honky-tonks, beneath the weathered and illegible headstones on a smaller knoll four hundred yards away.

All that was left of him was the old mark of the river bed, and the road, and the skeleton of the house, and the legend of the gold which his slaves buried somewhere when Grant passed through the land on his Vicksburg campaign; so that for sixty years three generations of sons and grandsons, lurking into the place at night and on foot, had turned under the original surface time and again, hunting for the gold and the silver, the money and the plate.

The place was owned now by Varner, who was the principal landowner of the community; he had bought it for the taxes and kept it under the same condition.

The fresh tracks did not go on as far as the house. They went on to where, beside and along the fence to what had once been a garden, the wagons themselves stood and drew up in turn and stopped. The women kept their seats on the splint chairs in the wagon beds.

The men, though, descended and went to the fence and leaned there where the earlier arrivals already stood, watching the man who was digging in the garden. He was digging alone, spading the earth steadily down the slope toward the ditch, working with a certain unflagging fury. He had been digging there for a week. His name was Henry Armstid.

They had been watching him for a week, coming by wagon and on horse and mule back for ten miles, to gather, with lips full of snuff, along the fence with the decorum of a formal reception, the rapt and static interest of a crowd watching a magician at a fair. On the first day, when the first rider descended and came to the fence, Armstid turned and ran at him with the lifted shovel, cursing in a harsh, light whisper, and drove the man away.

But he had quit that, and he appeared to be not even aware of them as on the successive days they gathered along the fence, talking a little among themselves in sparse syllables, watching Armstid spade the surface of the garden steadily down the slope toward the ditch, working steadily back and forth across the hillside.

Along toward sundown they would begin to watch the road, until sometime before dark the last wagon would arrive. It contained a single occupant; a weathered and patched wagon drawn by two rabbit-like mules, creaking terrifically on crazy and dishing wheels.

Then the spectators would stop talking and they would turn and watch quietly while the occupant, a woman in a gray shapeless garment and a faded sunbonnet, descended and lifted down a tin pail and approached the fence beyond which Armstid still had not looked up, had not faltered in his labor.

She would set the pail into the corner of the fence and then stand there for a time, motionless, the gray garment falling in rigid folds to her stained tennis shoes, her hands rolled together into a fold of the garment. She just stood there. She did not appear to look at Armstid, to look at anything. She was his wife; the pail she brought contained cold food.

She never stayed long. He never looked up when she came and they never spoke, and after a while she would return to the crazy wagon and get in and drive away. Then the spectators would begin to drift away, mounting their wagons and creaking also supperward, barnward, leaving Henry alone again, spading himself into the waxing twilight with the regularity of a mechanical toy and with something monstrous in his unflagging effort, as if the toy were too light for what it had been set to do, and too tightly wound.

In the long forenoons, squatting with their slow tobacco on the porch of Varner's store two miles away, or in halted wagons along the quiet roads and lanes, or in the fields or at the cabin doors about the slow, laborious land, they talked about it.

"Still at it, is he?"

"Sho. Still at it."

“Reckon he’s aiming to kill himself there in that garden.”

“Well, it won’t be no loss to her.”

“It’s a fact. Save her a trip ever’ day, toting him food.”

“I notice she don’t never stay long out there when she comes.”

“She has to get back home to get supper for them chaps of theirs and to take care of the stock.”

“I reckon she won’t be sorry.”

“Sho. It’s a fact.”

“That Flem Snopes. I’ll declare.”

“He’s a sight, sho. Yes, sir. Wouldn’t no other man but him done it.”

“Couldn’t no other man done it. Anybody might a-fooled Henry Armstid. But couldn’t nobody but Flem a-fooled Suratt.”

“That’s a fact, that’s a fact. Sho.”

II

Suratt was a sewing-machine agent. He traveled the country in a buckboard, to the rear of which was attached a sheet-iron dog kennel painted to resemble a house. It had two painted windows on each side, in each of which a painted woman’s face simpered above a painted sewing machine, and into the kennel a sewing machine neatly fitted.

On successive days and two counties apart, the buckboard and the sturdy mismatched team might be seen tethered in the nearest shade,

and Suratt's affable, ready face and neat, tieless blue shirt one of the squatting group on the porch of a crossroads store. Or — and still squatting — among the women surrounded by laden clotheslines and blackened wash pots at springs and wells, or decorous in a splint chair in cabin dooryards, talking and listening.

He had a regular itinerary, selling perhaps three machines a year, and the rest of the time trading in land and livestock, in secondhand farm tools and musical instruments, or whatever came to his hand. He had an affable and impenetrable volubility, a gift for anecdote and gossip. He never forgot names and he knew everyone, man, mule and dog, in fifty miles. He was believed to be well fixed.

His itinerary brought him to Varner's store every six weeks. One day he arrived two weeks ahead of schedule. While across the county he had bought, for twenty dollars, of a Northerner who was establishing a ranch to breed native goats, a contract to sell the Northerner a hundred goats which Suratt knew to be owned near Varner's store, in the Frenchman's Bend country.

Of the four or five men squatting along the porch of the store Suratt made his guarded inquiries, larding them skillfully into his anecdote, and got the information which he wanted. The next morning he drove out to the first goat owner.

"Wish you'd got here yesterday," the man said. "I done already sold them goats."

"The devil you have," Suratt said. "Who to?"

"Flem Snopes."

“Flem Snopes?”

Snopes was the man who ran Varner’s store. Varner himself — he was a politician, a veterinary, a Methodist lay preacher — was hardly ever seen about the store. Snopes had been running the store for two or three years — a squat man who might have been any age between twenty-five and fifty, with a round full face and dull eyes, who sat all day, between the infrequent customers, in a tilted chair in the door, chewing and whittling and saying no word.

All that was known of him was known on hearsay, and that not his own; it was not even known what his exact relation to Varner and the store was, whether clerk, partner or what. He had been sitting in his usual chair, chewing and whittling, while Suratt was getting his information about the goats.

“He come out here last night and bought all I had,” the goat owner said.

“You mean, he come out here after dark?”

“About nine o’clock it was. I reckon he couldn’t leave the store sooner.”

“Sho,” Suratt said. “I reckon not.” The second goat owner lived four miles away. Suratt drove it in thirty-two minutes. “I come out to see if you sold your goats at ten o’clock last night, or was it half-past ten?”

“Why, yes,” the man said. “It was along about midnight when Flem got here. How did you know?”

“I knowed I had the best team,” Suratt said. “That’s how. Good-by.”

“What’s your hurry? I got a couple of shotes I might sell.”

“Sho, now,” Suratt said. “They wouldn’t do me no good. Soon as they belonged to me they would get elephant-sized overnight, and bust. This here country’s too rich for me.”

He did not call on the other goat owner at all. He returned to Jefferson without passing Varner’s store. Three miles from town, a single goat balanced with somnolent precariousness upon the roof of a barn. Beside the fence a small boy in overalls watched Suratt draw up and stop.

“What did Flem Snopes offer you for that goat, bud?” Suratt said.

“Sir?” the boy said.

Suratt drove on. Three days later Snopes gave Suratt twenty-one dollars for the contract for which Suratt had paid twenty. He put the twenty dollars away in a tobacco sack and held the other dollar in his hand. He chucked it, caught it, the squatting men along the wall watching him. Snopes had sat again, whittling.

“Well, at least I ain’t skunked.” Suratt said. The others guffawed, save Snopes. Suratt looked about at them, bleak, sardonic, humorous too. Two children, a boy and a girl, mounted the steps, carrying a basket. Suratt gave them the dollar. “Here, chillens,” he said. “Here’s something Mr. Snopes sent you.”

It was three years after that when Suratt learned that Snopes had bought the Old Frenchman place from Varner. Suratt knew the place. He knew it better than anyone suspected. Perhaps once a year he drove three or four miles out of his way to pass the place, entering

from the back. Why he took that precaution he could not have said; he probably would have believed it was not to be seen doing something by which he had no expectation of gaining anything.

Once a year he halted his buckboard before the house and sat in the buckboard to contemplate the austere skeleton somnolent in the summer sunlight, a little sinister, thinking of the generations of men who had dug for gold there, contemplating the inscrutable desolation of cedar and brier and crapemyrtle and calycanthus gone lush and wild, sensing out of the sunny and sinister silence the ancient spent and hopeful lusts, the optimism, the effluvium of the defunct greed and despair, the spent and secret nocturnal sweat left upon the place by men as quiet now as the man who had unwittingly left behind him a monument more enduring than any obituary either carved or cast.

“It’s bound to be there, somewhere,” Suratt told himself. “It’s bound to.” Then he would drive on to Varner’s store two miles away or to Jefferson twelve miles away, having carried away with him something of that ancient air, that old splendor, confusing it though he did with the fleshly gratifications, the wherewith to possess them, in his peasant’s mind. “It’s bound to. Folks wouldn’t keep on digging for it if it wasn’t there somewhere. It wouldn’t be right to keep on letting them. No, sir.”

When he learned that Snopes had bought the place, Suratt was eating dinner in Jefferson in the restaurant which he and his brother-in-law owned. He sat on a backless and friction-smooth stool, his elbows on the friction-smooth counter, eating steak and potatoes. He became motionless, humped forward in the attitude of eating, the laden knife blade arrested halfway to his mouth, his eyes profoundly concentrant. “If Flem Snopes bought that place, he knows something about it that even Will Varner never knowed. Flem Snopes wouldn’t buy a nickel

mousetrap withouten he knowed beforehand it would make him back a dime.”

He reached Varner’s store in mid-afternoon. Snopes was sitting in the chair, chewing, whittling minutely at a piece of soft pine. There was about him, his white shirt, his blue denim trousers braced thick and smooth, a profound inertia impervious to haste like that of a cow, to the necessity for haste like an idol. “That’s what makes me so mad about it,” Suratt told himself. “That he can set still and know what I got to work so hard to find out.

That I got to work fast to learn it and ain’t got time to work fast because I don’t know if I got time to make a mistake by working fast. And him just setting still.” But when he mounted the steps there was upon his brown, lean face its usual expression — alert, quizzical, pleasant, impenetrable and immediate. He greeted in rotation the men who squatted along the wall.

“Well, boys,” he said, “I hear Flem has done bought himself a farm. You fixing to start a goat ranch of your own, Flem? Or maybe it’s just a home for the folks you trims trading.” Then he said, getting his sober and appreciative laugh while Snopes chewed slowly and trimmed minutely at the stick with the profound impenetrability of an idol or a cow, “Well, if Flem knowed any way to make anything offen that old place, he’d be too durn close-mouthed to tell himself about it.”

III

The three men crouched in the weeds along the ditch at the foot of the garden. The shaggy slope rose before them in the darkness to the crest

where the broken roof and topless chimneys of the house stood sharp against the sky. In one of the windows a single star showed, like a feeble candle set upon the ledge. They lay in the weeds, listening to the sigh and recover of an invisible shovel halfway up the garden slope.

“Didn’t I tell you?” Suratt whispered. “Didn’t I? Is there e’er a man or woman in this country that don’t know Flem Snopes wouldn’t pay a nickel for nothing if he didn’t know all the time he would make a dime back?”

“How do I know it’s Flem?” the second said. His name was Vernon Tull. He was a well-to-do bachelor.

“Ain’t I watched him?” Suratt said. “Ain’t I laid here in these weeds two nights now and watched him come out here and dig? Ain’t I waited until he left, and crawled up there and found every place where he had done filled the hole up again and smoothed the dirt back to hide it?”

“But how do I know it’s Flem?” Vernon said.

“If you knowed, would you believe it was something buried there?” Suratt whispered. The third man was Henry Armstid. He lay between them, glaring up the dark slope; they could feel him trembling like a dog. Now and then he cursed in a dry whisper. He lived on a small mortgaged farm, which he and his wife worked like two men.

During one season, having lost one of his mules, he and his wife did the plowing, working day about in the second trace beside the other mule. The land was either poor land or they were poor managers.

It made for them less than a bare living, which the wife eked out by weaving by the firelight after dark. She wove fancy objects of colored string saved from packages and of bits of cloth given her by the women in Jefferson, where, in a faded gingham wrapper and sunbonnet and tennis shoes, she peddled the objects from door to door on the market days. They had four children, all under six years of age, the youngest an infant in arms.

They lay there in the weeds, the darkness, hearing the shovel. After a while it ceased. "He's done found it," Henry said. He surged suddenly between them. They grasped his arms.

"Stop!" Suratt whispered. "Stop! Help hold him, Vernon." They held him until he ceased and lay again between them, rigid, glaring, cursing. "He ain't found it yet." Suratt whispered.

"He knows it's there somewhere; he's done found the paper maybe that tells. But he's got to hunt for it same as we will. He knows it's in that 'ere garden, but he's got to hunt for it same as us. Ain't we done watched him?" They spoke in hissing whispers, rigid, panting, glaring up the starlit slope.

"How do I know it's Flem?" Vernon said.

"Just watch, that's all," Suratt whispered. They crouched; the shadowy, deliberate motion of the digger mounted the slope. It was the sound made by a lazy man rather than by a cautious one. Suratt gripped Henry. "Watch, now!" he whispered. They breathed with hissing exhalations, in passionate and dying sighs.

Then the man came into sight. For a moment he came into relief against the sky upon the crest of the knoll, as though he had paused

there for an instant. "There!" Suratt whispered. "Ain't that Flem Snopes? Do you believe now?"

Vernon drew his breath quietly in like a man preparing to sleep. "It's a fact," he said. He spoke quietly, soberly. "It's Flem."

"Do you believe now?" Suratt whispered. "Do you? Do you believe now?" Between them, Henry lay cursing in a dry whisper. Beneath Vernon's and Suratt's arms his arms felt like wire cables vibrating faintly.

"All we got to do," Suratt said, "is to find where it's at tomorrow night, and then get it."

"Tomorrow night, hell!" Henry said. "Let's get up there now and find it. That's what we got to do. Before he—"

They argued with him, violent, sibilant, expostulant. They held him flat on the ground between them, cursing. "We got to find where it is the first time and dig it up," Suratt said. "We got to get Uncle Dick. Can't you see that? Can't you see we got to find it the first time? That we can't be caught looking?"

"We got to get Uncle Dick," Vernon said. "Hush, Henry. Hush, now."

They returned the next night with Uncle Dick. When Vernon and Suratt, carrying the second shovel and the pick and half carrying Uncle Dick between them, climbed up out of the ditch at the foot of the garden, they could hear Henry already digging.

After concealing the buckboard in the branch bottom they had had to run to keep even within hearing of Henry, and so Uncle Dick could not yet stand alone. Yet they released him at once, whereupon he sank to the ground at their feet, from where his invisible breathing rose in reedy gasps, and as one Vernon and Suratt glared into the darkness toward the hushed, furious sound of Henry's shovel.

"We got to make him quit until Uncle Dick's ready," Suratt said. They ran toward the sound, shoulder to shoulder in the stumbling dark. Suratt spoke to Henry. Henry did not cease to dig. Suratt grasped at the shovel. Henry whirled, the shovel raised like an ax; they glared at each other, their faces strained with sleeplessness and weariness and lust. It was Suratt's fourth night without having removed his clothes; Vernon's and Henry's second.

"Touch it," Henry whispered. "Touch it."

"Wait, Henry," Suratt said. "Let Uncle Dick find where it's at."

"Get away," Henry said. "I warn you. Get outen my hole."

Uncle Dick was sitting up when Suratt and Vernon returned running and plunged down beside him and began to scabble in the dark weeds for the second shovel. Suratt found the pick and learned the blade with his hand in one motion and flung it behind him into the darkness again, and plunged down again just as Vernon found the shovel. They struggled for it, their breathing harsh, mute, repressed. "Leave go," Suratt whispered. "Leave go." They clutched the shovel between them. Out of the darkness came the unflagging sound of Henry's digging.

"Wait," Uncle Dick said. He got stiffly to his feet — a shriveled little old man in a filthy frock coat, with a long white beard. Between sunup and

sundown Suratt, seventy-two hours without having removed his clothes, drove thirty miles to fetch him from where he lived alone in a mud-daubed hut in a cane swamp.

He had no other name, and he antedated all who knew him. He made and sold nostrums and charms, and they said that he ate not only frogs and snakes but bugs as well — anything that he could catch. “Wait,” he said in a reedy, quavering voice. “Ther air anger in the yearth. Ye must make that ’ere un quit a-bruisin’ hit, so the Lord kin show whar hit’s hid at.”

“That’s so,” Suratt said. “It won’t work unless the ground is quiet. I forgot.”

When they approached, Henry stood erect in his pit and threatened them with the shovel and cursed them, but Uncle Dick walked up and touched him.

“Ye kin dig and ye kin dig, young man,” he said. “Fer what’s rendered to the yearth, the yearth will keep withouten the will of the Lord air revealed.”

Henry desisted then and lowered the shovel. Uncle Dick drove them back to the ditch. From his coat he produced a forked peach branch, from the end of which, dangling on a bit of string, swung an empty brass cartridge containing a gold-filled human tooth. He held them there for five minutes, stooping now and then to lay his hand flat on the ground.

Then with the three of them at his heels — Henry rigid, silent; Suratt and Vernon speaking now and then in short, hissing whispers — he

went to the fence corner and grasped the two prongs of the branch in his hands and stood there for a moment, muttering to himself.

They moved like a procession, with something at once outrageously pagan and orthodoxly funereal about them, working slowly back and forth across the garden, mounting the slope in overlapping traverses. Near the spot where they had watched the man digging last night Uncle Dick began to slow. The others clumped at his back, breathing with thick, tense breaths. "Tech my elbers," Uncle Dick said. They did so. Inside his sleeves his arms — arms thin and frail and dead as rotten wood — were jerking a little.

Henry began to curse, pointless. Uncle Dick stopped; when they jarred into him they felt his whole thin body straining. Suratt made a sound with his mouth and touched the twig and found it curved into a rigid down-pointing bar, the string taut as wire. Uncle Dick staggered; his arms sprang free. The twig lay dead at his feet until Henry, digging furiously with his bare hands, flung it away. He was still cursing. He was cursing the ground, the earth.

They got the tools and began to dig, swiftly, hurling the dirt aside, while Uncle Dick, shapeless in his shapeless garment, appeared to muse upon them with detached interest. Suddenly the three of them became utterly still in their attitudes, then they leaped into the hole and struggled silently over something.

"Stop it!" Suratt whispered. "Stop it! Ain't we all three pardners alike?"

But Henry clung to the object and at last Vernon and Suratt desisted and stood away. Henry was half stooped, clutching the object to his middle, glaring at them.

“Let him keep it,” Vernon said. “Don’t you know that ain’t all? Come here, Uncle Dick.”

Uncle Dick was motionless behind them. His head was turned toward the ditch, toward where they had hidden. “What?” Suratt whispered. They were all three motionless, rigid, stooped a little. “Do you see something? Is it somebody hiding yonder?”

“I feel four bloods lust-running,” Uncle Dick said. “Hit’s four sets of blood here lusting for dross.”

They crouched, rigid. “Well, ain’t it four of us right here?” Vernon said.

“Uncle Dick don’t care nothing about money,” Suratt said. “If it’s somebody hiding there—”

They were running then, the tools clutched, plunging and stumbling down the slope.

“Kill him,” Henry said. “Watch every bush and kill him.”

“No,” Suratt said, “catch him first.”

They halted at the ditch bank. They could hear Henry beating along the ditch. But they found nothing.

“Maybe Uncle Dick never seen nobody,” Vernon said.

“He’s gone, anyway,” Suratt said. “Maybe it—” He ceased. He and Vernon stared at each other; above their held breath they heard the horse. It was going at a gallop, the sound clear but faint, diminishing. Then it ceased. They stared at each other in the darkness, across their breath. “That means we got till daylight,” Suratt said. “Come on.”

Twice more Uncle Dick's twig sprang and bent; twice more they exhumed small bulging canvas sacks solid and unmistakable even in the dark.

"Now," Suratt said, "we got a hole apiece and till daylight to do it in. Dig, boys."

When the east began to gray they had found nothing more. At last they made Henry see reason and quit, and they filled up the holes and removed the traces of their labor. They opened the bags in the gray light. Vernon's and Suratt's contained each twenty-five silver dollars. Henry wouldn't tell what his contained. He crouched over it some distance away, his back toward them. Vernon and Suratt closed the sacks and looked at each other quietly, their blood cool now with weariness, with sleeplessness and fatigue.

"We got to buy it," Suratt said. "We got to buy it tomorrow."

"You mean today," Vernon said. Beneath a tree, in the wan light, Uncle Dick lay sleeping. He slept quiet as a child, not even snoring.

"That's right," Suratt said. "It's today now."

IV

When at noon the next day Suratt drove up to the store, there was a stranger squatting among the others on the porch. His name was Eustace Grimm, from the adjoining county — a youngish man, also in overalls, with a snuff stick in his mouth. Snopes sat in the tilted chair in the doorway, whittling.

Suratt descended and tethered his team. "Morning, gentlemen," he said.

They replied. "Be durn if you don't look like you ain't been to bed in a week, Suratt," one said. "What you up to now? Lon Quick said his boy seen your team hid out in the bottom below Armstid's two mornings ago, but I told him I didn't reckon them horses had done nothing to hide from. I wasn't so sho about you, I told him."

Suratt joined the laugh readily. "I reckon not. I reckon I'm still smart enough to not be caught by nobody around here except Flem Snopes. 'Course I take a back seat for Flem." He mounted the steps. Snopes had not looked up. Suratt looked briefly from face to face, his gaze pausing for an instant at Eustace Grimm, then going on. "To tell the truth, I am getting pretty durn tired of traipsing all over the country to make a living. Be durn if I ain't sometimes a good mind to buy me a piece of land and settle down like folks."

"You might buy that Old What-you-call-it place from Flem," Grimm said. He was watching Suratt. Suratt looked at him. When he spoke his tone was immediate, far superior to merely casual.

"That's a fact. I might do that." He looked at Grimm. "What you doing way up here, Eustace? Ain't you strayed a right smart?"

"I come up to see if I couldn't trade Flem outen—"

Snopes spoke. His voice was not cold so much as utterly devoid of any inflection. "Reckon you better get on to dinner, Eustace," he said. "Mrs. Littlejohn'll be ringing the bell soon. She don't like to be kept waiting."

Grimm looked at Snopes, his mouth still slacked for talk. He rose. Suratt looked at Snopes, too, who had not raised his head from his whittling. Suratt looked at Grimm again. Grimm had closed his mouth. He was moving toward the steps.

“If it’s goats you’re aiming to trade Flem for,” Suratt said, “I can warn you to look out.”

The others laughed, sober, appreciative. Grimm descended the steps. “That depends on how smart the fellow is that trades with Flem,” he said. “I reckon Flem don’t only need goats—”

“Tell her I’ll be there in ten minutes,” Snopes said. Again Grimm paused, looking back, his mouth slacked for speech; again he closed it.

“All right,” he said. He went on. Suratt watched him. Then he looked at Snopes.

“Flem,” he said, “you sholy ain’t going to unload that Old Frenchman place on a poor fellow like Eustace Grimm? Boys, we hadn’t ought to stand for it. I reckon Eustace has worked pretty hard for every cent he’s got, and he won’t be no match for Flem.”

Snopes whittled with tedious deliberation, his jaw thrusting steadily.

“Of course, a smart fellow like Flem might make something offen that old place, but Eustace now — Let me tell you what I heard about one of them Grimms down there last month; it might be Eustace they tell it on.” He achieved his anecdote skillfully above the guffaws. When he had finished it Snopes rose, putting his knife away. He crossed the porch, waddling thickly in his denim trousers braced neatly over his white shirt, and descended the steps. Suratt watched him.

“If it’s that time, I reckon I better move too,” Suratt said. “Might have to go into town this evening.” He descended the steps. Snopes had gone on. “Here, Flem,” Suratt said. “I’m going past Littlejohn’s. I’ll give you a free ride that far. Won’t cost you a cent.”

Again the squatting men on the porch guffawed, watching Suratt and Snopes like four or five boys twelve years old might watch and listen to two boys fourteen years old. Snopes stopped. He did not look back. He stood there, chewing with steady unhaste, until Suratt swung the buckboard up and cramped the wheel; then he got in. They drove on.

“So you done sold that old place,” Suratt said. They drove at a walk. Mrs. Littlejohn’s house was a quarter of a mile down the road. In the middle distance Eustace Grimm walked, his back toward them. “That ’ere Frenchman place,” Suratt said.

Snopes spat over the wheel. “Dickering,” he said.

“Oh,” Suratt said. “Can’t get Eustace to close with you?” They drove on. “What’s Eustace want with that place? I thought his folks owned a right smart of land down yonder.”

“Heard so,” Snopes said.

They drove on. Grimm’s figure was a little nearer. Suratt drew the team down to a slower walk. “Well, if a man just give what that old place is worth, I reckon most anybody could buy it.” They drove on. “Still, for a man that just wanted a place to settle down, a fellow that depended on outside work for his living—”

Snopes spat over the wheel.

“Yes, sir,” Suratt said. “For a fellow that just aimed to fix him up a home, say. Like me. A fellow like that might give you two hundred for it. Just the house and garden and orchard, say.” The red dust coiled slow beneath the slow hoofs and wheels. Grimm had almost reached Mrs. Littlejohn’s gate. “What would you take for that much of it?”

“Don’t aim to sell unless I sell the whole place,” Snopes said. “Ain’t in no rush to sell that.”

“Yes?” Suratt said. “What was you asking Eustace Grimm for the whole place?”

“Ain’t asked him nothing yet. Just listened to him.”

“Well, what would you ask me, say?”

“Three thousand,” Snopes said.

“Three which?” Suratt said. He laughed, slapping his leg. He laughed for some time. “If you ain’t a sight. Three thousand.” They drove on. Grimm had reached Mrs. Littlejohn’s gate. Suratt quit laughing. “Well, I hope you get it. If Eustace can’t quite meet that, I might could find you a buyer at three hundred, if you get in a tight to sell.”

“Ain’t in no rush to sell,” Snopes said. “I’ll get out here.” Grimm had paused at the gate. He was looking back at them from beneath his hat brim, with a gaze at once attentive and veiled.

That afternoon Suratt, Vernon and Henry made Snopes three joint notes for one thousand dollars each.

Vernon was good for his. Suratt gave a lien on his half of the restaurant which he and his brother-in-law owned in Jefferson. Henry gave a

second mortgage on his farm and a chattel mortgage on his stock and fixtures, including a new stove which his wife had bought with her weaving money, and a mile of barbed-wire fence.

They reached their new property just before sundown. When they arrived a wagon, the mules still — or already — in the traces, stood on the lawn, and then Eustace Grimm came around the corner of the house and stood there, watching them. Henry ordered him off the place. He got into the wagon and they began to dig at once, though it was still light. They dug for some little time before they found that Grimm had not yet departed. He was sitting in the wagon in the road, watching them across the fence, until Henry rushed at him with his shovel. Then he drove on.

Vernon and Suratt had stopped also. Vernon watched Grimm's back as he rattled on down the road in the slow wagon. "Ain't he some kin to them Snopeses?" Vernon said. "A in-law or something?"

"What?" Suratt said. They watched the wagon disappear in the dusk. "I didn't know that."

"Come on," Vernon said. "Henry's getting ahead of us." They began to dig again. It was dark soon, but they could still hear one another.

They dug steadily for two nights, two brief summer darks broken by the daylight intervals of fitful sleep on the bare floor of their house, where even to the ground floor the sunlight reached in patchy splashes at noon. In the sad light of the third dawn Suratt stopped and straightened his back. Twenty feet away, Henry, in his pit, moved up and down with the regularity of an automaton.

He was waist-deep, as though he were digging himself tirelessly into that earth whose born thrall he was; as though he had been severed at the waist, the dead torso laboring on in measured stoop and recover, not knowing that it was dead.

They had completely turned under the entire surface of the garden, and standing in the dark fresh loam, his muscles flinching and jerking with fatigue, Suratt watched Henry; and then he found that Vernon was watching him quietly in turn. Suratt laid his shovel carefully down and went to where Vernon stood. They stood looking at each other while the dawn grayed upon their gaunt faces. When they spoke their voices were quiet.

“You looked close at that money of yours yet?” Suratt said.

Vernon didn't answer at once. They watched Henry as he rose and fell behind his pick. “I don't reckon I dared to,” Vernon said. He laid his tool carefully on the earth also, and together he and Suratt turned and went to the house. It was still dark in the house, so they lit the lantern and took the two sacks from the hiding place in a chimney and set the lantern on the floor.

“I reckon we'd ought to thought it wouldn't no cloth sack—” Suratt said.

“Sho,” Vernon said. “I reckon you can say that and leave off about the sack.”

They squatted, the lantern between them, opening the sacks. “Bet you a dollar I beat you,” Suratt said.

“All right,” Vernon said. They laid two coins aside and examined the others, one by one. Then they looked at each other. “1901,” Vernon said. “What you got?”

“1896,” Suratt said. “I beat you.”

“Yes,” Vernon said. “You beat me.” Suratt took up the wager and they hid the money again and blew the lantern out. It was lighter now, and they could see Henry quite well as he worked in his thigh-deep trench. Soon the sun; already three buzzards soared in it high against the yellow blue.

Henry did not look up at them when they reached him. “Henry,” Suratt said. Henry did not pause. “When was your oldest dollar minted, Henry?” Suratt said. Henry did not falter. Suratt came nearer and touched his shoulder. “Henry,” he said.

Henry whirled, raising the shovel, the blade turned edgewise, glinting a thin line of steel-colored dawn such as an ax would have.

“Git outen my hole,” he said. “Git outen hit.”

The End