



Lo! William Faulkner

Lo!

THE PRESIDENT STOOD motionless at the door of the Dressing Room, fully dressed save for his boots. It was half-past six in the morning and it was snowing; already he had stood for an hour at the window, watching the snow.

Now he stood just inside the door to the corridor, utterly motionless in his stockings, stooped a little from his lean height as though listening, on his face an expression of humorless concern, since humor had departed from his situation and his view of it almost three weeks before. Hanging from his hand, low against his flank, was a hand mirror of elegant French design, such as should have been lying upon a lady's dressing table: certainly at this hour of a February day.

At last he put his hand on the knob and opened the door infinitesimally; beneath his hand the door crept by inches and without any sound; still with that infinitesimal silence he put his eye to the crack and saw, lying upon the deep, rich pile of the corridor carpet, a bone. It was a cooked bone, a rib; to it still adhered close shreds of flesh holding in mute and overlapping halfmoons the marks of human teeth. Now that the door was open he could hear the voices too.

Still without any sound, with that infinite care, he raised and advanced the mirror. For an instant he caught his own reflection in it and he paused for a time and with a kind of cold unbelief he examined his own face — the face of the shrewd and courageous lighter, of that wellnigh infallible expert in the anticipation of and controlling of man and his doings, overlaid now with the baffled helplessness of a child.

Then he slanted the glass a little further until he could see the corridor reflected in it. Squatting and facing one another across the carpet as across a stream of water were two men. He did not know the faces, though he knew the Face, since he had looked upon it by day and dreamed upon it by night for three weeks now. It was a squat face, dark, a little flat, a little Mongol; secret, decorous, impenetrable, and grave.

He had seen it repeated until he had given up trying to count it or even estimate it; even now, though he could see the two men squatting before him and could hear the two quiet voices, it seemed to him that in some idiotic moment out of attenuated sleeplessness and strain he looked upon a single man facing himself in a mirror.

They wore beaver hats and new frock coats; save for the minor detail of collars and waistcoats they were impeccably dressed — though a little early — for the forenoon of the time, down to the waist. But from here down credulity, all sense of fitness and decorum, was outraged.

At a glance one would have said that they had come intact out of Pickwickian England, save that the tight, light-colored smallclothes ended not in Hessian boots nor in any boots at all, but in dark, naked feet.

On the floor beside each one lay a neatly rolled bundle of dark cloth; beside each bundle in turn, mute toe and toe and heel and heel, as though occupied by invisible sentries facing one another across the corridor, sat two pairs of new boots.

From a basket woven of whiteoak withes beside one of the squatting men there shot suddenly the snake-like head and neck of a game cock, which glared at the faint flash of the mirror with a round, yellow, outraged eye. It was from these that the voices came, pleasant, decorous, quiet:

“That rooster hasn’t done you much good up here.”

“That’s true. Still, who knows? Besides, I certainly couldn’t have left him at home, with those damned lazy Indians. I wouldn’t find a feather left. You know that. But it is a nuisance, having to lug this cage around with me day and night.”

“This whole business is a nuisance, if you ask me.”

“You said it. Squatting here outside this door all night long, without a gun or anything. Suppose bad men tried to get in during the night: what could we do? If anyone would want to get in. I don’t.”

“Nobody does. It’s for honor.”

“Whose honor? Yours? Mine? Frank Weddel’s?”

“White man’s honor. You don’t understand white people. They are like children: you have to handle them careful because you never know what they are going to do next. So if it’s the rule for guests to squat all night long in the cold outside this man’s door, we’ll just have to do it. Besides, hadn’t you rather be in here than out yonder in the snow in one of those damn tents?”

“You said it. What a climate. What a country. I wouldn’t have this town if they gave it to me.”

“Of course you wouldn’t. But that’s white men: no accounting for taste. So as long as we are here, we’ll have to try to act like these people believe that Indians ought to act. Because you never know until afterward just what you have done to insult or scare them. Like this having to talk white talk all the time. . . .”

The President withdrew the mirror and closed the door quietly. Once more he stood silent and motionless in the middle of the room, his head bent, musing, baffled yet indomitable: indomitable since this was not the first time that he had faced odds; baffled since he faced not an enemy in the open field, but was besieged within his very high and lonely office by them to whom he was, by legal if not divine appointment, father.

In the iron silence of the winter dawn he seemed, clairvoyant of walls, to be ubiquitous and one with the waking of the stately House. Invisible and in a kind of musing horror he seemed to be of each group of his Southern guests — that one squatting without the door, that larger one like so many figures carved of stone in the very rotunda itself of this concrete and visible apotheosis of the youthful Nation’s pride — in their new beavers and frock coats and woolen drawers.

With their neatly rolled pantaloons under their arms and their virgin shoes in the other hand; dark, timeless, decorous and serene beneath the astonished faces and golden braid, the swords and ribbons and stars, of European diplomats.

The President said quietly, “Damn. Damn. Damn.” He moved and crossed the room, pausing to take up his boots from where they sat beside a chair, and approached the opposite door. Again he paused and opened this door too quietly and carefully, out of the three weeks’

habit of expectant fatalism, though there was only his wife beyond it, sleeping peacefully in bed.

He crossed this room in turn, carrying his boots, pausing to replace the hand glass on the dressing table, among its companion pieces of the set which the new French Republic had presented to a predecessor, and tiptoed on and into the anteroom, where a man in a long cloak looked up and then rose, also in his stockings. They looked at one another soberly. "All clear?" the President said in a low tone.

"Yes, General."

"Good. Did you . . ." The other produced a second long, plain cloak.

"Good, good," the President said. He swung the cloak about him before the other could move. "Now the . . ." This time the other anticipated him; the President drew the hat well down over his face. They left the room on tiptoe, carrying their boots in their hands.

The back stairway was cold; their stockinged toes curled away from the treads, their vaporized breath wisped about their heads. They descended quietly and sat on the bottom step and put on their boots.

Outside it still snowed; invisible against snow-colored sky and snow-colored earth, the flakes seemed to materialize with violent and silent abruptness against the dark orifice of the stables.

Each bush and shrub resembled a white balloon whose dark shroud lines descended, light and immobile, to the white earth. Interspersed among these in turn and with a certain regularity were a dozen vaguely tent-shaped mounds, from the ridge of each of which a small column of smoke rose into the windless snow, as if the snow itself were in a state

of peaceful combustion. The President looked at these, once, grimly. "Get along," he said.

The other, his head lowered and his cloak held closely about his face, scuttled on and ducked into the stable. Perish the day when these two words were applied to the soldier chief of a party and a nation, yet the President was so close behind him that their breaths made one cloud.

And perish the day when the word flight were so applied, yet they had hardly vanished into the stable when they emerged, mounted now and already at a canter, and so across the lawn and past the snow-hidden tents and toward the gates which gave upon that Avenue in embryo yet but which in time would be the stage upon which each four years would parade the proud panoply of the young Nation's lusty man's estate for the admiration and envy and astonishment of the weary world.

At the moment, though, the gates were occupied by those more immediate than splendid augurs of the future.

"Look out," the other man said, reining back. They reined aside — the President drew the cloak about his face — and allowed the party to enter: the squat, broad, dark men dark against the snow, the beaver hats, the formal coats, the solid legs clad from thigh to ankle in woolen drawers. Among them moved three horses on whose backs were lashed the carcasses of six deer. They passed on, passing the two horsemen without a glance.

"Damn, damn, damn," the President said; then aloud: "You found good hunting."

One of the group glanced at him, briefly. He said courteously, pleasantly, without inflection, going on: "So so."

The horses moved again. "I didn't see any guns," the other man said.

"Yes," the President said grimly. "I must look into this, too. I gave strict orders. . . ." He said fretfully, "Damn. Damn. Do they carry their pantaloons when they go hunting too, do you know?"

The Secretary was at breakfast, though he was not eating. Surrounded by untasted dishes he sat, in his dressing gown and unshaven; his expression too was harried as he perused the paper which lay upon his empty plate. Before the fire were two men — one a horseman with unmelted snow still upon his cloak, seated on a wooden settle, the other standing, obviously the secretary to the Secretary.

The horseman rose as the President and his companion entered. "Sit down, sit down," the President said. He approached the table, slipping off the cloak, which the secretary came forward and took. "Give us some breakfast," the President said. "We don't dare go home." He sat down; the Secretary served him in person. "What is it now?" the President said.

"Do you ask?" the Secretary said. He took up the paper again and glared at it. "From Pennsylvania, this time." He struck the paper. "Maryland, New York, and now Pennsylvania; apparently the only thing that can stop them is the temperature of the water in the Potomac River."

He spoke in a harsh, irascible voice. "Complaint, complaint, complaint: here is a farmer near Gettysburg. His Negro slave was in the barn,

milking by lantern light after dark, when — the Negro doubtless thought about two hundred, since the farmer estimated them at ten or twelve — springing suddenly out of the darkness in plug hats and carrying knives and naked from the waist down.

Result, item: One barn and loft of hay and cow destroyed when the lantern was kicked over; item: one able-bodied slave last seen departing from the scene at a high rate of speed, headed for the forest, and doubtless now dead of fear or by the agency of wild beasts. Debit the Government of the United States: for barn and hay, one hundred dollars; for cow, fifteen dollars; for Negro slave, two hundred dollars. He demands it in gold.”

“Is that so?” the President said, eating swiftly. “I suppose the Negro and the cow took them to be ghosts of Hessian soldiers.”

“I wonder if they thought the cow was a deer,” the horseman said.

“Yes,” the President said. “That’s something else I want. . . .”

“Who wouldn’t take them for anything on earth or under it?” the Secretary said. “The entire Atlantic seaboard north of the Potomac River overrun by creatures in beaver hats and frock coats and woolen drawers, frightening women and children, setting fire to barns and running off slaves, killing deer. . . .”

“Yes,” the President said. “I want to say a word about that, myself. I met a party of them returning as I came out. They had six deer. I thought I gave strict orders that they were not to be permitted guns.”

Again it was the horseman who spoke. “They don’t use guns.”

“What?” the President said. “But I saw myself . . .”

“No, sir. They use knives. They track the deer down and slip up on them and cut their throats.”

“What?” the President said.

“All right, sir. I seen one of the deer. It never had a mark on it except its throat cut up to the neckbone with one lick.”

Again the President said, “Damn. Damn. Damn.” Then the President ceased and the Soldier cursed steadily for a while. The others listened, gravely, their faces carefully averted, save the Secretary, who had taken up another paper. “If you could just persuade them to keep their pantaloons on,” the President said. “At least about the House. . . .”

The Secretary started back, his hair upcrested like an outraged, iron-gray cockatoo. “I, sir? I persuade them?”

“Why not? Aren’t they subject to your Department? I’m just the President. Confound it, it’s got to where my wife no longer dares leave her bedroom, let alone receive lady guests. How am I to explain to the French Ambassador, for instance, why his wife no longer dares call upon my wife because the corridors and the very entrance to the House are blocked by half-naked Chickasaw Indians asleep on the floor or gnawing at half-raw ribs of meat? And I, myself, having to hide away from my own table and beg breakfast, while the official representative of the Government has nothing to do but . . .”

“. . . but explain again each morning to the Treasury,” the Secretary said in shrill rage, “why another Dutch farmer in Pennsylvania or New York must have three hundred dollars in gold in payment for the destruction of his farm and livestock, and explain to the State Department that the

capital is not being besieged by demons from hell itself, and explain to the War Department why twelve brand-new army tents must be ventilated at the top with butcher knives. . . .”

“I noticed that, too,” the President said mildly. “I had forgot it.”

“Ha. Your Excellency noted it,” the Secretary said fiercely. “Your Excellency saw it and then forgot it. I have neither seen it nor been permitted to forget it. And now Your Excellency wonders why I do not persuade them to wear their pantaloons.”

“It does seem like they would,” the President said fretfully. “The other garments seem to please them well enough. But there’s no accounting for taste.” He ate again. The Secretary looked at him, about to speak. Then he did not. As he watched the oblivious President a curious, secret expression came into his face; his gray and irate crest settled slowly, as if it were deflating itself. When he spoke now his tone was bland, smooth; now the other three men were watching the President with curious, covert expressions.

“Yes,” the Secretary said, “there’s no accounting for taste. Though it does seem that when one has been presented with a costume as a mark of both honor and esteem, let alone decorum, and by the chief of a well, tribe . . .”

“That’s what I thought,” the President said innocently. Then he ceased chewing and said “Eh?” sharply, looking up. The three lesser men looked quickly away, but the Secretary continued to watch the President with that bland, secret expression. “What the devil do you mean?” the President said. He knew what the Secretary meant, just as the other three knew.

A day or two after his guest had arrived without warning, and after the original shock had somewhat abated, the President had decreed the new clothing for them. He commanded, out of his own pocket, merchants and hatters as he would have commanded gunsmiths and bulletmakers in war emergency; incidentally he was thus able to estimate the number of them, the men at least, and within forty-eight hours he had transformed his guest's grave and motley train into the outward aspect of decorum at least.

Then, two mornings after that, the guest — the half Chickasaw, half Frenchman, the squat, obese man with the face of a Gascon brigand and the mannerisms of a spoiled eunuch and dingy lace at throat and wrist, who for three weeks now had dogged his waking hours and his sleeping dreams with bland inescapability — called formally upon him while he and his wife were still in bed at five o'clock in the morning, with two of his retainers carrying a bundle and what seemed to the President at least a hundred others, men, women and children, thronging quietly into the bedroom, apparently to watch him array himself in it.

For it was a costume — even in the shocked horror of the moment, the President found time to wonder wildly where in the capital Weddel (or Vidal) had found it — a mass, a network, of gold braid — frogs, epaulets, sash and sword — held loosely together by bright green cloth and presented to him in return.

This is what the Secretary meant, while the President glared at him and while behind them both the three other men stood looking at the fire with immobile gravity. "Have your joke," the President said. "Have it quickly. Are you done laughing now?"

“I laugh?” the Secretary said. “At what?”

“Good,” the President said. He thrust the dishes from him. “Then we can get down to business. Have you any documents you will need to refer to?”

The Secretary’s secretary approached. “Shall I get the other papers, sir?”

“Papers?” the Secretary said; once more his crest began to rise. “What the devil do I need with papers? What else have I thought about night and day for three weeks?”

“Good; good,” the President said. “Suppose you review the matter briefly, in case I have forgot anything else.”

“Your Excellency is indeed a fortunate man, if you have been able to forget,” the Secretary said. From the pocket of his dressing gown he took a pair of steel-bowed spectacles. But he used them merely to glare again at the President in cockatoo-crested outrage.

“This man, Weddel, Vidal — whatever his name is — he and his family or clan or whatever they are — claim to own the entire part of Mississippi which lies on the west side of this river in question. Oh, the grant is in order: that French father of his from New Orleans saw to that. — Well, it so happens that facing his home or plantation is the only ford in about three hundred miles.”

“I know all this,” the President said impatiently. “Naturally I regret now that there was any way of crossing the river at all. But otherwise I don’t see . . .”

“Neither did they,” the Secretary said. “Until the white man came.”

“Ah,” the President said. “The man who was mur . . .”

The Secretary raised his hand. “Wait. He stayed about a month with them, ostensibly hunting, since he would be absent all day long, though obviously what he was doing was assuring himself that there was no other ford close by. He never brought any game in; I imagine they laughed at that a good deal, in their pleasant way.”

“Yes,” the President said. “Weddel must have found that very amusing.”

“. . . or Vidal — whatever his name is,” the Secretary said fretfully. “He don’t even seem to know or even to care what his own name is.”

“Get on,” the President said. “About the ford.”

“Yes. Then one day, after a month, the white man offered to buy some of Weddel’s land — Weddel, Vidal — Damn, da . . .”

“Call him Weddel,” the President said.

“. . . from Weddel. Not much; a piece about the size of this room, for which Weddel or V — charged him about ten prices. Not out of any desire for usufruct, you understand; doubtless Weddel would have given the man the land or anyway wagered it on a game of mumble peg, it not having yet occurred to any of them apparently that the small plot which the man wanted contained the only available entrance to or exit from the ford.

Doubtless the trading protracted itself over several days or perhaps weeks, as a kind of game to while away otherwise idle afternoons or evenings, with the bystanders laughing heartily and pleasantly at the happy scene.

They must have laughed a great deal, especially when the man paid Weddel's price; they must have laughed hugely indeed later when they watched the white man out in the sun, building a fence around his property, it doubtless not even then occurring to them that what the white man had done was to fence off the only entrance to the ford."

"Yes," the President said impatiently. "But I still don't see . . ."

Again the Secretary lifted his hand, pontifical, admonitory. "Neither did they; not until the first traveler came along and crossed at the ford. The white man had built himself a tollgate."

"Oh," the President said.

"Yes. And now it must have been, indeed, amusing for them to watch the white man sitting now in the shade — he had a deerskin pouch fastened to a post for the travelers to drop their coins in, and the gate itself arranged so he could operate it by a rope from the veranda of his one-room domicile without having to even leave his seat; and to begin to acquire property — among which was the horse."

"Ah," the President said. "Now we are getting at it."

"Yes. They got at it swiftly from then on. It seems that the match was between the white man's horse and this nephew's horse, the wager the ford and tollgate against a thousand or so acres of land. The nephew's horse lost. And that night . . ."

“Ah,” the President said. “I see. And that night the white man was murdered.”

“Let us say, died,” the Secretary said primly, “since it is so phrased in the agent’s report. Though he did add in a private communication that the white man’s disease seemed to be a split skull. But that is neither here nor there.”

“No,” the President said. “It’s up yonder at the House.” Where they had been for three weeks now, men, women, children and Negro slaves, coming for fifteen hundred miles in slow wagons since that day in late autumn when the Chickasaw agent had appeared to inquire into the white man’s death.

For fifteen hundred miles, across winter swamps and rivers, across the trackless eastern backbone of the continent, led by the bland, obese mongrel despot and patriarch in a carriage, dozing, his nephew beside him and one fat, ringed hand beneath its fall of soiled lace lying upon the nephew’s knee to hold him in charge. “Why didn’t the agent stop him?” the President said.

“Stop him?” the Secretary cried. “He finally compromised to the extent of offering to allow the nephew to be tried on the spot, by the Indians themselves, he reserving only the intention of abolishing the tollgate, since no one knew the white man anyway. But no.

The nephew must come to you, to be absolved or convicted in person.”

“But couldn’t the agent stop the rest of them? Keep the rest of them from . . .”

“Stop them?” the Secretary cried again. “Listen. He moved in there and lived — Weddel, Vi — Damn! damn!! Where was — Yes. Weddel told him that the house was his; soon it was. Because how could he tell there were fewer faces present each morning than the night before? Could you have? Could you now?”

“I wouldn’t try,” the President said. “I would just declare a national thanksgiving. So they slipped away at night.”

“Yes. Weddel and the carriage and a few forage wagons went first; they had been gone about a month before the agent realized that each morning the number which remained had diminished somewhat. They would load the wagons and go at night, by families — grandparents, parents, children; slaves, chattels and dogs — everything. And why not? Why should they deny themselves this holiday at the expense of the Government?

Why should they miss, at the mere price of a fifteen-hundred-mile journey through unknown country in the dead of winter, the privilege and pleasure of spending a few weeks or months in new beavers and broadcloth coats and underdrawers, in the home of the beneficent White Father?”

“Yes,” the President said. He said: “And you have told him that there is no charge here against this nephew?”

“Yes. And that if they will go back home, the agent himself will declare the nephew innocent publicly, in whatever ceremony they think fit. And he said — how was it he put it?” The Secretary now spoke in a pleasant, almost lilting tone, in almost exact imitation of the man whom he

repeated: "All we desire is justice. If this foolish boy has murdered a white man, I think that we should know it."

"Damn, damn, damn," the President said. "All right. We'll hold the investigation. Get them down here and let's have it over with."

"Here?" The Secretary started back. "In my house?"

"Why not? I've had them for three weeks; at least you can have them for an hour." He turned to the companion. "Hurry. Tell them we are waiting here to hold his nephew's trial."

And now the President and the Secretary sat behind the cleared table and looked at the man who stood as though framed by the opened doors through which he had entered, holding his nephew by the hand like an uncle conducting for the first time a youthful provincial kinsman into a metropolitan museum of wax figures.

Immobile, they contemplated the soft, paunchy man facing them with his soft, bland, inscrutable face — the long, monk-like nose, the slumbrous lids, the flabby, café-au-lait-colored jowls above a froth of soiled lace of an elegance fifty years outmoded and vanished; the mouth was full, small, and very red.

Yet somewhere behind the face's expression of flaccid and weary disillusion, as behind the bland voice and the almost feminine mannerisms, there lurked something else: something willful, shrewd, unpredictable and despotic. Behind him clotted, quiet and gravely decorous, his dark retinue in beavers and broadcloth and woolen drawers, each with his neatly rolled pantaloons beneath his arm.

For a moment longer he stood, looking from face to face until he found the President. He said, in a voice of soft re-proach: "This is not your house."

"No," the President said. "This is the house of this chief whom I have appointed myself to be the holder of justice between me and my Indian people. He will deal justice to you."

The uncle bowed slightly. "That is all that we desire."

"Good," the President said. On the table before him sat inkstand, quill, and sandbox, and many papers with ribbons and golden seals much in evidence, though none could have said if the heavy gaze had remarked them or not. The President looked at the nephew. Young, lean, the nephew stood, his right wrist clasped by his uncle's fat, lace-foamed hand, and contemplated the President quietly, with grave and alert repose. The President dipped the quill into the ink. "Is this the man who . . ."

"Who performed this murder?" the uncle said pleasantly. "That is what we made this long winter's journey to discover. If he did, if this white man really did not fall from that swift horse of his perhaps and strike his head upon a sharp stone, then this nephew of mine should be punished. We do not think that it is right to slay white men like a confounded Cherokee or Creek."

Perfectly inscrutable, perfectly decorous, he looked at the two exalted personages playing behind the table their clumsy deception with dummy papers; for an instant the President himself met the slumbrous eyes and looked down. The Secretary though, upthrust, his crest roached violently upward, glared at the uncle.

“You should have held this horse-race across the ford itself,” he said. “Water wouldn’t have left that gash in the white man’s skull.”

The President, glancing quickly up, saw the heavy, secret face musing upon the Secretary with dark speculation. But almost immediately the uncle spoke. “So it would. But this white man would have doubtless required a coin of money from my nephew for passing through his gate.” Then he laughed, mirthful, pleasant, decorous. “Perhaps it would have been better for that white man if he had allowed my nephew to pass through free. But that is neither here nor there now.”

“No,” the President said, almost sharply, so that they looked at him again. He held the quill above the paper. “What is the correct name? Weddel or Vidal?”

Again the pleasant, inflectionless voice came: “Weddel or Vidal. What does it matter by what name the White Chief calls us? We are but Indians: remembered yesterday and forgotten tomorrow.”

The President wrote upon the paper. The quill scratched steadily in the silence in which there was but one other sound: a faint, steady, minor sound which seemed to emerge from the dark and motionless group behind the uncle and nephew. He sanded what he had written and folded it and rose and stood for a moment so while they watched him quietly — the soldier who had commanded men well on more occasions than this.

“Your nephew is not guilty of this murder. My chief whom I have appointed to hold justice between us says for him to return home and never do this again, because next time he will be displeased.”

His voice died into a shocked silence; even for that instant the heavy lids fluttered, while from the dark throng behind him that faint, unceasing sound of quiet scratching by heat and wool engendered, like a faint, constant motion of the sea, also ceased for an instant. The uncle spoke in a tone of shocked unbelief: "My nephew is free?"

"He is free," the President said. The uncle's shocked gaze traveled about the room.

"This quick? And in here? In this house? I had thought. . . . But no matter." They watched him; again the face was smooth, enigmatic, blank. "We are only Indians; doubtless these busy white men have but little time for our small affairs. Perhaps we have already incommoded them too much."

"No, no," the President said quickly. "To me, my Indian and my white people are the same." But again the uncle's gaze was traveling quietly about the room; standing side by side, the President and the Secretary could feel from one to another the same dawning alarm. After a while the President said: "Where had you expected this council to be held?"

The uncle looked at him. "You will be amused. In my ignorance I had thought that even our little affair would have been concluded in . . . But no matter."

"In what?" the President said.

The bland, heavy face mused again upon him for a moment. "You will laugh; nevertheless, I will obey you. In the big white council house beneath the golden eagle."

“What?” the Secretary cried, starting again. “In the . . .”

The uncle looked away. “I said that you would be amused. But no matter. We will have to wait, anyway.”

“Have to wait?” the President said. “For what?”

“This is really amusing,” the uncle said. He laughed again, in his tone of mirthful detachment. “More of my people are about to arrive. We can wait for them, since they will wish to see and hear also.” No one exclaimed at all now, not even the Secretary. They merely stared at him while the bland voice went on: “It seems that some of them mistook the town.

They had heard the name of the White Chief’s capital spoken, but it so happens that there is also a town in our country with the same name, so that when some of the People inquired on the road, they became misdirected and went there instead, poor ignorant Indians.”

He laughed, with fond and mirthful tolerance behind his enigmatic and sleepy face. “But a messenger has arrived; they will arrive themselves within the week. Then we will see about punishing this headstrong boy.” He shook the nephew’s arm lightly. Except for this the nephew did not move, watching the President with his grave and unwinking regard.

For a long moment there was no sound save the faint, steady scratching of the Indians. Then the Secretary began to speak, patiently, as though addressing a child: “Look. Your nephew is free. This paper says that he did not slay the white man and that no man shall so accuse him again, else both I and the great chief beside me will be angered.

He can return home now, at once. Let all of you return home at once. For is it not well said that the graves of a man's fathers are never quiet in his absence?"

Again there was silence. Then the President said, "Besides, the white council house beneath the golden eagle is being used now by a council of chiefs who are more powerful there than I am."

The uncle's hand lifted; foamed with soiled lace, his forefinger wagged in reproachful deprecation. "Do not ask even an ignorant Indian to believe that," he said. Then he said, with no change of inflection whatever; the Secretary did not know until the President told him later, that the uncle was now addressing him: "And these chiefs will doubtless be occupying the white council hut for some time yet, I suppose."

"Yes," the Secretary said. "Until the last snow of winter has melted among the flowers and the green grass."

"Good," the uncle said. "We will wait, then. Then the rest of the People will have time to arrive."

And so it was that up that Avenue with a high destiny the cavalcade moved in the still falling snow, led by the carriage containing the President and the uncle and nephew, the fat, ringed hand lying again upon the nephew's knee, and followed by a second carriage containing the Secretary and his secretary, and this followed in turn by two files of soldiers between which walked the dark and decorous cloud of men, women and children on foot and in arms; so it was that behind the Speaker's desk of that chamber which was to womb and contemplate

the high dream of a destiny superior to the injustice of events and the folly of mankind, the President and the Secretary stood, while below them, ringed about by the living manipulators of, and interspersed by the august and watching ghosts of the dreamers of, the destiny, the uncle and nephew stood, with behind them the dark throng of kin and friends and acquaintances from among which came steadily and unabated that faint sound of wool and flesh in friction. The President leaned to the Secretary.

“Are they ready with the cannon?” he whispered. “Are you sure they can see my arm from the door? And suppose those damned guns explode: they have not been fired since Washington shot them last at Cornwallis: will they impeach me?”

“Yes,” the Secretary hissed.

“Then God help us. Give me the book.” The Secretary passed it to him: it was Petrarch’s Sonnets, which the Secretary had snatched from his table in passing. “Let us hope that I remember enough law Latin to keep it from sounding like either English or Chickasaw,” the President said. He opened the book, and then again the President, the conqueror of men, the winner of battles diplomatic, legal and martial, drew himself erect and looked down upon the dark, still, intent, waiting faces; when he spoke his voice was the voice which before this had caused men to pause and attend and then obey: “Francis Weddel, chief in the Chickasaw Nation, and you, nephew of Francis Weddel and some day to be a chief, hear my words.”

Then he began to read. His voice was full, sonorous, above the dark faces, echoing about the august dome in profound and solemn syllables. He read ten sonnets. Then, with his arm lifted, he perorated;

his voice died profoundly away and he dropped his arm. A moment later, from outside the building, came a ragged crash of artillery.

And now for the first time the dark throng stirred; from among them came a sound, a murmur, of pleased astonishment. The President spoke again: "Nephew of Francis Weddel, you are free. Return to your home."

And now the uncle spoke; again his finger waggled from out its froth of lace. "Heedless boy," he said. "Consider the trouble which you have caused these busy men." He turned to the Secretary, almost briskly; again his voice was bland, pleasant, almost mirthful: "And now, about the little matter of this cursed ford. . . ."

With the autumn sun falling warmly and pleasantly across his shoulders, the President said, "That is all," quietly and turned to his desk as the secretary departed. While he took up the letter and opened it the sun fell upon his hands and upon the page, with its inference of the splendid dying of the year, of approaching harvests and of columns of quiet wood smoke — serene pennons of peace — above peaceful chimneys about the land.

Suddenly the President started; he sprang up, the letter in his hand, glaring at it in shocked and alarmed consternation while the bland words seemed to explode one by one in his comprehension like musketry:

Dear sir and friend:

This is really amusing. Again this hot-headed nephew — he must have taken his character from his father's people, since it is none of mine — has come to trouble you and me. It is this cursed ford again.

Another white man came among us, to hunt in peace we thought, since God's forest and the deer which He put in it belong to all. But he too became obsessed with the idea of owning this ford, having heard tales of his own kind who, after the curious and restless fashion of white men, find one side of a stream of water superior enough to the other to pay coins of money for the privilege of reaching it.

So the affair was arranged as this white man desired it. Perhaps I did wrong, you will say. But — do I need to tell you? — I am a simple man and some day I shall be old, I trust, and the continuous interruption of these white men who wish to cross and the collecting and care of the coins of money is only a nuisance.

For what can money be to me, whose destiny it apparently is to spend my declining years beneath the shade of familiar trees from whose peaceful shade my great white friend and chief has removed the face of every enemy save death? That was my thought, but when you read further you will see that it was not to be.

Once more it is this rash and heedless boy. It seems that he challenged this new white man of ours (or the white man challenged him: the truth I will leave to your unerring wisdom to unravel) to a swimming race in the river, the stakes to be this cursed ford against a few miles of land, which (this will amuse you) this wild nephew of mine did not even own.

The race took place, but unfortunately our white man failed to emerge from the river until after he was dead.

And now your agent has arrived, and he seems to feel that perhaps this swimming race should not have taken place at all. And so now there is nothing for me to do save to bestir old bones and bring this rash boy to you for you to reprimand him. We will arrive in about . . .

The President sprang to the bell and pulled it violently. When his secretary entered, he grasped the man by the shoulders and whirled him toward the door again. "Get me the Secretary of War, and maps of all the country between here and New Orleans!" he cried. "Hurry."

And so again we see him; the President is absent now and it is the Soldier alone who sits with the Secretary of War behind the map-strewn table, while there face them the officers of a regiment of cavalry. At the table his secretary is writing furiously while the President looks over his shoulder. "Write it big," he says, "so that even an Indian cannot mistake it. Know all men by these presents," he quotes.

"Francis Weddel his heirs, descendants and assigns from now on in perpetuity . . . provided — Have you got provided? Good — provided that neither he nor his do ever again cross to the eastern side of the above described River. . . . And now to that damned agent," he said.

"The sign must be in duplicate, at both ends of the ford: The United States accepts no responsibility for any man, woman or child, black, white, yellow or red, who crosses this ford, and no white man shall buy,

lease or accept it as a gift save under the severest penalty of the law. Can I do that?"

"I'm afraid not, Your Excellency," the Secretary said.

The President mused swiftly. "Damn," he said. "Strike out The United States, then." The Secretary did so. The President folded the two papers and handed them to the cavalry colonel.

"Ride," he said. "Your orders are, Stop them."

"Suppose they refuse to stop," the colonel said. "Shall I fire then?"

"Yes," the President said. "Shoot every horse, mule, and ox. I know they won't walk. Off with you, now." The officers withdrew. The President turned back to the maps — the Soldier still: eager, happy, as though he rode himself with the regiment, or as if in spirit already he deployed it with that shrewd cunning which could discern and choose the place most disadvantageous to the enemy, and get there first.

"It will be here," he said. He put his finger on the map. "A horse, General, that I may meet him here and turn his flank and drive him."

"Done, General," the Secretary said.

The End