



# Mountain Victory, William Faulkner

## Mountain Victory

I

THROUGH THE CABIN window the five people watched the cavalcade toil up the muddy trail and halt at the gate. First came a man on foot, leading a horse. He wore a broad hat low on his face, his body shapeless in a weathered gray cloak from which his left hand emerged, holding the reins.

The bridle was silvermounted, the horse a gaunt, mudsplashed, thoroughbred bay, wearing in place of saddle a navy blue army blanket bound on it by a piece of rope. The second horse was a shortbodied, bigheaded, scrub sorrel, also mudsplashed.

It wore a bridle contrived of rope and wire, and an army saddle in which, perched high above the dangling stirrups, crouched a shapeless something larger than a child, which at that distance appeared to wear no garment or garments known to man.

One of the three men at the cabin window left it quickly. The others, without turning, heard him cross the room swiftly and then return, carrying a long rifle.

“No, you don’t,” the older man said.

“Don’t you see that cloak?” the younger said. “That rebel cloak?”

“I wont have it,” the other said. “They have surrendered. They have said they are whipped.”

Through the window they watched the horses stop at the gate. The gate was of sagging hickory, in a rock fence which straggled down a gaunt slope sharp in relief against the valley and a still further range of mountains dissolving into the low, dissolving sky.

They watched the creature on the second horse descend and hand his reins also into the same left hand of the man in gray that held the reins of the thoroughbred. They watched the creature enter the gate and mount the path and disappear beyond the angle of the window. Then they heard it cross the porch and knock at the door. They stood there and heard it knock again.

After a while the older man said, without turning his head, “Go and see.”

One of the women, the older one, turned from the window, her feet making no sound on the floor, since they were bare. She went to the front door and opened it. The chill, wet light of the dying April afternoon fell in upon her — upon a small woman with a gnarled expressionless face, in a gray shapeless garment.

Facing her across the sill was a creature a little larger than a large monkey, dressed in a voluminous blue overcoat of a private in the Federal army, with, tied tentlike over his head and falling about his shoulders, a piece of oilcloth which might have been cut square from the hood of a sutler’s wagon; within the orifice the woman could see nothing whatever save the whites of two eyes, momentary and phantomlike, as with a single glance the Negro examined the woman

standing barefoot in her faded calico garment, and took in the bleak and barren interior of the cabin hall.

“Marster Major Soshay Weddel send he compliments en say he wishful fo sleeping room fo heself en boy en two hawses,” he said in a pompous, parrot-like voice. The woman looked at him. Her face was like a spent mask. “We been up yonder a ways, fighting dem Yankees,” the Negro said. “Done quit now. Gwine back home.”

The woman seemed to speak from somewhere behind her face, as though behind an effigy or a painted screen: “I’ll ask him.”

“We ghy pay you,” the Negro said.

“Pay?” Pausing, she seemed to muse upon him. “Hit aint near a ho-tel on the mou-tin.”

The Negro made a large gesture. “Don’t make no diffunce. We done stayed de night in worse places den whut dis is. You just tell um it Marse Soshay Weddel.” Then he saw that the woman was looking past him. He turned and saw the man in the worn gray cloak already halfway up the path from the gate.

He came on and mounted the porch, removing with his left hand the broad slouched hat bearing the tarnished wreath of a Confederate field officer. He had a dark face, with dark eyes and black hair, his face at once thick yet gaunt, and arrogant.

He was not tall, yet he topped the Negro by five or six inches. The cloak was weathered, faded about the shoulders where the light fell

strongest. The skirts were bedraggled, frayed, mudsplashed: the garment had been patched again and again, and brushed again and again; the nap was completely gone.

“Goodday, madam,” he said. “Have you stableroom for my horses and shelter for myself and my boy for the night?”

The woman looked at him with a static, musing quality, as though she had seen without alarm an apparition.

“I’ll have to see,” she said.

“I shall pay,” the man said. “I know the times.”

“I’ll have to ask him,” the woman said. She turned, then stopped. The older man entered the hall behind her. He was big, in jean clothes, with a shock of iron-gray hair and pale eyes.

“I am Saucier Weddel,” the man in gray said. “I am on my way home to Mississippi from Virginia. I am in Tennessee now?”

“You are in Tennessee,” the other said. “Come in.”

Weddel turned to the Negro. “Take the horses on to the stable,” he said.

The Negro returned to the gate, shapeless in the oilcloth cape and the big overcoat, with that swaggering arrogance which he had assumed as soon as he saw the woman’s bare feet and the meagre, barren interior of the cabin. He took up the two bridle reins and began to shout at the

horses with needless and officious vociferation, to which the two horses paid no heed, as though they were long accustomed to him.

It was as if the Negro himself paid no attention to his cries, as though the shouting were merely concomitant to the action of leading the horses out of sight of the door, like an effluvium by both horses and Negro accepted and relegated in the same instant.

II

Through the kitchen wall the girl could hear the voices of the men in the room from which her father had driven her when the stranger approached the house. She was about twenty: a big girl with smooth, simple hair and big, smooth hands, standing barefoot in a single garment made out of flour sacks. She stood close to the wall, motionless, her head bent a little, her eyes wide and still and empty like a sleepwalker's, listening to her father and the guest enter the room beyond it.

The kitchen was a plank leanto built against the log wall of the cabin proper. From between the logs beside her the clay chinking, dried to chalk by the heat of the stove, had fallen away in places. Stooping, the movement slow and lush and soundless as the whispering of her bare feet on the floor, she leaned her eye to one of these cracks. She could see a bare table on which sat an earthenware jug and a box of musket cartridges stenciled U. S. Army.

At the table her two brothers sat in splint chairs, though it was only the younger one, the boy, who looked toward the door, though she knew, could hear now, that the stranger was in the room. The older brother

was taking the cartridges one by one from the box and crimping them and setting them upright at his hand like a mimic parade of troops, his back to the door where she knew the stranger was now standing. She breathed quietly. "Vatch would have shot him," she said, breathed, to herself, stooping. "I reckon he will yet."

Then she heard feet again and her mother came toward the door to the kitchen, crossing and for a moment blotting the orifice. Yet she did not move, not even when her mother entered the kitchen. She stooped to the crack, her breathing regular and placid, hearing her mother clattering the stovelids behind her.

Then she saw the stranger for the first time and then she was holding her breath quietly, not even aware that she had ceased to breathe. She saw him standing beside the table in his shabby cloak, with his hat in his left hand. Vatch did not look up.

"My name is Saucier Weddel," the stranger said.

"Soshay Weddel," the girl breathed into the dry chinking, the crumbled and powdery wall. She could see him at full length, in his stained and patched and brushed cloak, with his head lifted a little and his face worn, almost gaunt, stamped with a kind of indomitable weariness and yet arrogant too, like a creature from another world with other air to breathe and another kind of blood to warm the veins. "Soshay Weddel," she breathed.

"Take some whiskey," Vatch said without moving.

Then suddenly, as it had been with the suspended breathing, she was not listening to the words at all, as though it were no longer necessary

for her to hear, as though curiosity too had no place in the atmosphere in which the stranger dwelled and in which she too dwelled for the moment as she watched the stranger standing beside the table, looking at Vatch, and Vatch now turned in his chair, a cartridge in his hand, looking up at the stranger. She breathed quietly into the crack through which the voices came now without heat or significance out of that dark and smoldering and violent and childlike vanity of men:

“I reckon you know these when you see them, then?”

“Why not? We used them too. We never always had the time nor the powder to stop and make our own. So we had to use yours now and then. Especially during the last.”

“Maybe you would know them better if one exploded in your face.”

“Vatch.” She now looked at her father, because he had spoken. Her younger brother was raised a little in his chair, leaning a little forward, his mouth open a little. He was seventeen. Yet still the stranger stood looking quietly down at Vatch, his hat clutched against his worn cloak, with on his face that expression arrogant and weary and a little quizzical.

“You can show your other hand too,” Vatch said. “Don’t be afraid to leave your pistol go.”

“No,” the stranger said. “I am not afraid to show it.”

“Take some whiskey, then,” Vatch said, pushing the jug forward with a motion slighting and contemptuous.

“I am obliged infinitely,” the stranger said. “It’s my stomach. For three years of war I have had to apologize to my stomach; now, with peace, I



must apologize for it. But if I might have a glass for my boy? Even after four years, he cannot stand cold.”

“Soshay Weddel,” the girl breathed into the crumbled dust beyond which the voices came, not yet raised yet forever irreconcilable and already doomed, the one blind victim, the other blind executioner:

“Or maybe behind your back you would know it better.”

“You, Vatch.”

“Stop, sir. If he was in the army for as long as one year, he has run too, once. Perhaps oftener, if he faced the Army of Northern Virginia.”

“Soshay Weddel,” the girl breathed, stooping. Now she saw Weddel, walking apparently straight toward her, a thick tumbler in his left hand and his hat crumpled beneath the same arm.

“Not that way,” Vatch said. The stranger paused and looked back at Vatch. “Where are you aiming to go?”

“To take this out to my boy,” the stranger said. “Out to the stable. I thought perhaps this door—” His face was in profile now, worn, haughty, wasted, the eyebrows lifted with quizzical and arrogant interrogation. Without rising Vatch jerked his head back and aside. “Come away from that door.” But the stranger did not stir. Only his head moved a little, as though he had merely changed the direction of his eyes.

“He’s looking at paw,” the girl breathed. “He’s waiting for paw to tell him. He aint skeered of Vatch. I knowed it.”

“Come away from that door,” Vatch said. “You damn nigra.”

“So it’s my face and not my uniform,” the stranger said. “And you fought four years to free us, I understand.”

Then she heard her father speak again. “Go out the front way and around the house, stranger,” he said.

“Soshay Weddel,” the girl said. Behind her her mother clattered at the stove. “Soshay Weddel,” she said. She did not say it aloud. She breathed again, deep and quiet and without haste. “It’s like a music. It’s like a singing.”

III

The Negro was squatting in the hallway of the barn, the sagging and broken stalls of which were empty save for the two horses. Beside him was a worn rucksack, open. He was engaged in polishing a pair of thin dancing slippers with a cloth and a tin of paste, empty save for a thin rim of polish about the circumference of the tin.

Beside him on a piece of plank sat one finished shoe. The upper was cracked; it had a crude sole nailed recently and crudely on by a clumsy hand.

“Thank de Lawd folks cant see de bottoms of yo feets,” the Negro said. “Thank de Lawd it’s just dese hyer mountain trash. I’d even hate fo Yankees to see yo feets in dese things.” He rubbed the shoe, squinted at it, breathed upon it, rubbed it again upon his squatting flank.

“Here,” Weddel said, extending the tumbler. It contained a liquid as colorless as water.

The Negro stopped, the shoe and the cloth suspended. "Which?" he said. He looked at the glass. "Whut's dat?"

"Drink it," Weddel said.

"Dat's water. Whut you bringing me water fer?"

"Take it," Weddel said. "It's not water."

The Negro took the glass gingerly. He held it as if it contained nitroglycerin. He looked at it, blinking, bringing the glass slowly under his nose. He blinked. "Where'd you git dis hyer?" Weddel didn't answer. He had taken up the finished slipper, looking at it. The Negro held the glass under his nose. "It smell kind of like it ought to," he said. "But I be dawg ef it look like anything. Dese folks fixing to pizen you." He tipped the glass and sipped gingerly, and lowered the glass, blinking.

"I didn't drink any of it," Weddel said. He set the slipper down.

"You better hadn't," the Negro said. "When here I done been fo years trying to take care of you en git you back home like whut Mistis tole me to do, and here you sleeping in folks' barns at night like a tramp, like a pater-roller nigger—" He put the glass to his lips, tilting it and his head in a single jerk.

He lowered the glass, empty; his eyes were closed; he said, "Whuf!" shaking his head with a violent, shuddering motion. "It smells right, and it act right. But I be dawg ef it look right. I reckon you better let it alone, like you started out. When dey try to make you drink it you send um to me. I done already stood so much I reckon I can stand a little mo fer Mistis' sake."

He took up the shoe and the cloth again. Weddel stooped above the rucksack. "I want my pistol," he said.

Again the Negro ceased, the shoe and the cloth poised. "Whut fer?" He leaned and looked up the muddy slope toward the cabin. "Is dese folks Yankees?" he said in a whisper.

"No," Weddel said, digging in the rucksack with his left hand. The Negro did not seem to hear him.

"In Tennessee? You tole me we was in Tennessee, where Memphis is, even if you never tole me it was all disyer up-and-down land in de Memphis country. I know I never seed none of um when I went to Memphis wid yo paw dat time. But you says so. And now you telling me dem Memphis folks is Yankees?"

"Where is the pistol?" Weddel said.

"I done tole you," the Negro said. "Acting like you does. Letting dese folks see you come walking up de road, leading Caesar caze you think he tired; making me ride whilst you walks when I can outwalk you any day you ever lived and you knows it, even if I is fawty en you twenty-eight. I ghy tell yo maw. I ghy tell um."

Weddel rose, in his hand a heavy cap-and-ball revolver. He chuckled it in his single hand, drawing the hammer back, letting it down again. The Negro watched him, crouched like an ape in the blue Union army overcoat. "You put dat thing back," he said. "De war done wid now. Dey tole us back dar at Ferginny it was done wid. You dont need no pistol now. You put it back, you hear me?"

"I'm going to bathe," Weddel said. "Is my shirt—"

“Bathe where? In whut? Dese folks aint never seed a bathtub.”

“Bathe at the well. Is my shirt ready?”

“Whut dey is of it. . . . You put dat pistol back, Marse Soshay. I ghy tell yo maw on you. I ghy tell um. I just wish Marster was here.”

“Go to the kitchen,” Weddel said. “Tell them I wish to bathe in the well house. Ask them to draw the curtain on that window there.” The pistol had vanished beneath the grey cloak. He went to the stall where the thoroughbred was. The horse nuzzled at him, its eyes rolling soft and wild. He patted its nose with his left hand. It whickered, not loud, its breath sweet and warm.

#### IV

The Negro entered the kitchen from the rear. He had removed the oilcloth tent and he now wore a blue forage cap which, like the overcoat, was much too large for him, resting upon the top of his head in such a way that the unsupported brim oscillated faintly when he moved as though with a life of its own.

He was completely invisible save for his face between cap and collar like a dried Dyak trophy and almost as small and dusted lightly over as with a thin pallor of wood ashes by the cold.

The older woman was at the stove on which frying food now hissed and sputtered; she did not look up when the Negro entered. The girl was standing in the middle of the room, doing nothing at all. She looked at the Negro, watching him with a slow, grave, secret, unwinking gaze as

he crossed the kitchen with that air of swaggering caricatured assurance, and upended a block of wood beside the stove and sat upon it.

“If disyer is de kind of weather yawl has up here all de time,” he said, “I dont care ef de Yankees does has dis country.” He opened the overcoat, revealing his legs and feet as being wrapped, shapeless and huge, in some muddy and anonymous substance resembling fur, giving them the appearance of two muddy beasts the size of halfgrown dogs lying on the floor; moving a little nearer the girl, the girl thought quietly Hit’s fur. He taken and cut up a fur coat to wrap his feet in “Yes, suh,” the Negro said. “Just yawl let me git home again, en de Yankees kin have all de rest of it.”

“Where do you-uns live?” the girl said.

The Negro looked at her. “In Miss’ippi. On de Domain. Aint you never hyeard tell of Countymaison?”

“Countymaison?”

“Dat’s it. His grandpappy named it Countymaison caze it’s bigger den a county to ride over. You cant ride across it on a mule betwixt sunup and sundown. Dat’s how come.” He rubbed his hands slowly on his thighs. His face was now turned toward the stove; he snuffed loudly.

Already the ashy overlay on his skin had disappeared, leaving his face dead black, wizened, his mouth a little loose, as though the muscles had become slack with usage, like rubber bands — not the eating muscles, the talking ones. “I reckon we is gittin nigh home, after all. Leastways dat hawg meat smell like it do down whar folks lives.”

“Countymaison,” the girl said in a rapt, bemused tone, looking at the Negro with her grave, unwinking regard. Then she turned her head and looked at the wall, her face perfectly serene, perfectly inscrutable, without haste, with a profound and absorbed deliberation.

“Dat’s it,” the Negro said. “Even Yankees is heard tell of Weddel’s Countymaison en erbout Marster Francis Weddel. Maybe yawl seed um pass in de carriage dat time he went to Washn’ton to tell yawl’s president how he aint like de way yawl’s president wuz treating de people. He rid all de way to Washn’ton in de carriage, wid two niggers to drive en to heat de bricks to kept he foots warm, en de man done gone on ahead wid de wagon en de fresh hawses.

He carried yawl’s president two whole dressed bears en eight sides of smoked deer venison. He must a passed right out dar in front yawl’s house. I reckon yo pappy or maybe his pappy seed um pass.”

He talked on, voluble, in soporific singsong, his face beginning to glisten, to shine a little with the rich warmth, while the mother bent over the stove and the girl, motionless, static, her bare feet cupped smooth and close to the rough puncheons, her big, smooth, young body cupped soft and richly mammalian to the rough garment, watching the Negro with her ineffable and unwinking gaze, her mouth open a little.

The Negro talked on, his eyes closed, his voice interminable, boastful, his air lazily intolerant, as if he were still at home and there had been no war and no harsh rumors of freedom and of change, and he (a stableman, in the domestic hierarchy a man of horses) were spending the evening in the quarters among field hands, until the older woman dished the food and left the room, closing the door behind her.

He opened his eyes at the sound and looked toward the door and then back to the girl. She was looking at the wall, at the closed door through which her mother had vanished. "Dont dey lets you eat at de table wid um?" he said.

The girl looked at the Negro, unwinking. "Countymaison," she said. "Vatch says he is a nigra too."

"Who? Him? A nigger? Marse Soshay Weddel? Which un is Vatch?" The girl looked at him. "It's caze yawl aint never been nowhere. Ain't never seed nothing. Living up here on a nekkid hill whar you cant even see smoke. Him a nigger? I wish his maw could hear you say dat." He looked about the kitchen, wizened, his eyeballs rolling white, ceaseless, this way and that. The girl watched him.

"Do the girls there wear shoes all the time?" she said.

The Negro looked about the kitchen, "Where does yawl keep dat ere Tennessee spring water? Back here somewhere?"

"Spring water?"

The Negro blinked slowly. "Dat ere light-drinking kahysene."

"Kahysene?"

"Dat ere light colored lamp oil whut yawl drinks. Aint you got a little of it hid back here somewhere?"

"Oh," the girl said. "You mean corn." She went to a corner and lifted a loose plank in the floor, the Negro watching her, and drew forth another earthen jug. She filled another thick tumbler and gave it to the



Negro and watched him jerk it down his throat, his eyes closed. Again he said, "Whuf!" and drew his back hand across his mouth.

"Whut wuz dat you axed me?" he said.

"Do the girls down there at Countymaison wear shoes?"

"De ladies does. If dey didn't have none, Marse Soshay could sell a hun'ed niggers en buy um some . . . Which un is it say Marse Soshay a nigger?"

The girl watched him. "Is he married?"

"Who married? Marse Soshay?" The girl watched him. "How he have time to git married, wid us fighting de Yankees for fo years? Aint been home in fo years now where no ladies to marry is." He looked at the girl, his eyewhites a little bloodshot, his skin shining in faint and steady highlights. Thawing, he seemed to have increased in size a little too.

"Whut's it ter you, if he married or no?"

They looked at each other. The Negro could hear her breathing. Then she was not looking at him at all, though she had not yet even blinked nor turned her head. "I dont reckon he'd have any time for a girl that didn't have any shoes," she said. She went to the wall and stooped again to the crack. The Negro watched her. The older woman entered and took another dish from the stove and departed without having looked at either of them.

V

The four men, the three men and the boy, sat about the supper table. The broken meal lay on thick plates. The knives and forks were iron. On

the table the jug still sat. Weddel was now cloakless. He was shaven, his still damp hair combed back. Upon his bosom the ruffles of the shirt frothed in the lamplight, the right sleeve, empty, pinned across his breast with a thin gold pin. Under the table the frail and mended dancing slippers rested among the brogans of the two men and the bare splayed feet of the boy.

“Vatch says you are a nigra,” the father said.

Weddel was leaning a little back in his chair. “So that explains it,” he said. “I was thinking that he was just congenitally illtempered. And having to be a victor, too.”

“Are you a nigra?” the father said.

“No,” Weddel said. He was looking at the boy, his weathered and wasted face a little quizzical. Across the back of his neck his hair, long, had been cut roughly as though with a knife or perhaps a bayonet. The boy watched him in complete and rapt immobility. As if I might be an apparition he thought. A hant. Maybe I am. “No,” he said. “I am not a Negro.”

“Who are you?” the father said.

Weddel sat a little sideways in his chair, his hand lying on the table. “Do you ask guests who they are in Tennessee?” he said. Vatch was filling a tumbler from the jug. His face was lowered, his hands big and hard. His face was hard. Weddel looked at him. “I think I know how you feel,” he said. “I expect I felt that way once. But it’s hard to keep on feeling any way for four years. Even feeling at all.”

Vatch said something, sudden and harsh. He clapped the tumbler on to the table, splashing some of the liquor out. It looked like water, with a

violent, dynamic odor. It seemed to possess an inherent volatility which carried a splash of it across the table and on to the foam of frayed yet immaculate linen on Weddel's breast, striking sudden and chill through the cloth against his flesh.

"Vatch!" the father said.

Weddel did not move; his expression arrogant, quizzical, and weary, did not change. "He did not mean to do that," he said.

"When I do," Vatch said, "it will not look like an accident."

Weddel was looking at Vatch. "I think I told you once," he said. "My name is Saucier Weddel. I am a Mississippian. I live at a place named Contalmaison. My father built it and named it. He was a Choctaw chief named Francis Weddel, of whom you have probably not heard. He was the son of a Choctaw woman and a French émigré of New Orleans, a general of Napoleon's and a knight of the Legion of Honor. His name was François Vidal.

My father drove to Washington once in his carriage to remonstrate with President Jackson about the Government's treatment of his people, sending on ahead a wagon of provender and gifts and also fresh horses for the carriage, in charge of the man, the native overseer, who was a full blood Choctaw and my father's cousin.

In the old days The Man was the hereditary title of the head of our clan; but after we became Europeanised like the white people, we lost the title to the branch which refused to become polluted, though we kept the slaves and the land. The Man now lives in a house a little larger than the cabins of the Negroes — an upper servant. It was in

Washington that my father met and married my mother. He was killed in the Mexican War.

My mother died two years ago, in '63, of a complication of pneumonia acquired while superintending the burying of some silver on a wet night when Federal troops entered the county, and of unsuitable food; though my boy refuses to believe that she is dead. He refuses to believe that the country would have permitted the North to deprive her of the imported Martinique coffee and the beaten biscuit which she had each Sunday noon and Wednesday night.

He believes that the country would have risen in arms first. But then, he is only a Negro, member of an oppressed race burdened with freedom. He has a daily list of my misdoings which he is going to tell her on me when we reach home. I went to school in France, but not very hard. Until two weeks ago I was a major of Mississippi infantry in the corps of a man named Longstreet, of whom you may have heard."

"So you were a major," Vatch said.

"That appears to be my indictment; yes."

"I have seen a rebel major before," Vatch said. "Do you want me to tell you where I saw him?"

"Tell me," Weddel said.

"He was lying by a tree. We had to stop there and lie down, and he was lying by the tree, asking for water. 'Have you any water, friend?' he said. 'Yes. I have water,' I said. 'I have plenty of water.' I had to crawl; I couldn't stand up. I crawled over to him and I lifted him so that his head would be propped against the tree. I fixed his face to the front."

“Didn’t you have a bayonet?” Weddel said. “But I forgot; you couldn’t stand up.”

“Then I crawled back. I had to crawl back a hundred yards, where—”

“Back?”

“It was too close. Who can do decent shooting that close? I had to crawl back, and then the damned musket—”

“Damn musket?” Weddel sat a little sideways in his chair, his hand on the table, his face quizzical and sardonic, contained.

“I missed, the first shot. I had his face propped up and turned, and his eyes open watching me, and then I missed. I hit him in the throat and I had to shoot again because of the damned musket.”

“Vatch,” the father said.

Vatch’s hands were on the table. His head, his face, were like his father’s, though without the father’s deliberation. His face was furious, still, unpredictable. “It was that damn musket. I had to shoot three times. Then he had three eyes, in a row across his face propped against the tree, all three of them open, like he was watching me with three eyes. I gave him another eye, to see better with. But I had to shoot twice because of the damn musket.”

“You, Vatch,” the father said. He stood now, his hands on the table, propping his gaunt body. “Dont you mind Vatch, stranger. The war is over now.”

“I dont mind him,” Weddel said. His hands went to his bosom, disappearing into the foam of linen while he watched Vatch steadily

with his alert, quizzical, sardonic gaze. "I have seen too many of him for too long a time to mind one of him any more."

"Take some whiskey," Vatch said.

"Are you just making a point?"

"Damn the pistol," Vatch said. "Take some whiskey."

Weddel laid his hand again on the table. But instead of pouring, Vatch held the jug poised over the tumbler. He was looking past Weddel's shoulder. Weddel turned. The girl was in the room, standing in the doorway with her mother just behind her. The mother said as if she were speaking to the floor under her feet: "I tried to keep her back, like you said. I tried to. But she is strong as a man; hardheaded like a man."

"You go back," the father said.

"Me to go back?" the mother said to the floor.

The father spoke a name; Weddel did not catch it; he did not even know that he had missed it. "You go back."

The girl moved. She was not looking at any of them. She came to the chair on which lay Weddel's worn and mended cloak and opened it, revealing the four ragged slashes where the sable lining had been cut out as though with a knife. She was looking at the cloak when Vatch grasped her by the shoulder, but it was at Weddel that she looked.

"You cut hit out and gave hit to that nigra to wrap his feet in," she said.

Then the father grasped Vatch in turn. Weddel had not stirred, his face turned over his shoulder; beside him the boy was upraised out of his chair by his arms, his young, slacked face leaned forward into the lamp. But save for the breathing of Vatch and the father there was no sound in the room.

“I am stronger than you are, still,” the father said. “I am a better man still, or as good.”

“You wont be always,” Vatch said.

The father looked back over his shoulder at the girl. “Go back,” he said. She turned and went back toward the hall, her feet silent as rubber feet. Again the father called that name which Weddel had not caught; again he did not catch it and was not aware again that he had not. She went out the door.

The father looked at Weddel. Weddel’s attitude was unchanged, save that once more his hand was hidden inside his bosom. They looked at one another — the cold, Nordic face and the half Gallic half Mongol face thin and worn like a bronze casting, with eyes like those of the dead, in which only vision has ceased and not sight. “Take your horses, and go,” the father said.

VI

It was dark in the hall, and cold, with the black chill of the mountain April coming up through the floor about her bare legs and her body in the single coarse garment. “He cut the lining outen his cloak to wrap that nigra’s feet in,” she said. “He done hit for a nigra.”

The door behind her opened. Against the lamplight a man loomed, then the door shut behind him. "Is it Vatch or paw?" she said. Then something struck her across the back — a leather strap. "I was afeared it would be Vatch," she said. The blow fell again.

"Go to bed," the father said.

"You can whip me, but you cant whip him," she said.

The blow fell again: a thick, flat, soft sound upon her immediate flesh beneath the coarse sacking.

## VII

In the deserted kitchen the Negro sat for a moment longer on the upturned block beside the stove, looking at the door. Then he rose carefully, one hand on the wall.

"Whuf!" he said. "Wish us had a spring on de Domain whut run dat. Stock would git trompled to death, sho mon." He blinked at the door, listening, then he moved, letting himself carefully along the wall, stopping now and then to look toward-the door and listen, his air cunning, unsteady, and alert.

He reached the corner and lifted the loose plank, stooping carefully, bracing himself against the wall. He lifted the jug out, whereupon he lost his balance and sprawled on his face, his face ludicrous and earnest with astonishment. He got up and sat flat on the floor, carefully, the jug between his knees, and lifted the jug and drank. He drank a long time.



“Whuf!” he said. “On de Domain we’d give disyer stuff to de hawgs. But deseyer ign’unt mountain trash—” He drank again; then with the jug poised there came into his face an expression of concern and then consternation. He set the jug down and tried to get up, sprawling above the jug, gaining his feet at last, stooped, swaying, drooling, with that expression of outraged consternation on his face. Then he fell headlong to the floor, overturning the jug.

## VIII

They stooped above the Negro, talking quietly to one another — Weddel in his frothed shirt, the father and the boy.

“We’ll have to tote him,” the father said.

They lifted the Negro. With his single hand Weddel jerked the Negro’s head up, shaking him. “Jubal,” he said.

The Negro struck out, clumsily, with one arm. “Le’m be,” he muttered. “Le’m go.”

“Jubal!” Weddel said.

The Negro thrashed, sudden and violent. “You le’m be,” he said. “I ghy tell de Man. I ghy tell um.” He ceased, muttering: “Field hands. Field niggers.”

“We’ll have to tote him,” the father said.

“Yes,” Weddel said. “I’m sorry for this. I should have warned you. But I didn’t think there was another jug he could have gained access to.” He stooped, getting his single hand under the Negro’s shoulders.

“Get away,” the father said. “Me and Hule can do it.” He and the boy picked the Negro up. Weddel opened the door. They emerged into the high black cold. Below them the barn loomed. They carried the Negro down the slope. “Get them horses out, Hule,” the father said.

“Horses?” Weddel said. “He cant ride now. He cant stay on a horse.” They looked at one another, each toward the other voice, in the cold, the icy silence.

“You wont go now?” the father said.

“I am sorry. You see I cannot depart now. I will have to stay until daylight, until he is sober. We will go then.”

“Leave him here. Leave him one horse, and you ride on. He is nothing but a nigra.”

“I am sorry. Not after four years.” His voice was quizzical, whimsical almost, yet with that quality of indomitable weariness. “I’ve worried with him this far; I reckon I will get him on home.”

“I have warned you,” the father said.

“I am obliged. We will move at daylight. If Hule will be kind enough to help me get him into the loft.”

The father had stepped back. “Put that nigra down, Hule,” he said.

“He will freeze here,” Weddel said. “I must get him into the loft.” He hauled the Negro up and propped him against the wall and stooped to

hunch the Negro's lax body onto his shoulder. The weight rose easily, though he did not understand why until the father spoke again:

"Hule. Come away from there."

"Yes; go," Weddel said quietly. "I can get him up the ladder." He could hear the boy's breathing, fast, young, swift with excitement perhaps. Weddel did not pause to speculate, nor at the faintly hysterical tone of the boy's voice:

"I'll help you."

Weddel didn't object again. He slapped the Negro awake and they set his feet on the ladder rungs, pushing him upward. Halfway up he stopped; again he thrashed out at them. "I ghy tell um. I ghy tell de Man. I ghy tell Mistis. Field hands. Field niggers."

IX

They lay side by side in the loft, beneath the cloak and the two saddle blankets. There was no hay. The Negro snored, his breath reeking and harsh, thick. Below, in its stall, the Thoroughbred stamped now and then. Weddel lay on his back, his arm across his chest, the hand clutching the stub of the other arm. Overhead, through the cracks in the roof the sky showed — the thick chill, black sky which would rain again tomorrow and on every tomorrow until they left the mountains.

"If I leave the mountains," he said quietly, motionless on his back beside the snoring Negro, staring upward. "I was concerned. I had thought that it was exhausted; that I had lost the privilege of being afraid. But I have not. And so I am happy."

Quite happy.” He lay rigid on his back in the cold darkness, thinking of home. “Contalmaison. Our lives are summed up in sounds and made significant. Victory. Defeat. Peace. Home. That’s why we must do so much to invent meanings for the sounds, so damned much. Especially if you are unfortunate enough to be victorious: so damned much. It’s nice to be whipped; quiet to be whipped. To be whipped and to lie under a broken roof, thinking of home.”

The Negro snored. “So damned much”; seeming to watch the words shape quietly in the darkness above his mouth. “What would happen, say, a man in the lobby of the Gayoso, in Memphis, laughing suddenly aloud.

But I am quite happy—” Then he heard the sound. He lay utterly still then, his hand clutching the butt of the pistol warm beneath the stub of his right arm, hearing the quiet, almost infinitesimal sound as it mounted the ladder. But he made no move until he saw the dim orifice of the trap door blotted out. “Stop where you are,” he said.

“It’s me,” the voice said; the voice of the boy, again with that swift, breathless quality which even now Weddel did not pause to designate as excitement or even to remark at all. The boy came on his hands and knees across the dry, sibilant chaff which dusted the floor. “Go ahead and shoot,” he said.

On his hands and knees he loomed above Weddel with his panting breath. “I wish I was dead. I so wish hit. I wish we was both dead. I could wish like Vatch wishes. Why did you uns have to stop here?”

Weddel had not moved. "Why does Vatch wish I was dead?"

"Because he can still hear you uns yelling. I used to sleep with him and he wakes up at night and once paw had to keep him from choking me to death before he waked up and him sweating, hearing you uns yelling still. Without nothing but unloaded guns, yelling, Vatch said, like scarecrows across a cornpatch, running." He was crying now, not aloud. "Damn you! Damn you to hell!"

"Yes," Weddel said. "I have heard them, myself. But why do you wish you were dead?"

"Because she was trying to come, herself. Only she had to—"

"Who? She? Your sister?"

" — had to go through the room to get out. Paw was awake. He said, 'If you go out that door, dont you never come back.' And she said, 'I dont aim to.' And Vatch was awake too and he said, 'Make him marry you quick because you are going to be a widow at daylight.' And she come back and told me. But I was awake too. She told me to tell you."

"Tell me what?" Weddel said. The boy cried quietly, with a kind of patient and utter despair.

"I told her if you was a nigra, and if she done that — I told her that I—"

"What? If she did what? What does she want you to tell me?"

"About the window into the attic where her and me sleep. There is a foot ladder I made to come back from hunting at night for you to get in. But I told her if you was a nigra and if she done that I would—"

“Now then,” Weddel said sharply; “pull yourself together now. Dont you remember? I never even saw her but that one time when she came in the room and your father sent her out.”

“But you saw her then. And she saw you.”

“No,” Weddel said.

The boy ceased to cry. He was quite still above Weddel. “No what?”

“I wont do it. Climb up your ladder.”

For a while the boy seemed to muse above him, motionless, breathing slow and quiet now; he spoke now in a musing, almost dreamy tone: “I could kill you easy. You aint got but one arm, even if you are older. . . .” Suddenly he moved, with almost unbelievable quickness; Weddel’s first intimation was when the boy’s hard, overlarge hands took him by the throat. Weddel did not move. “I could kill you easy. And wouldn’t none mind.”

“Shhhhhh,” Weddel said. “Not so loud.”

“Wouldn’t none care.” He held Weddel’s throat with hard, awkward restraint. Weddel could feel the choking and the shaking expend itself somewhere about the boy’s forearms before it reached his hands, as though the connection between brain and hands was incomplete.

“Wouldn’t none care. Except Vatch would be mad.”

“I have a pistol,” Weddel said.

“Then shoot me with it. Go on.”

“No.”

“No what?”

“I told you before.”

“You swear you wont do it? Do you swear?”

“Listen a moment,” Weddel said; he spoke now with a sort of soothing patience, as though he spoke one-syllable words to a child: “I just want to go home. That’s all. I have been away from home for four years. All I want is to go home. Dont you see? I want to see what I have left there, after four years.”

“What do you do there?” The boy’s hands were loose and hard about Weddel’s throat, his arms still, rigid. “Do you hunt all day, and all night too if you want, with a horse to ride and nigras to wait on you, to shine your boots and saddle the horse, and you setting on the gallery, eating, until time to go hunting again?”

“I hope so. I haven’t been home in four years, you see. So I dont know any more.”

“Take me with you.”

“I dont know what’s there, you see. There may not be anything there: no horses to ride and nothing to hunt. The Yankees were there, and my mother died right afterward, and I dont know what we would find there, until I can go and see.”

“I’ll work. We’ll both work. You can get married in Mayesfield. It’s not far.”

“Married? Oh. Your . . . I see. How do you know I am not already married?” Now the boy’s hands shut on his throat, shaking him. “Stop it!” he said.

“If you say you have got a wife, I will kill you,” the boy said.

“No,” Weddel said. “I am not married.”

“And you dont aim to climb up that foot ladder?”

“No. I never saw her but once. I might not even know her if I saw her again.”

“She says different. I dont believe you. You are lying.”

“No,” Weddel said.

“Is it because you are afraid to?”

“Yes. That’s it.”

“Of Vatch?”

“Not Vatch. I’m just afraid. I think my luck has given out. I know that it has lasted too long; I am afraid that I shall find that I have forgot how to be afraid. So I cant risk it. I cant risk finding that I have lost touch with truth. Not like Jubal here. He believes that I still belong to him; he will not believe that I have been freed. He wont even let me tell him so. He does not need to bother about truth, you see.”

“We would work. She might not look like the Miss’ippi women that wear shoes all the time. But we would learn. We would not shame you before them.”

“No,” Weddel said. “I cannot.”

“Then you go away. Now.”



“How can I? You see that he cannot ride, cannot stay on a horse.” The boy did not answer at once; an instant later Weddel could almost feel the tenseness, the utter immobility, though he himself had heard no sound; he knew that the boy, crouching, not breathing, was looking toward the ladder. “Which one is it?” Weddel whispered.

“It’s paw.”

“I’ll go down. You stay here. You keep my pistol for me.”

X

The dark air was high, chill, cold. In the vast invisible darkness the valley lay, the opposite cold and invisible range black on the black sky. Clutching the stub of his missing arm across his chest, he shivered slowly and steadily.

“Go,” the father said.

“The war is over,” Weddel said. “Vatch’s victory is not my trouble.”

“Take your horses and nagra, and ride on.”

“If you mean your daughter, I never saw her but once and I never expect to see her again.”

“Ride on,” the father said. “Take what is yours, and ride on.”

“I cannot.” They faced one another in the darkness. “After four years I have bought immunity from running.”

“You have till daylight.”

“I have had less than that in Virginia for four years. And this is just Tennessee.” But the other had turned; he dissolved into the black slope. Weddel entered the stable and mounted the ladder. Motionless above the snoring Negro the boy squatted.

“Leave him here,” the boy said. “He aint nothing but a nigra. Leave him, and go.”

“No,” Weddel said.

The boy squatted above the snoring Negro. He was not looking at Weddel, yet there was between them, quiet and soundless, the copse, the sharp dry report, the abrupt wild thunder of upreared horse, the wisping smoke. “I can show you a short cut down to the valley. You will be out of the mountains in two hours. By daybreak you will be ten miles away.”

“I cant. He wants to go home too. I must get him home too.” He stooped; with his single hand he spread the cloak awkwardly, covering the Negro closer with it. He heard the boy creep away, but he did not look. After a while he shook the Negro. “Jubal,” he said.

The Negro groaned; he turned heavily, sleeping again. Weddel squatted above him as the boy had done. “I thought that I had lost it for good,” he said. “ — The peace and the quiet; the power to be afraid again.”

The cabin was gaunt and bleak in the thick cold dawn when the two horses passed out the sagging gate and into the churned road, the Negro on the Thoroughbred, Weddel on the sorrel. The Negro was shivering. He sat hunched and high, with updrawn knees, his face almost invisible in the oilcloth hood.

“I tole you dey wuz fixing to pizen us wid dat stuff,” he said. “I tole you. Hillbilly rednecks. En you not only let um pizen me, you fotch me de pizen wid yo own hand. O Lawd, O Lawd! If we ever does git home.”

Weddel looked back at the cabin, at the weathered, blank house where there was no sign of any life, not even smoke. “She has a young man, I suppose — a beau.” He spoke aloud, musing, quizzical. “And that boy. Hule.

He said to come within sight of a laurel copse where the road disappears, and take a path to the left. He said we must not pass that copse.”

“Who says which?” the Negro said. “I aint going nowhere. I going back to dat loft en lay down.”

“All right,” Weddel said. “Get down.”

“Git down?”

“I’ll need both horses. You can walk on when you are through sleeping.”

“I ghy tell yo maw,” the Negro said. “I ghy tell um. Ghy tell how after four years you aint got no more sense than to not know a Yankee when

you seed um. To stay de night wid Yankees en let um pizen one of Mistis' niggers. I ghy tell um."

"I thought you were going to stay here," Weddel said. He was shivering too. "Yet I am not cold," he said. "I am not cold."

"Stay here? Me? How in de world you ever git home widout me? Whut I tell Mistis when I come in widout you en she ax me whar you is?"

"Come," Weddel said. He lifted the sorrel into motion. He looked quietly back at the house, then rode on. Behind him on the Thoroughbred the Negro muttered and mumbled to himself in woebegone singsong. The road, the long hill which yesterday they had toiled up, descended now. It was muddy, rockchurned, scarred across the barren and rocky land beneath the dissolving sky, jolting downward to where the pines and laurel began. After a while the cabin had disappeared.

"And so I am running away," Weddel said. "When I get home I shall not be very proud of this. Yes, I will. It means that I am still alive. Still alive, since I still know fear and desire. Since life is an affirmation of the past and a promise to the future. So I am still alive — Ah." It was the laurel copse.

About three hundred yards ahead it seemed to have sprung motionless and darkly secret in the air which of itself was mostly water. He drew rein sharply, the Negro, hunched, moaning, his face completely hidden, overriding him unawares until the Thoroughbred stopped of its own accord.

“But I dont see any path—” Weddel said; then a figure emerged from the copse, running toward them. Weddel thrust the reins beneath his groin and withdrew his hand inside his cloak. Then he saw that it was the boy. He came up trotting. His face was white, strained, his eyes quite grave.

“It’s right yonder,” he said.

“Thank you,” Weddel said. “It was kind of you to come and show us, though we could have found it, I imagine.”

“Yes,” the boy said as though he had not heard. He had already taken the sorrel’s bridle. “Right tother of the brush. You cant see hit until you are in hit.”

“In whut?” the Negro said. “I ghy tell um. After four years you aint got no more sense. . . .”

“Hush,” Weddel said. He said to the boy, “I am obliged to you. You’ll have to take that in lieu of anything better. And now you get on back home. We can find the path. We will be all right now.”

“They know the path too,” the boy said. He drew the sorrel forward. “Come on.”

“Wait,” Weddel said, drawing the sorrel up. The boy still tugged at the bridle, looking on ahead toward the copse. “So we have one guess and they have one guess. Is that it?”

“Damn you to hell, come on!” the boy said, in a kind of thin frenzy. “I am sick of hit. Sick of hit.”

“Well,” Weddel said. He looked about, quizzical, sardonic, with his gaunt, weary, wasted face. “But I must move. I cant stay here, not even if I had a house, a roof to live under. So I have to choose between three things. That’s what throws a man off — that extra alternative. Just when he has come to realize that living consists in choosing wrongly between two alternatives, to have to choose among three. You go back home.”

The boy turned and looked up at him. “We’d work. We could go back to the house now, since paw and Vatch are . . . We could ride down the mou-tin, two on one horse and two on tother. We could go back to the valley and get married at Mayesfield. We would not shame you.”

“But she has a young man, hasn’t she? Somebody that waits for her at church on Sunday and walks home and takes Sunday dinner, and maybe fights the other young men because of her?”

“You wont take us, then?”

“No. You go back home.”

For a while the boy stood, holding the bridle, his face lowered. Then he turned; he said quietly: “Come on, then. We got to hurry.”

“Wait,” Weddel said; “what are you going to do?”

“I’m going a piece with you. Come on.” He dragged the sorrel forward, toward the roadside.

“Here,” Weddel said, “you go on back home. The war is over now. Vatch knows that.”

The boy did not answer. He led the sorrel into the underbrush. The Thoroughbred hung back. "Whoa, you Caesar!" the Negro said. "Wait, Marse Soshay. I aint gwine ride down no. . . ."

The boy looked over his shoulder without stopping. "You keep back there," he said. "You keep where you are."

The path was a faint scar, doubling and twisting among the brush. "I see it now," Weddel said. "You go back."

"I'll go a piece with you," the boy said; so quietly that Weddel discovered that he had been holding his breath, in a taut, strained alertness. He breathed again, while the sorrel jolted stiffly downward beneath him. "Nonsense," he thought. "He will have me playing Indian also in five minutes more.

I had wanted to recover the power to be afraid, but I seem to have outdone myself." The path widened; the Thoroughbred came alongside, the boy walking between them; again he looked at the Negro.

"You keep back, I tell you," he said.

"Why back?" Weddel said. He looked at the boy's wan, strained face; he thought swiftly, "I dont know whether I am playing Indian or not." He said aloud: "Why must he keep back?"

The boy looked at Weddel; he stopped, pulling the sorrel up. "We'd work," he said. "We wouldn't shame you."

Weddel's face was now as sober as the boy's. They looked at one another. "Do you think we have guessed wrong? We had to guess. We had to guess one out of three."

Again it was as if the boy had not heard him. "You wont think hit is me? You swear hit?"

"Yes. I swear it." He spoke quietly, watching the boy; they spoke now as two men or two children. "What do you think we ought to do?"

"Turn back. They will be gone now. We could . . ." He drew back on the bridle; again the Thoroughbred came abreast and forged ahead.

"You mean, it could be along here?" Weddel said. Suddenly he spurred the sorrel, jerking the clinging boy forward. "Let go," he said. The boy held onto the bridle, swept forward until the two horses were again abreast. On the Thoroughbred the Negro perched, highkneed, his mouth still talking, flobbered down with ready speech, easy and worn with talk like an old shoe with walking.

"I done tole him en tole him," the Negro said.

"Let go!" Weddel said, spurring the sorrel, forcing its shoulder into the boy. "Let go!"

"You wont turn back?" the boy said. "You wont?"

"Let go!" Weddel said. His teeth showed a little beneath his mustache; he lifted the sorrel bodily with the spurs. The boy let go of the bridle and ducked beneath the Thoroughbred's neck; Weddel, glancing back as the sorrel leaped, saw the boy surge upward and on to the Thoroughbred's back, shoving the Negro back along its spine until he vanished.



“They think you will be riding the good horse,” the boy said in a thin, panting voice; “I told them you would be riding . . . Down the mou-tin!” he cried as the Thoroughbred swept past; “the horse can make hit! Git outen the path! Git outen the. . . .”

Weddel spurred the sorrel; almost abreast the two horses reached the bend where the path doubled back upon itself and into a matted shoulder of laurel and rhododendron. The boy looked back over his shoulder. “Keep back!” he cried. “Git outen the path!” Weddel rowelled the sorrel. On his face was a thin grimace of exasperation and anger almost like smiling.

It was still on his dead face when he struck the earth, his foot still fast in the stirrup. The sorrel leaped at the sound and dragged Weddel to the path side and halted and whirled and snorted once, and began to graze.

The Thoroughbred however rushed on past the curve and whirled and rushed back, the blanket twisted under its belly and its eyes rolling, springing over the boy’s body where it lay in the path, the face wrenched sideways against a stone, the arms back-sprawled, openpalmed, like a woman with lifted skirts springing across a puddle.

Then it whirled and stood above Weddel’s body, whinnying, with tossing head, watching the laurel copse and the fading gout of black powder smoke as it faded away.

The Negro was on his hands and knees when the two men emerged from the copse. One of them was running. The Negro watched him run forward, crying monotonously. “The durned fool! The durned fool!

The durned fool!" and then stop suddenly and drop the gun; squatting, the Negro saw him become stone still above the fallen gun, looking dawn at the boy's body with an expression of shock and amazement like he was waking from a dream.

Then the Negro saw the other man. In the act of stopping, the second man swung the rifle up and began to reload it. The Negro did not move. On his hands and knees he watched the two white men, his irises rushing and wild in the bloodshot whites.

Then he too moved and, still on hands and knees, he turned and scuttled to where Weddel lay beneath the sorrel and crouched over Weddel and looked again and watched the second man backing slowly away up the path, loading the rifle.

He watched the man stop; he did not close his eyes nor look away. He watched the rifle elongate and then rise and diminish slowly and become a round spot against the white shape of Vatch's face like a period on a page. Crouching, the Negro's eyes rushed wild and steady and red, like those of a cornered animal.

The End