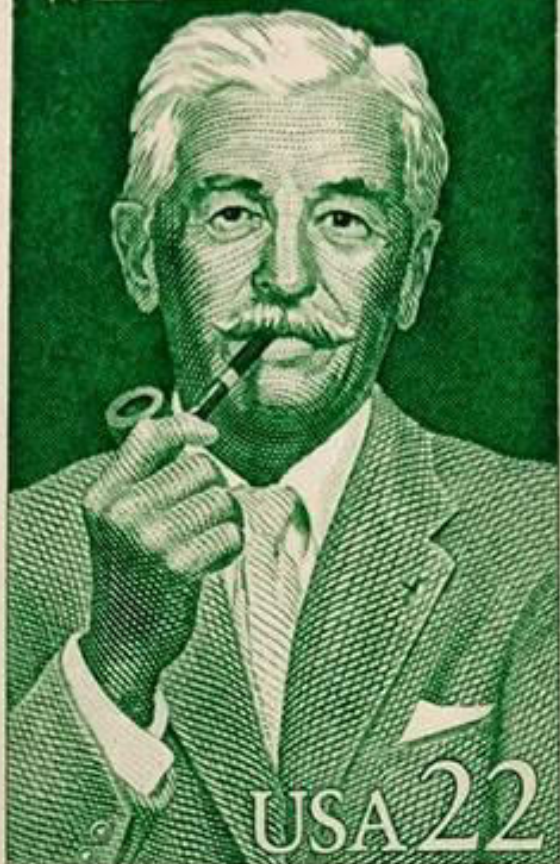
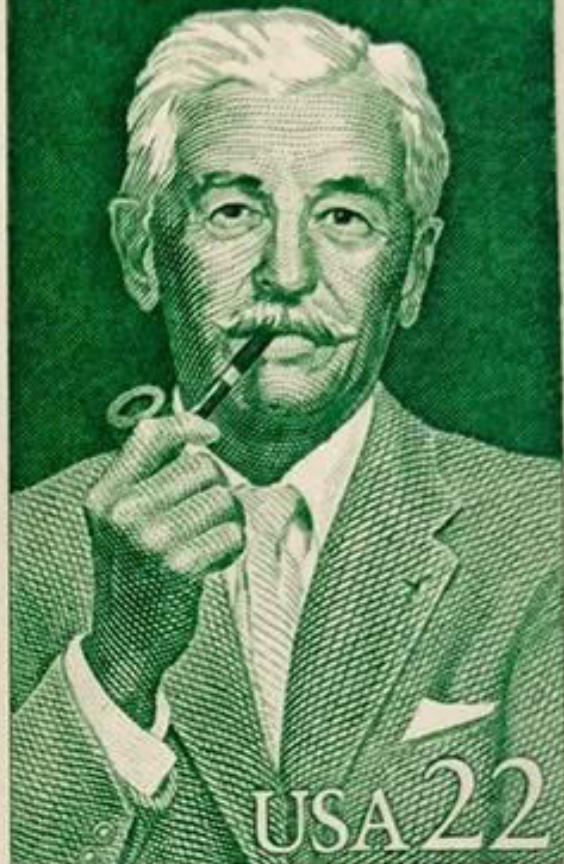


William Faulkner



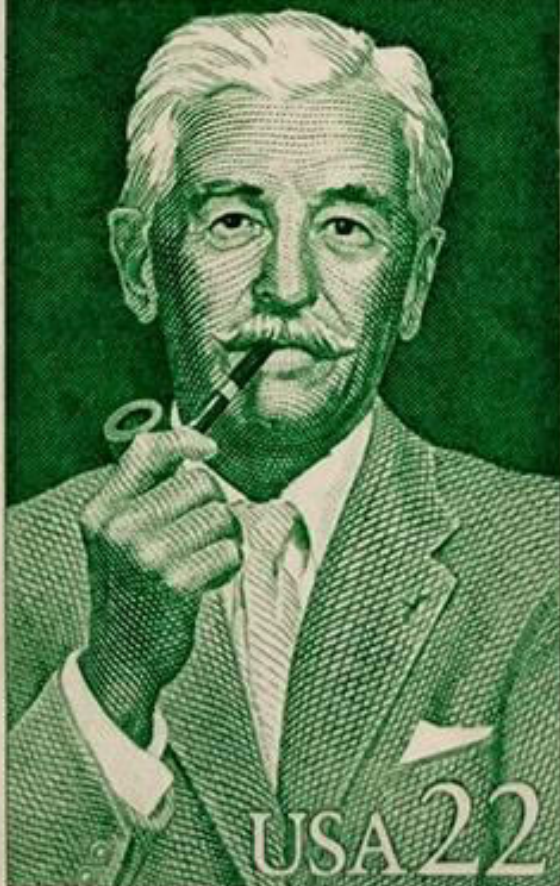
USA 22

William Faulkner



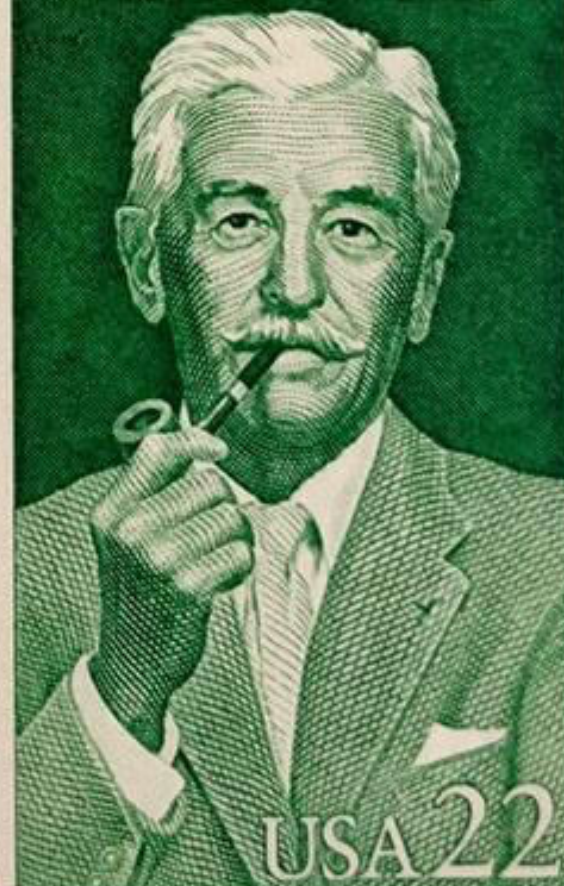
USA 22

William Faulkner



USA 22

William Faulkner



USA 22

Mule in the Yard, William Faulkner

Mule in the Yard

IT WAS A gray day in late January, though not cold because of the fog. Old Het, just walked in from the poorhouse, ran down the hall toward the kitchen, shouting in a strong, bright, happy voice. She was about seventy probably, though by her own counting, calculated from the ages of various housewives in the town from brides to grandmothers whom she claimed to have nursed in infancy, she would have to be around a hundred and at least triplets.

Tall, lean, fog-beaded, in tennis shoes and a long rat-colored cloak trimmed with what forty or fifty years ago had been fur, a modish though not new purple toque set upon her headrag and carrying (time was when she made her weekly rounds from kitchen to kitchen carrying a brocaded carpetbag though since the advent of the ten-cent stores the carpetbag became an endless succession of the convenient paper receptacles with which they supply their customers for a few cents) the shopping-bag, she ran into the kitchen and shouted with strong and childlike pleasure: "Miss Mannie! Mule in de yard!"

Mrs. Hait, stooping to the stove, in the act of drawing from it a scuttle of live ashes, jerked upright; clutching the scuttle, she glared at old Het, then she too spoke at once, strong too, immediate.

"Them sons of bitches," she said. She left the kitchen, not running exactly, yet with a kind of outraged celerity, carrying the scuttle — a

compact woman of forty-odd, with an air of indomitable yet relieved bereavement, as though that which had relicted her had been a woman and a not particularly valuable one at that. She wore a calico wrapper and a sweater coat, and a man's felt hat which they in the town knew had belonged to her ten years' dead husband.

But the man's shoes had not belonged to him. They were high shoes which buttoned, with toes like small tulip bulbs, and in the town they knew that she had bought them new for herself. She and old Het ran down the kitchen steps and into the fog.

That's why it was not cold: as though there lay supine and prisoned between earth and mist the long winter night's suspiration of the sleeping town in dark, close rooms — the slumber and the rousing; the stale waking thermostatic, by re-heating heat-engendered: it lay like a scum of cold grease upon the steps and the wooden entrance to the basement and upon the narrow plank walk which led to a shed building in the corner of the yard: upon these planks, running and still carrying the scuttle of live ashes, Mrs. Hait skated viciously.

"Watch out!" old Het, footed securely by her rubber soles, cried happily. "Dey in de front!" Mrs. Hait did not fall. She did not even pause. She took in the immediate scene with one cold glare and was running again when there appeared at the corner of the house and apparently having been born before their eyes of the fog itself, a mule. It looked taller than a giraffe. Longheaded, with a flying halter about its scissorlike ears, it rushed down upon them with violent and apparitionlike suddenness.

"Dar hit!" old Het cried, waving the shopping-bag. "Hoo!" Mrs. Hait whirled. Again she skidded savagely on the greasy planks as she and the

mule rushed parallel with one another toward the shed building, from whose open doorway there now projected the static and astonished face of a cow. To the cow the fog-born mule doubtless looked taller and more incredibly sudden than a giraffe even, and apparently bent upon charging right through the shed as though it were made of straw or were purely and simply mirage. The cow's head likewise had a quality transient and abrupt and unmundane.

It vanished, sucked into invisibility like a match flame, though the mind knew and the reason insisted that she had withdrawn into the shed, from which, as proof's burden, there came an indescribable sound of shock and alarm by shed and beast engendered, analogous to a single note from a profoundly struck lyre or harp.

Toward this sound Mrs. Hait sprang, immediately, as if by pure reflex, as though in invulnerable compact of female with female against a world of mule and man. She and the mule converged upon the shed at top speed, the heavy scuttle poised lightly in her hand to hurl. Of course it did not take this long, and likewise it was the mule which refused the gambit.

Old Het was still shouting "Dar hit! Dar hit!" when it swerved and rushed at her where she stood tall as a stove pipe, holding the shopping-bag which she swung at the beast as it rushed past her and vanished beyond the other corner of the house as though sucked back into the fog which had produced it, profound and instantaneous and without any sound.

With that unhasteful celerity Mrs. Hait turned and set the scuttle down on the brick coping of the cellar entrance and she and old Het turned the corner of the house in time to see the now wraithlike mule at the

moment when its course converged with that of a choleric-looking rooster and eight Rhode Island Red hens emerging from beneath the house. Then for an instant its progress assumed the appearance and trappings of an apotheosis: hell-born and hell-returning, in the act of dissolving completely into the fog, it seemed to rise vanishing into a sunless and dimensionless medium borne upon and enclosed by small winged goblins.

“Dey’s mo in de front!” old Het cried.

“Them sons of bitches,” Mrs. Hait said, again in that grim, prescient voice without rancor or heat. It was not the mules to which she referred; it was not even the owner of them. It was her whole town-dwelling history as dated from that April dawn ten years ago when what was left of Hait had been gathered from the mangled remains of five mules and several feet of new Manila rope on a blind curve of the railroad just out of town; the geographical hap of her very home; the very components of her bereavement — the mules, the defunct husband, and the owner of them.

His name was Snopes; in the town they knew about him too — how he bought his stock at the Memphis market and brought it to Jefferson and sold it to farmers and widows and orphans black and white, for whatever he could contrive — down to a certain figure; and about how (usually in the dead season of winter) teams and even small droves of his stock would escape from the fenced pasture where he kept them and, tied one to another with sometimes quite new hemp rope (and which item Snopes included in the subsequent claim), would be annihilated by freight trains on the same blind curve which was to be the scene of Hait’s exit from this world; once a town wag sent him through the mail a printed train schedule for the division.

A squat, pasty man perennially tieless and with a strained, harried expression, at stated intervals he passed athwart the peaceful and somnolent life of the town in dust and uproar, his advent heralded by shouts and cries, his passing marked by a yellow cloud filled with tossing jug-shaped heads and clattering hooves and the same forlorn and earnest cries of the drovers; and last of all and well back out of the dust, Snopes himself moving at a harried and panting trot, since it was said in the town that he was deathly afraid of the very beasts in which he cleverly dealt.

The path which he must follow from the railroad station to his pasture crossed the edge of town near Hait's home; Hait and Mrs. Hait had not been in the house a week before they waked one morning to find it surrounded by galloping mules and the air filled with the shouts and cries of the drovers.

But it was not until that April dawn some years later, when those who reached the scene first found what might be termed foreign matter among the mangled mules and the savage fragments of new rope, that the town suspected that Hait stood in any closer relationship to Snopes and the mules than that of helping at periodical intervals to drive them out of his front yard. After that they believed that they knew; in a three days' recess of interest, surprise, and curiosity they watched to see if Snopes would try to collect on Hait also.

But they learned only that the adjuster appeared and called upon Mrs. Hait and that a few days later she cashed a check for eight thousand five hundred dollars, since this was back in the old halcyon days when even the companies considered their southern branches and divisions the legitimate prey of all who dwelt beside them.

She took the cash: she stood in her sweater coat and the hat which Hait had been wearing on the fatal morning a week ago and listened in cold, grim silence while the teller counted the money and the president and the cashier tried to explain to her the virtues of a bond, then of a savings account, then of a checking account, and departed with the money in a salt sack under her apron; after a time she painted her house: that serviceable and time-defying color which the railroad station was painted, as though out of sentiment or (as some said) gratitude.

The adjuster also summoned Snopes into conference, from which he emerged not only more harried-looking than ever, but with his face stamped with a bewildered dismay which it was to wear from then on, and that was the last time his pasture fence was ever to give inexplicably away at dead of night upon mules coupled in threes and fours by adequate rope even though not always new. And then it seemed as though the mules themselves knew this, as if, even while haltered at the Memphis block at his bid, they sensed it somehow as they sensed that he was afraid of them.

Now, three or four times a year and as though by fiendish concord and as soon as they were freed of the box car, the entire uproar — the dust cloud filled with shouts earnest, harried, and dismayed, with plunging demoniac shapes — would become translated in a single burst of perverse and uncontrollable violence, without any intervening contact with time, space, or earth, across the peaceful and astonished town and into Mrs. Hait's yard, where, in a certain hapless despair which abrogated for the moment even physical fear, Snopes ducked and dodged among the thundering shapes about the house (for whose very impervious paint the town believed that he felt he had paid and whose inmate lived within it a life of idle and queenlike ease on money which

he considered at least partly his own) while gradually that section and neighborhood gathered to look on from behind adjacent window curtains and porches screened and not, and from the sidewalks and even from halted wagons and cars in the street — housewives in the wrappers and boudoir caps of morning, children on the way to school, casual Negroes and casual whites in static and entertained repose.

They were all there when, followed by old Het and carrying the stub of a worn-out broom, Mrs. Hait ran around the next corner and onto the handkerchief-sized plot of earth which she called her front yard. It was small; any creature with a running stride of three feet could have spanned it in two paces, yet at the moment, due perhaps to the myopic and distortive quality of the fog, it seemed to be as incredibly full of mad life as a drop of water beneath the microscope.

Yet again she did not falter. With the broom clutched in her hand and apparently with a kind of sublime faith in her own invulnerability, she rushed on after the haltered mule which was still in that arrested and wraithlike process of vanishing furiously into the fog, its wake indicated by the tossing and dispersing shapes of the nine chickens like so many jagged scraps of paper in the dying air blast of an automobile, and the madly dodging figure of a man.

The man was Snopes; beaded too with moisture, his wild face gaped with hoarse shouting and the two heavy lines of shaven beard descending from the corners of it as though in alluvial retrospect of years of tobacco, he screamed at her: "Fore God, Miz Hait! I done everything I could!" She didn't even look at him.

"Ketch that big un with the bridle on," she said in her cold, panting voice. "Git that big un outen here."

“Sho!” Snopes shrieked. “Jest let um take their time. Jest don’t git um excited now.”

“Watch out!” old Het shouted. “He headin fer de back again!”

“Git the rope,” Mrs. Hait said, running again. Snopes glared back at old Het.

“Fore God, where is ere rope?” he shouted.

“In de cellar fo God!” old Het shouted, also without pausing. “Go roun de udder way en head um.” Again she and Mrs. Hait turned the corner in time to see again the still-vanishing mule with the halter once more in the act of floating lightly onward in its cloud of chickens with which, they being able to pass under the house and so on the chord of a circle while it had to go around on the arc, it had once more coincided. When they turned the next corner they were in the back yard again.

“Fo God!” old Het cried. “He fixin to misuse de cow!” For they had gained on the mule now, since it had stopped. In fact, they came around the corner on a tableau. The cow now stood in the centre of the yard. She and the mule faced one another a few feet apart.

Motionless, with lowered heads and braced forelegs, they looked like two book ends from two distinct pairs of a general pattern which some one of amateurly bucolic leanings might have purchased, and which some child had salvaged, brought into idle juxtaposition and then forgotten; and, his head and shoulders projecting above the back-flung slant of the cellar entrance where the scuttle still sat, Snopes standing as though buried to the armpits for a Spanish-Indian-American suttee.

Only again it did not take this long. It was less than tableau; it was one of those things which later even memory cannot quite affirm. Now and

in turn, man and cow and mule vanished beyond the next corner, Snopes now in the lead, carrying the rope, the cow next with her tail rigid and raked slightly like the stern staff of a boat. Mrs. Hait and old Het ran on, passing the open cellar gaping upon its accumulation of human necessities and widowed womanyears — boxes for kindling wood, old papers and magazines, the broken and outworn furniture and utensils which no woman ever throws away; a pile of coal and another of pitch pine for priming fires — and ran on and turned the next corner to see man and cow and mule all vanishing now in the wild cloud of ubiquitous chickens which had once more crossed beneath the house and emerged.

They ran on, Mrs. Hait in grim and unflagging silence, old Het with the eager and happy amazement of a child. But when they gained the front again they saw only Snopes. He lay flat on his stomach, his head and shoulders upreared by his outstretched arms, his coat tail swept forward by its own arrested momentum about his head so that from beneath it his slack-jawed face mused in wild repose like that of a burlesqued nun.

“Whar’d dey go?” old Het shouted at him. He didn’t answer.

“Dey tightenin’ on de curves!” she cried. “Dey already in de back again!” That’s where they were. The cow made a feint at running into her shed, but deciding perhaps that her speed was too great, she whirled in a final desperation of despair-like valor. But they did not see this, nor see the mule, swerving to pass her, crash and blunder for an instant at the open cellar door before going on. When they arrived, the mule was gone.

The scuttle was gone too, but they did not notice it; they saw only the cow standing in the centre of the yard as before, panting, rigid, with braced forelegs and lowered head facing nothing, as if the child had returned and removed one of the book ends for some newer purpose or game.

They ran on. Mrs. Hait ran heavily now, her mouth too open, her face putty-colored and one hand pressed to her side. So slow was their progress that the mule in its third circuit of the house overtook them from behind and soared past with undiminished speed, with brief demon thunder and a keen ammonia-sweet reek of sweat sudden and sharp as a jeering cry, and was gone.

Yet they ran doggedly on around the next corner in time to see it succeed at last in vanishing into the fog; they heard its hoofs, brief, staccato, and derisive, on the paved street, dying away.

“Well!” old Het said, stopping. She panted, happily. “Gentlemen, hush! Ain’t we had—” Then she became stone still; slowly her head turned, high-nosed, her nostrils pulsing; perhaps for the instant she saw the open cellar door as they had last passed it, with no scuttle beside it. “Fo God I smells smoke!” she said. “Chile, run, git yo money.”

That was still early, not yet ten o’clock. By noon the house had burned to the ground. There was a farmers’ supply store where Snopes could be usually found; more than one had made a point of finding him there by that time.

They told him about how when the fire engine and the crowd reached the scene, Mrs. Hait, followed by old Het carrying her shopping-bag in

one hand and a framed portrait of Mr. Hait in the other, emerged with an umbrella and wearing a new, dun-colored, mail-order coat, in one pocket of which lay a fruit jar filled with smoothly rolled banknotes and in the other a heavy, nickel-plated pistol, and crossed the street to the house opposite, where with old Het beside her in another rocker, she had been sitting ever since on the veranda, grim, inscrutable, the two of them rocking steadily, while hoarse and tireless men hurled her dishes and furniture and bedding up and down the street.

“What are you telling me for?” Snopes said. “Hit warn’t me that set that ere scuttle of live fire where the first thing that passed would knock hit into the cellar.”

“It was you that opened the cellar door, though.”

“Sho. And for what? To git that rope, her own rope, where she told me to git it.”

“To catch your mule with, that was trespassing on her property. You can’t get out of it this time, I. O. There ain’t a jury in the county that won’t find for her.”

“Yes. I reckon not. And just because she is a woman. That’s why. Because she is a durn woman. All right. Let her go to her durn jury with hit. I can talk too; I reckon hit’s a few things I could tell a jury myself about—” He ceased. They were watching him.

“What? Tell a jury about what?”

“Nothing. Because hit ain’t going to no jury. A jury between her and me? Me and Mannie Hait? You boys don’t know her if you think she’s going to make trouble over a pure acci-dent couldn’t nobody help.

Why, there ain't a fairer, finer woman in the county than Miz Mannie Hait.

I just wisht I had a opportunity to tell her so." The opportunity came at once. Old Het was behind her, carrying the shopping-bag. Mrs. Hait looked once, quietly, about at the faces, making no response to the murmur of curious salutation, then not again. She didn't look at Snopes long either, nor talk to him long.

"I come to buy that mule," she said.

"What mule?" They looked at one another. "You'd like to own that mule?" She looked at him. "Hit'll cost you a hundred and fifty, Miz Mannie."

"You mean dollars?"

"I don't mean dimes nor nickels neither, Miz Mannie."

"Dollars," she said. "That's more than mules was in Hait's time."

"Lots of things is different since Hait's time. Including you and me."

"I reckon so," she said. Then she went away. She turned without a word, old Het following.

"Maybe one of them others you looked at this morning would suit you," Snopes said. She didn't answer. Then they were gone.

"I don't know as I would have said that last to her," one said.

"What for?" Snopes said. "If she was aiming to law something outen me about that fire, you reckon she would have come and offered to pay me

money for hit?” That was about one o’clock. About four o’clock he was shouldering his way through a throng of Negroes before a cheap grocery store when one called his name. It was old Het, the now bulging shopping-bag on her arm, eating bananas from a paper sack.

“Fo God I wuz jest dis minute huntin fer you,” she said. She handed the banana to a woman beside her and delved and fumbled in the shopping-bag and extended a greenback. “Miz Mannie gimme dis to give you; I wuz jest on de way to de sto whar you stay at. Here.” He took the bill.

“What’s this? From Miz Hait?”

“Fer de mule.” The bill was for ten dollars. “You don’t need to gimme no receipt. I kin be de witness I give hit to you.”

“Ten dollars? For that mule? I told her a hundred and fifty dollars.”

“You’ll have to fix dat up wid her yo’self. She jest gimme dis to give ter you when she sot out to fetch de mule.”

“Set out to fetch — She went out there herself and taken my mule outen my pasture?”

“Lawd, chile,” old Het said, “Miz Mannie ain’t skeered of no mule. Ain’t you done foun dat out?”

And then it became late, what with the yet short winter days; when she came in sight of the two gaunt chimneys against the sunset, evening was already finding itself. But she could smell the ham cooking before she came in sight of the cow shed even, though she could not see it until she came around in front where the fire burned beneath an iron

skillet set on bricks and where nearby Mrs. Hait was milking the cow. "Well," old Het said, "you is settled down, ain't you?" She looked into the shed, neated and raked and swept even, and floored now with fresh hay.

A clean new lantern burned on a box, beside it a pallet bed was spread neatly on the straw and turned neatly back for the night. "Why, you is fixed up," she said with pleased astonishment. Within the door was a kitchen chair. She drew it out and sat down beside the skillet and laid the bulging shopping-bag beside her.

"I'll tend dis meat whilst you milks. I'd offer to strip dat cow fer you ef I wuzn't so wo out wid all dis excitement we been had." She looked around her. "I don't believe I sees yo new mule, dough." Mrs. Hait grunted, her head against the cow's flank. After a moment she said, "Did you give him that money?"

"I give um ter him. He ack surprise at first, lak maybe he think you didn't aim to trade dat quick. I tole him to settle de details wid you later. He taken de money, dough. So I reckon dat's offen his mine en yo'n bofe." Again Mrs. Hait grunted.

Old Het turned the ham in the skillet. Beside it the coffee pot bubbled and steamed. "Cawfee smell good too," she said. "I ain't had no appetite in years now. A bird couldn't live on de vittles I eats.

But jest lemme git a whiff er cawfee en seem lak hit always whets me a little. Now, ef you jest had nudder little piece o dis ham, now — Fo God, you got company aready." But Mrs. Hait did not even look up until she

had finished. Then she turned without rising from the box on which she sat.

“I reckon you and me better have a little talk,” Snopes said. “I reckon I got something that belongs to you and I hear you got something that belongs to me.” He looked about, quickly, ceaselessly, while old Het watched him. He turned to her. “You go away, aunty. I don’t reckon you want to set here and listen to us.”

“Lawd, honey,” old Het said. “Don’t you mind me. I done already had so much troubles myself dat I kin set en listen to udder folks’ widout hit worryin me a-tall. You gawn talk whut you came ter talk; I jest set here en tend de ham.” Snopes looked at Mrs. Hait.

“Ain’t you going to make her go away?” he said.

“What for?” Mrs. Hait said. “I reckon she ain’t the first critter that ever come on this yard when hit wanted and went or stayed when hit liked.” Snopes made a gesture, brief, fretted, restrained.

“Well,” he said. “All right. So you taken the mule.”

“I paid you for it. She give you the money.”

“Ten dollars. For a hundred-and-fifty-dollar mule. Ten dollars.”

“I don’t know anything about hundred-and-fifty-dollar mules. All I know is what the railroad paid.” Now Snopes looked at her for a full moment.

“What do you mean?”

“Them sixty dollars a head the railroad used to pay you for mules back when you and Hait—”

“Hush,” Snopes said; he looked about again, quick, ceaseless. “All right. Even call it sixty dollars. But you just sent me ten.”

“Yes. I sent you the difference.” He looked at her, perfectly still. “Between that mule and what you owed Hait.”

“What I owed—”

“For getting them five mules onto the tr—”

“Hush!” he cried. “Hush!” Her voice went on, cold, grim, level.

“For helping you. You paid him fifty dollars each time, and the railroad paid you sixty dollars a head for the mules. Ain’t that right?” He watched her. “The last time you never paid him. So I taken that mule instead. And I sent you the ten dollars difference.”

“Yes,” he said in a tone of quiet, swift, profound bemusement; then he cried: “But look! Here’s where I got you. Hit was our agreement that I wouldn’t never owe him nothing until after the mules was—”

“I reckon you better hush yourself,” Mrs. Hait said.

“ — until hit was over. And this time, when over had come, I never owed nobody no money because the man hit would have been owed to wasn’t nobody,” he cried triumphantly. “You see?” Sitting on the box, motionless, downlooking, Mrs. Hait seemed to muse. “So you just take your ten dollars back and tell me where my mule is and we’ll just go back good friends to where we started at. Fore God, I’m as sorry as ere a living man about that fire—”

“Fo God!” old Het said, “hit was a blaze, wuzn’t it?”

“ — but likely with all that ere railroad money you still got, you just been wanting a chance to build new, all along. So here. Take hit.” He put the money into her hand. “Where’s my mule?” But Mrs. Hait didn’t move at once.

“You want to give it back to me?” she said.

“Sho. We been friends all the time; now we’ll just go back to where we left off being. I don’t hold no hard feelings and don’t you hold none. Where you got the mule hid?”

“Up at the end of that ravine ditch behind Spilmer’s,” she said.

“Sho. I know. A good, sheltered place, since you ain’t got nere barn. Only if you’d a just left hit in the pasture, hit would a saved us both trouble. But hit ain’t no hard feelings though. And so I’ll bid you goodnight. You’re all fixed up, I see. I reckon you could save some more money by not building no house a-tall.”

“I reckon I could,” Mrs. Hait said. But he was gone.

“Whut did you leave de mule dar fer?” old Het said.

“I reckon that’s far enough,” Mrs. Hait said.

“Fer enough?” But Mrs. Hait came and looked into the skillet, and old Het said, “Wuz hit me er you dat mentioned something erbout er nudder piece o dis ham?” So they were both eating when in the not-quite-yet accomplished twilight Snopes returned. He came up quietly and stood, holding his hands to the blaze as if he were quite cold. He did not look at any one now.

“I reckon I’ll take that ere ten dollars,” he said.

“What ten dollars?” Mrs. Hait said. He seemed to muse upon the fire. Mrs. Hait and old Het chewed quietly, old Het alone watching him.

“You ain’t going to give hit back to me?” he said.

“You was the one that said to let’s go back to where we started,” Mrs. Hait said.

“Fo God you wuz, en dat’s de fack,” old Het said. Snopes mused upon the fire; he spoke in a tone of musing and amazed despair:

“I go to the worry and the risk and the agoment for years and years and I get sixty dollars. And you, one time, without no trouble and no risk, without even knowing you are going to git it, git eighty-five hundred dollars.

I never begrudged hit to you; can’t nere a man say I did, even if hit did seem a little strange that you should git it all when he wasn’t working for you and you never even knowed where he was at and what doing; that all you done to git it was to be married to him. And now, after all these ten years of not begrudging you hit, you taken the best mule I had and you ain’t even going to pay me ten dollars for hit. Hit ain’t right. Hit ain’t justice.”

“You got de mule back, en you ain’t satisfried yit,” old Het said. “Whut does you want?” Now Snopes looked at Mrs. Hait.

“For the last time I ask hit,” he said. “Will you or won’t you give hit back?”

“Give what back?” Mrs. Hait said. Snopes turned. He stumbled over something — it was old Het’s shopping-bag — and recovered and went on. They could see him in silhouette, as though framed by the two blackened chimneys against the dying west; they saw him fling up both clenched hands in a gesture almost Gallic, of resignation and impotent despair. Then he was gone. Old Het was watching Mrs. Hait.

“Honey,” she said. “Whut did you do wid de mule?” Mrs. Hait leaned forward to the fire. On her plate lay a stale biscuit. She lifted the skillet and poured over the biscuit the grease in which the ham had cooked.

“I shot it,” she said.

“You which?” old Het said. Mrs. Hait began to eat the biscuit. “Well,” old Het said, happily, “de mule burnt de house en you shot de mule. Dat’s whut I calls justice.” It was getting dark fast now, and before her was still the three-mile walk to the poorhouse. But the dark would last a long time in January, and the poorhouse too would not move at once.

She sighed with weary and happy relaxation. “Gentlemen, hush! Ain’t we had a day!”

The End