



An Error in Chemistry, William Faulkner

An Error in Chemistry

IT WAS JOEL Flint himself who telephoned the sheriff that he had killed his wife. And when the sheriff and his deputy reached the scene, drove the twenty-odd miles into the remote back-country region where old Wesley Pritchel lived, Joel Flint himself met them at the door and asked them in.

He was the foreigner, the outlander, the Yankee who had come into our county two years ago as the operator of a pitch — a lighted booth where a roulette wheel spun against a bank of nickel-plated pistols and razors and watches and harmonicas, in a traveling street carnival — and who when the carnival departed had remained, and two months later was married to Pritchel's only living child: the dim-witted spinster of almost forty who until then had shared her irascible and violent-tempered father's almost hermit-existence on the good though small farm which he owned.

But even after the marriage, old Pritchel still seemed to draw the line against his son-in-law. He built a new small house for them two miles from his own, where the daughter was presently raising chickens for the market. According to rumor old Pritchel, who hardly ever went anywhere anyway, had never once entered the new house, so that he saw even this last remaining child only once a week.

This would be when she and her husband would drive each Sunday in the second-hand truck in which the son-in-law marketed the chickens, to take Sunday dinner with old Pritchel in the old house where Pritchel now did his own cooking and housework. In fact, the neighbors said the

only reason he allowed the son-in-law to enter his house even then was so that his daughter could prepare him a decent hot meal once a week.

So for the next two years, occasionally in Jefferson, the county seat, but more frequently in the little cross-roads hamlet near his home, the son-in-law would be seen and heard too.

He was a man in the middle forties, neither short nor tall nor thin nor stout (in fact, he and his father-in-law could easily have cast that same shadow which later for a short time they did), with a cold, contemptuous intelligent face and a voice lazy with anecdotes of the teeming outland which his listeners had never seen — a dweller among the cities, though never from his own accounting long resident in any one of them, who within the first three months of his residence among them had impressed upon the people whose way of life he had assumed, one definite personal habit by which he presently became known throughout the whole county, even by men who had never seen him.

This was a harsh and contemptuous derogation, sometimes without even provocation or reason or opportunity, of our local southern custom of drinking whiskey by mixing sugar and water with it. He called it effeminacy, a pap for children, himself drinking even our harsh, violent, illicit and unaged homemade com whiskey without even a sip of water to follow it.

Then on this last Sunday morning he telephoned the sheriff that he had killed his wife and met the officers at his father-in-law's door and said: 'I have already carried her into the house. So you won't need to waste breath telling me I shouldn't have touched her until you got here.'

‘I reckon it was all right to take her up out of the dirt,’ the sheriff said. ‘It was an accident, I believe you said.’

‘Then you believe wrong,’ Flint said. ‘I said I killed her.’ And that was all.

The sheriff brought him to Jefferson and locked him in a cell in the jail. And that evening after supper the sheriff came through the side door into the study where Uncle Gavin was supervising me in the drawing of a brief. Uncle Gavin was only county, not District, attorney.

But he and the sheriff, who had been sheriff off and on even longer than Uncle Gavin had been county attorney, had been friends all that while. I mean friends in the sense that two men who play chess together are friends, even though sometimes their aims are diametrically opposed. I heard them discuss it once.

‘I’m interested in truth,’ the sheriff said.

‘So am I,’ Uncle Gavin said. ‘It’s so rare. But I am more interested in justice and human beings.’

‘Ain’t truth and justice the same thing?’ the sheriff said. ‘Since when?’ Uncle Gavin said. ‘In my time I have seen truth that was anything under the sun but just, and I have seen justice using tools and instruments I wouldn’t want to touch with a ten-foot fence rail.’

The sheriff told us about the killing, standing, looming above the table-lamp — a big man with little hard eyes, talking down at Uncle Gavin’s wild shock of prematurely white hair and his quick thin face, while Uncle Gavin sat on the back of his neck practically, his legs crossed on the desk, chewing the bit of his corncob pipe and spinning and

unspinning around his finger his watch chain weighted with the Phi Beta Kappa key he got at Harvard.

Why?’ Uncle Gavin said.

‘I asked him that, myself,’ the sheriff said. ‘He said, “Why do men ever kill their wives? Call it for the insurance.”’

‘That’s wrong,’ Uncle Gavin said. ‘It’s women who murder their spouses for immediate personal gain — insurance policies, or at what they believe is the instigation or promise of another man. Men murder their wives from hatred or rage or despair, or to keep them from talking since not even bribery not even simple absence can bridle a woman’s tongue.’

‘Correct,’ the sheriff said. He blinked his little eyes at Uncle Gavin. ‘It’s like he wanted to be locked up in jail. Not like he was submitting to arrest because he had killed his wife, but like he had killed her so that he would be locked up, arrested. Guarded.’

Why?’ Uncle Gavin said.

‘Correct too,’ the sheriff said. When a man deliberately locks doors behind himself, it’s because he is afraid. And a man who would voluntarily have himself locked up on suspicion of murder...’ He batted his hard little eyes at Uncle Gavin for a good ten seconds while Uncle Gavin looked just as hard back at him. ‘Because he wasn’t afraid. Not then nor at any time. Now and then you meet a man that aint ever been afraid, not even of himself. He’s one.’

‘If that’s what he wanted you to do,’ Uncle Gavin said, ‘why did you do it?’

‘You think I should have waited a while?’

They looked at one another a while. Uncle Gavin wasn’t spinning the watch chain now. ‘All right,’ he said. ‘Old Man Pritchel—’

‘I was coming to that,’ the sheriff said. ‘Nothing.’

‘Nothing?’ Uncle Gavin said. ‘You didn’t even see him?’ And the sheriff told that too — how as he and the deputy and Flint stood on the gallery, they suddenly saw the old man looking out at them through a window — a face rigid, furious, glaring at them through the glass for a second and then withdrawn, vanished, leaving an impression of furious exultation and raging triumph, and something else....

‘Fear?’ the sheriff said. ‘No. I tell you, he wasn’t afraid — Oh,’ he said. ‘You mean Pritchel.’ This time he looked at Uncle Gavin so long that at last Uncle Gavin said, ‘All right. Go on.’

And the sheriff told that too: how they entered the house, the hall, and he stopped and knocked at the locked door of the room where they had seen the face and he even called old Pritchel’s name and still got no answer.

And how they went on and found Mrs. Flint on a bed in the back room with the shotgun wound in her neck, and Flint’s battered truck drawn up beside the back steps as if they had just got out of it.

'There were three dead squirrels in the truck,' the sheriff said. 'I'd say they had been shot since daylight' — and the blood on the steps, and on the ground between the steps and the truck, as if she had been shot from inside the truck, and the gun itself, still containing the spent shell, standing just inside the hall door as a man would put it down when he entered the house. And how the sheriff went back up the hall and knocked again at the locked door —

'Locked where?' Uncle Gavin said.

On the inside, the sheriff said — and shouted against the door's blank surface that he would break the door in if Mr. Pritchel didn't answer and open it, and how this time the harsh furious old voice answered, shouting:

Get out of my house! Take that murderer and get out of my house.'

'You will have to make a statement,' the sheriff answered.

'I'll make my statement when the time comes for it!' the old man shouted. 'Get out of my house, all of you!' And how he (the sheriff) sent the deputy in the car to fetch the nearest neighbor, and he and Flint waited until the deputy came back with a man and his wife.

Then they brought Flint on to town and locked him up and the sheriff telephoned back to old Pritchel's house and the neighbor answered and told him how the old man was still locked in the room, refusing to come out or even to answer save to order them all (several other neighbors had arrived by now, word of the tragedy having spread) to leave. But some of them would stay in the house, no matter what the seemingly crazed old man said or did, and the funeral would be tomorrow.

‘And that’s all?’ Uncle Gavin said.

That’s all,’ the sheriff said. ‘Because it’s too late now.’

‘For instance?’ Uncle Gavin said.

‘The wrong one is dead.’

‘That happens,’ Uncle Gavin said.

‘For instance?’

‘That clay-pit business.’

‘What clay-pit business?’ Because the whole county knew about old Pritchel’s clay-pit. It was a formation of malleable clay right in the middle of his farm, of which people in the adjacent countryside made quite serviceable though crude pottery — those times they could manage to dig that much of it before Mr. Pritchel saw them and drove them off.

For generations, Indian and even aboriginal relics — flint arrow-heads, axes and dishes and skulls and thigh-bones and pipes — had been excavated from it by random hoys, and a few years ago a party of archaeologists from the State University had dug into it until Old Man Pritchel got there, this time with a shotgun. But everybody knew this; this was not what the sheriff was telling, and now Uncle Gavin was sitting erect in the chair and his feet were on the floor now.

‘I hadn’t heard about this,’ Uncle Gavin said.

‘It’s common knowledge out there,’ the sheriff said. ‘In fact, you might call it the local outdoor sport. It began about six weeks ago. They are

three northern men. They're trying to buy the whole farm from old Pritchel to get the pit and manufacture some kind of road material out of the clay, I understand.

The folks out there are still watching them trying to buy it. Apparently the northerners are the only folks in the country that don't know yet old Pritchel aint got any notion of selling even the clay to them, let alone the farm.'

They've made him an offer, of course.'

'Probably a good one. It runs all the way from two hundred and fifty dollars to two hundred and fifty thousand, depending on who's telling it. Them northerners just don't know how to handle him. If they would just set in and convince him that everybody in the county is hoping he won't sell it to them, they could probably buy it before supper tonight.' He stared at Uncle Gavin, batting his eyes again. 'So the wrong one is dead, you see. If it was that clay pit, he's no nearer to it than he was yesterday.

He's worse off than he was yesterday. Then there wasn't anything between him and his pa-in-law's money but whatever private wishes and hopes and feelings that dim-witted girl might have had.

Now there's a penitentiary wall, and likely a rope. It don't make sense. If he was afraid of a possible witness, he not only destroyed the witness before there was anything to be witnessed but also before there was any witness to be destroyed.

He set up a signboard saying "Watch me and mark me," not just to this county and this state but to all folks everywhere who believe the Book

where it says Thou Shalt Not Kill — and then went and got himself locked up in the very place created to punish him for this crime and restrain him from the next one. Something went wrong.'

'I hope so,' Uncle Gavin said.

'You hope so?'

'Yes. That something went wrong in what has already happened, rather than what has already happened is not finished yet.'

'How not finished yet?' the sheriff said. 'How can he finish whatever it is he aims to finish? Aint he already locked up in jail, with the only man in the county who might make bond to free him being the father of the woman he as good as confessed he murdered?'

'It looks that way,' Uncle Gavin said. 'Was there an insurance policy?'

'I don't know,' the sheriff said. 'I'll find that out tomorrow. But that aint what I want to know. I want to know why he wanted to be locked up in jail. Because I tell you he wasn't afraid, then nor at any other time. You already guessed who it was out there that was afraid.'

But we were not to learn that answer yet. And there was an insurance policy. But by the time we learned about that, something else had happened which sent everything else temporarily out of mind. At daylight the next morning, when the jailer went and looked into Flint's cell, it was empty. He had not broken out. He had walked out, out of the cell, out of the jail, out of the town and apparently out of the country — no trace, no sign, no man who had seen him or seen anyone who might have been him. It was not yet sunup when I let the sheriff in

at the side study door; Uncle Gavin was already sitting up in bed when we reached his bedroom.

‘Old Man Pritchel!’ Uncle Gavin said. ‘Only we are already too late.’

‘What’s the matter with you?’ the sheriff said. ‘I told you last night he was already too late the second he pulled that wrong trigger. Besides, just to be in position to ease your mind, I’ve already telephoned out there. Been a dozen folks in the house all night, sitting up with the — with Mrs. Flint, and old Pritchel’s still locked in his room and all right too.’

They heard him bumping and blundering around in there just before daylight, and so somebody knocked on the door and kept on knocking and calling him until he finally opened the door wide enough to give them all a good cussing and order them again to get out of his house and stay out. Then he locked the door again.

Old fellow’s been hit pretty hard, I reckon. He must have seen it when it happened, and at his age, and having already druv the whole human race away from his house except that half-wit girl, until at last even she up and left him, even at any cost. I reckon it aint any wonder she married even a man like Flint.

What is it the Book says? ‘Who lives by the sword, so shall he die.’? — the sword in old Pritchel’s case being whatever it was he decided he preferred in place of human beings, while he was still young and hale and strong and didn’t need them.

But to keep your mind easy, I sent Bryan Ewell out there thirty minutes ago and told him not to let that locked door — or old Pritchel himself, if he comes out of it — out of his sight until I told him to, and I sent Ben Berry and some others out to Flint's house and told Ben to telephone me. And I'll call you when I hear anything. Which won't be anything, because that fellow's gone.

He got caught yesterday because he made a mistake, and the fellow that can walk out of that jail like he did aint going to make two mistakes within five hundred miles of Jefferson or Mississippi either.'

'Mistake?' Uncle Gavin said. 'He just told us this morning why he wanted to be put in jail.'

'And why was that?'

'So he could escape from it.'

'And why get out again, when he was already out and could have stayed out by just running instead of telephoning me he had committed a murder?'

'I don't know,' Uncle Gavin said. 'Are you sure Old Man Pritchel—'

'Didn't I just tell you folks saw and talked to him through that half-opened door this morning? And Bryan Ewell probably sitting in a chair tilted against that door right this minute — or he better be. I'll telephone you if I hear anything. But I've already told you that too — that it won't be nothing.' He telephoned an hour later. He had just talked to the deputy who had searched Flint's house, reporting only that Flint had been there sometime in the night — the back door open, an oil lamp shattered on the floor where Flint had apparently knocked it while fumbling in the dark, since the deputy found, behind a big,

open, hurriedly ransacked trunk, a twisted spill of paper which Flint had obviously used to light his search of the trunk — a scrap of paper torn from a billboard —

‘A what?’ Uncle Gavin said.

‘That’s what I said,’ the sheriff said. ‘And Ben says, “All right, then send somebody else out here, if my reading aint good enough to suit you. It was a scrap of paper which was evidently tore from the corner of a billboard because it says on the scrap in English that even I can read—” and I says, “Tell me exactly what it is you’re holding in your hand.” And he did. It’s a page, from a magazine or a small paper named Billboard or maybe The Billboard. There’s some more printing on it but Ben can’t read it because he lost his spectacles back in the woods while he was surrounding the house to catch Flint doing whatever it was he expected to catch him doing — cooking breakfast, maybe. Do you know what it is?’

‘Yes,’ Uncle Gavin said.

‘Do you know what it means, what it was doing there?’

‘Yes,’ Uncle Gavin said. ‘But why?’

‘Well, I can’t tell you. And he never will. Because he’s gone, Gavin. Oh, we’ll catch him — somebody will, I mean, someday, somewhere. But it won’t be here, and it won’t be for this. It’s like that poor, harmless, half-witted girl wasn’t important enough for even that justice you claim you prefer above truth, to avenge her.’

And that did seem to be all of it. Mrs. Flint was buried that afternoon. The old man was still locked in his room during the funeral, and even

after they departed with the coffin for the churchyard, leaving in the house only the deputy in his tilted chair outside the locked door, and two neighbor women who remained to cook a hot meal for old Pritchel, finally prevailing on him to open the door long enough to take the tray from them.

And he thanked them for it, clumsily and gruffly, thanking them for their kindness during all the last twenty-four hours. One of the women was moved enough to offer to return tomorrow and cook another meal for him, whereupon his old-time acerbity and choler returned and the kind-hearted woman was even regretting that she had made the offer at all when the harsh, cracked old voice from inside the half-closed door added: 'I don't need no help. I ain't had no darter nohow in two years,' and the door slammed in their faces and the bolt shot home.

Then the two women left, and there was only the deputy sitting in his tilted chair beside the door. He was back in town the next morning, telling how the old man had snatched the door suddenly open and kicked the chair out from beneath the dozing deputy before he could move and ordered him off the place with violent curses, and how as he (the deputy) peered at the house from around the corner of the bam a short time later, the shotgun blared from the kitchen window and the charge of squirrel shot slammed into the stable wall not a yard above his head. The sheriff telephoned that to Uncle Gavin too:

'So he's out there alone again. And since that's what he seems to want, it's all right with me. Sure I feel sorry for him. I feel sorry for anybody that has to live with a disposition like his. Old and alone, to have all this happen to him. It's like being snatched up by a tornado and whirled and slung and then slammed right back down where you started from, without even the benefit and pleasure of having taken a trip. What was it I said yesterday about living by the sword?'

'I don't remember,' Uncle Gavin said. 'You said a lot yesterday.'

'And a lot of it was right. I said it was finished yesterday. And it is. That fellow will trip himself again someday, but it won't be here.'

Only it was more than that. It was as if Flint had never been here at all — no mark, no scar to show that he had ever been in the jail cell. The meagre group of people who pitied but did not mourn, departing, separating, from the raw grave of the woman who had had little enough hold on our lives at best, whom a few of us had known without ever having seen her and some of us had seen without ever knowing her.... The childless old man whom most of us had never seen at all, once more alone in the house where, as he said himself, there had been no child anyway in two years....

'As though none of it had ever happened,' Uncle Gavin said. 'As if Flint had not only never been in that cell but had never existed at all. That triumvirate of murderer, victim, and bereaved — not three flesh-and-blood people but just an illusion, a shadow-play on a sheet — not only neither men nor women nor young nor old but just three labels which cast two shadows for the simple and only reason that it requires a minimum of two in order to postulate the verities of injustice and grief. That's it. They have never cast but two shadows, even though they did bear three labels, names. It was as though only by dying did that poor woman ever gain enough substance and reality even to cast a shadow.'

'But somebody killed her,' I said.

'Yes,' Uncle Gavin said. 'Somebody killed her.'

That was at noon. About five that afternoon I answered the telephone. It was the sheriff. 'Is your uncle there?' he said. Tell him to wait. I'm coming right over.' He had a stranger with him — a city man, in neat city clothes.

This is Mr. Workman,' the sheriff said. The adjustor. There was an insurance policy. For five hundred, taken out seventeen months ago. Hardly enough to murder anybody for.'

'If it ever was a murder,' the adjustor said. His voice was cold too, cold yet at the same time at a sort of seething boil. That policy will be paid at once, without question or any further investigation. And I'll tell you something else you people here don't seem to know yet. That old man is crazy. It was not the man Flint who should have been brought to town and locked up.'

Only it was the sheriff who told that too: how yesterday afternoon the insurance company's Memphis office had received a telegram, signed with Old Man Pritchel's name, notifying them of the insured's death, and the adjustor arrived at Old Man Pritchel's house about two o'clock this afternoon and within thirty minutes had extracted from Old Man Pritchel himself the truth about his daughter's death: the facts of it which the physical evidence — the truck and the three dead squirrels and the blood on the steps and on the ground — supported.

This was that while the daughter was cooking dinner, Pritchel and Flint had driven the truck down to Pritchel's woods lot to shoot squirrels for supper— 'And that's correct,' the sheriff said. 'I asked. They did that every Sunday morning.

Pritchel wouldn't let anybody but Flint shoot his squirrels, and he wouldn't even let Flint shoot them unless he was along' — and they

shot the three squirrels and Flint drove the truck back to the house and up beside the back steps and the woman came out to take the squirrels and Flint opened the door and picked up the gun to get out of the truck and stumbled, caught his heel on the edge of the running-board and flinging up the hand carrying the gun to break his fall, so that the muzzle of the gun was pointing right at his wife's head when it went off.

And Old Man Pritchel not only denied having sent the wire, he violently and profanely repudiated any and all implication or suggestion that he even knew the policy existed at all. He denied to the very last that the shooting had been any part of an accident.

He tried to revoke his own testimony as to what had happened when the daughter came out to get the dead squirrels and the gun went off, repudiating his own story when he realized that he had cleared his son-in-law of murder, snatching the paper from the adjustor's hand, which he apparently believed was the policy itself, and attempting to tear it up and destroy it before the adjustor could stop him.

'Why?' Uncle Gavin said.

'Why not?' the sheriff said. We had let Flint get away; Mr. Pritchel knew he was loose somewhere in the world. Do you reckon he aimed to let the man that killed his daughter get paid for it?'

'Maybe,' Uncle Gavin said. 'But I don't think so. I don't think he is worried about that at all. I think Mr. Pritchel knows that Joel Flint is not going to collect that policy or any other prize. Maybe he knew a little country jail like ours wasn't going to hold a wide-travelled ex-carnival man, and he expected Flint to come back out there and this time he

was ready for him. And I think that as soon as people stop worrying him, he will send you word to come out there, and he will tell you so.'

'Hah,' the adjustor said. Then they must have stopped worrying him. Listen to this. When I got there this afternoon, there were three men in the parlor with him. They had a certified check. It was a big check. They were buying his farm from him — lock, stock and barrel — and I didn't know land in this country was worth that much either, incidentally. He had the deed all drawn and signed, but when I told them who I was, they agreed to wait until I could get back to town here and tell somebody — the sheriff, probably.

And I left, and that old lunatic was still standing in the door, shaking that deed at me and croaking: 'Tell the sheriff, damn you! Get a lawyer, too! Get that lawyer Stevens. I hear tell he claims to be pretty slick!''

'We thank you,' the sheriff said. He spoke and moved with that deliberate, slightly florid, old-fashioned courtesy which only big men can wear, except that his was constant; this was the first time I ever saw him quit anyone shortly, even when he would see them again tomorrow. He didn't even look at the adjustor again. 'My car's outside,' he told Uncle Gavin.

So just before sunset we drove up to the neat picket fence enclosing Old Man Pritchel's neat, bare little yard and neat, tight little house, in front of which stood the big, dust-covered car with its city license plates and Flint's battered truck with a strange Negro youth at the wheel — strange because Old Man Pritchel had never had a servant of any sort save his daughter.

'He's leaving too,' Uncle Gavin said.

'That's his right,' the sheriff said. We mounted the steps. But before we reached the door, Old Man Pritchel was already shouting for us to come in — the harsh, cracked old man's voice shouting at us from beyond the hall, beyond the door to the dining room where a tremendous old-fashioned telescope bag, strapped and bulging, sat on a chair and the three northerners in dusty khaki stood watching the door and Old Man Pritchel himself sat at the table. And I saw for the first time (Uncle Gavin told me he had seen him only twice) the uncombed thatch of white hair, a fierce tangle of eyebrows above steel-framed spectacles, a jut of untrimmed mustache and a scrabble of beard stained with chewing tobacco to the color of dirty cotton.

'Come in,' he said. That lawyer Stevens, heh?'

'Yes. Mr. Pritchel,' the sheriff said.

'Hehm,' the old man barked. 'Well, Hub,' he said. 'Can I sell my land, or can't I?'

'Of course, Mr. Pritchel,' the sheriff said. We hadn't heard you aimed to.'

'Heh,' the old man said. 'Maybe this changed my mind.' The check and the folded deed both lay on the table in front of him. He pushed the check toward the sheriff. He didn't look at Uncle Gavin again; he just said: 'You, too.' Uncle Gavin and the sheriff moved to the table and stood looking down at the check. Neither of them touched it. I could see their faces. There was nothing in them. 'Well?' Mr. Pritchel said.

'It's a good price,' the sheriff said.

This time the old man said 'Hah!' short and harsh. He unfolded the deed and spun it to face, not the sheriff but Uncle Gavin. 'Well?' he said. 'You, lawyer?'

'It's all right, Mr. Pritchel,' Uncle Gavin said. The old man sat back, both hands on the table before him, his head tilted back as he looked up at the sheriff.

'Well?' he said. 'Fish, or cut bait.'

It's your land,' the sheriff said. 'What you do with it is no man's business else.'

'Hah,' Mr. Pritchel said. He didn't move. 'All right, gentlemen.' He didn't move at all; one of the strangers came forward and took up the deed. 'I'll be out of the house in thirty minutes. You can take possession then, or you will find the key under the mat tomorrow morning.' I don't believe he even looked after them as they went out, though I couldn't be sure because of the glare on his spectacles. Then I knew that he was looking at the sheriff, had been looking at him for a minute or more, and then I saw that he was trembling, jerking and shaking as the old tremble, although his hands on the table were as motionless as two lumps of the clay would have been.

'So you let him get away,' he said.

That's right,' the sheriff said. 'But you wait, Mr. Pritchel. We'll catch him.'

'When?' the old man said. Two years? Five years? Ten years? I am seventy-four years old; buried my wife and four children. Where will I be in ten years?'

'Here, I hope,' the sheriff said.

'Here?' the old man said. 'Didn't you just hear me tell that fellow he could have this house in thirty minutes? I own a automobile truck now; I got money to spend now, and something to spend it for.'

'Spend it for what?' the sheriff said. 'That check? Even this boy here would have to start early and run late to get shut of that much money in ten years.'

'Spend it running down the man that killed my Ellie!' He rose suddenly, thrusting his chair back. He staggered, but when the sheriff stepped quickly toward him, he flung his arm out and seemed actually to strike the sheriff back a pace. 'Let be,' he said, panting.

Then he said, harsh and loud in his cracked shaking voice: 'Get out of here! Get out of my house all of you!' But the sheriff didn't move, nor did we, and after a moment the old man stopped trembling. But he was still holding to the table edge. But his voice was quiet. 'Hand me my whiskey. On the sideboard. And three glasses.' The sheriff fetched them — an old-fashioned cut-glass decanter and three heavy tumblers — and set them before him.

And when he spoke this time, his voice was almost gentle and I knew what the woman had felt that evening when she offered to come back tomorrow and cook another meal for him: 'You'll have to excuse me. I'm tired. I've had a heap of trouble lately, and I reckon I'm wore out. Maybe a change is what I need.'

'But not tonight, Mr. Pritchel,' the sheriff said.

And then again, as when the woman had offered to come back and cook, he ruined it. 'Maybe I won't start tonight,' he said. 'And then maybe again I will. But you folks want to get on back to town, so we'll just drink to goodbye and better days.' He unstoppered the decanter and poured whiskey into the three tumblers and set the decanter down and looked about the table.

'You, boy,' he said, 'hand me the water bucket. It's on the back gallery shelf.' Then, as I turned and started toward the door, I saw him reach and take up the sugar bowl and plunge the spoon into the sugar and then I stopped too. And I remember Uncle Gavin's and the sheriff's faces and I could not believe my eyes either as he put the spoonful of sugar into the raw whiskey and started to stir it.

Because I had not only watched Uncle Gavin, and the sheriff when he would come to play chess with Uncle Gavin, but Uncle Gavin's father too who was my grandfather, and my own father before he died, and all the other men who would come to Grandfather's house who drank cold toddies as we call them, and even I knew that to make a cold toddy you do not put the sugar into the whiskey because sugar will not dissolve in raw whiskey but only lies in a little intact swirl like sand at the bottom of the glass; that you first put the water into the glass and dissolve the sugar into the water, in a ritual almost; then you add the whiskey, and that anyone like Old Man Pritchel who must have been watching men make cold toddies for nearly seventy years and had been making and drinking them himself for at least fifty-three, would know this too.

And I remember how the man we had thought was Old Man Pritchel realized too late what he was doing and jerked his head up just as Uncle Gavin sprang toward him, and swung his arm back and hurled the glass at Uncle Gavin's head, and the thud of the flung glass against the wall

and the dark splash it made and the crash of the table as it went over and the raw stink of the spilled whiskey from the decanter and Uncle Gavin shouting at the sheriff: 'Grab him, Hub! Grab him!'

Then we were all three on him. I remember the savage strength and speed of the body which was no old man's body; I saw him duck beneath the sheriff's arm and the entire wig came off; I seemed to see his whole face wrenching itself furiously free from beneath the makeup which bore the painted wrinkles and the false eyebrows.

When the sheriff snatched the beard and mustache off, the flesh seemed to come with it, springing quick and pink and then crimson, as though in that last desperate cast he had had to hide, not his face so much as the very blood which he had spilled.

It took us only thirty minutes to find old Mr. Pritchel's body. It was under the feed room in the stable, in a shallow and hurried trench, scarcely covered from sight. His hair had not only been dyed, it had been trimmed, the eyebrows trimmed and dyed too, and the mustache and beard shaved off.

He was wearing the identical garments which Flint had worn to the jail and he had been struck at least one crushing blow on the face, apparently with the flat of the same axe which had split his skull from behind, so that his features were almost unrecognizable and, after another two or three weeks underground, would perhaps have been even unidentifiable as those of the old man.

And pillowed carefully beneath the head was a big ledger almost six inches thick and weighing almost twenty pounds and filled with the

carefully pasted clippings which covered twenty years and more. It was the record and tale of the gift, the talent, which at the last he had misapplied and betrayed and which had then turned and destroyed him. It was all there: inception, course, peak, and then decline — the handbills, the theatre programs, the news clippings, and even one actual ten-foot poster:

SIGNOR CANOVA

Master of Illusion

He Disappears While You Watch Him

Management offers One Thousand Dollars in Cash To Any Man or Woman or

Child Who...

Last of all was the final clipping, from our Memphis-printed daily paper, under the Jefferson date line, which was news and not press-agentry.

This was the account of that last gamble in which he had cast his gift and his life against money, wealth, and lost — the clipped fragment of news-sheet which recorded the end not of one life but of three, though even here two of them cast but one shadow: not only that of the harmless dim-witted woman but of Joel Flint and Signor Canova too, with scattered among them and marking the date of that death too, the cautiously worded advertisements in Variety and Billboard, using the new changed name and no takers probably, since Signor Canova the Great was already dead then and already serving his purgatory in this circus for six months and that circus for eight — bandsman, ringman, Bornean wild man, down to the last stage where he touched bottom: the travelling from country town to country town with a roulette wheel

wired against imitation watches and pistols which would not shoot, until one day instinct perhaps showed him one more chance to use the gift again.

‘And lost this time for good,’ the sheriff said. We were in the study again. Beyond the open side door fireflies winked and drifted across the summer night and the crickets and tree-frogs cheeped and whirred. ‘It was that insurance policy.

If that adjustor hadn’t come to town and sent us back out there in time to watch him try to dissolve sugar in raw whiskey, he would have collected that check and taken that truck and got clean away. Instead, he sends for the adjustor, then he practically dares you and me to come out there and see past that wig and paint—’

‘You said something the other day about his destroying his witness too soon,’ Uncle Gavin said. ‘She wasn’t his witness. The witness he destroyed was the one we were supposed to find under that feed room.’

‘Witness to what?’ the sheriff said. To the fact that Joel Flint no longer existed?’

Tartly. But mostly to the first crime, the old one: the one in which Signor Canova died. He intended for that witness to be found. That’s why he didn’t bury it, hide it better and deeper. As soon as somebody found it, he would be at once and forever not only rich but free, free not only of Signor Canova who had betrayed him by dying eight years ago, but of Joel Flint too. Even if we had found it before he had a chance to leave, what would he have said?’

'He ought to have battered the face a little more,' the sheriff said.

'I doubt it,' Uncle Gavin said. What would he have said?'

'All right,' the sheriff said. 'What?'

"Yes, I killed him. He murdered my daughter." And what would you have said, being, as you are, the Law?'

'Nothing,' the sheriff said after a time.

'Nothing,' Uncle Gavin said. A dog was barking somewhere, not a big dog, and then a screech-owl flew into the mulberry tree in the back yard and began to cry, plaintive and tremulous, and all the little furred creatures would be moving now — the field mice, the possums and rabbits and the legless vertebrates — creeping or scurrying about the dark land which beneath the rainless summer stars was just dark: not desolate. 'That's one reason he did it.' Uncle Gavin said.

'One reason?' the sheriff said. What's the other?'

'The other is the real one. It had nothing to do with the money; he probably could not have helped obeying it if he had wanted to. That gift he had. His first regret right now is probably not that he was caught, but that he was caught too soon, before the body was found and he had the chance to identify it as his own; before Signor Canova had had time to toss his gleaming tophat vanishing behind him and bow to the amazed and stormlike staccato of adulant palms and turn and stride once or twice and then himself vanish from the pacing spotlight — gone, to be seen no more.

Think what he did: he convicted himself of murder when he could very likely have escaped by flight; he acquitted himself of it after he was already free again. Then he dared you and me to come out there and actually be his witnesses and guarantors in the consummation of the very act which he knew we had been trying to prevent.

What else could the possession of such a gift as his have engendered, and the successful practising of it have increased, but a supreme contempt for mankind? You told me yourself that he had never been afraid in his life.'

'Yes,' the sheriff said. The Book itself says somewhere, Know thyself. Ain't there another book somewhere that says, Man, fear thyself, thine arrogance and vanity and pride? You ought to know; you claim to be a book man. Didn't you tell me that's what that luck-charm on your watch chain means? What book is that in?'

'It's in all of them,' Uncle Gavin said. The good ones, I mean. It's said in a lot of different ways, but it's there.'

The End