



Monk, William Faulkner

Monk

I WILL HAVE to try to tell about Monk. I mean, actually try — a deliberate attempt to bridge the inconsistencies in his brief and sordid and unoriginal history, to make something out of it, not only with the nebulous tools of supposition and inference and invention, but to employ these nebulous tools upon the nebulous and inexplicable material which he left behind him.

Because it is only in literature that the paradoxical and even mutually negating anecdotes in the history of a human heart can be juxtaposed and annealed by art into verisimilitude and credibility.

He was a moron, perhaps even a cretin; he should never have gone to the penitentiary at all. But at the time of his trial we had a young District Attorney who had his eye on Congress, and Monk had no people and no money and not even a lawyer, because I don't believe he ever understood why he should need a lawyer or even what a lawyer was, and so the Court appointed a lawyer for him, a young man just admitted to the bar, who probably knew but little more about the practical functioning of criminal law than Monk did, who perhaps pleaded Monk guilty at the direction of the Court or maybe forgot that he could have entered a plea of mental incompetence, since Monk did not for one moment deny that he had killed the deceased.

They could not keep him from affirming or even reiterating it, in fact. He was neither confessing nor boasting. It was almost as though he were trying to make a speech, to the people who held him beside the body until the deputy got there, to the deputy and to the jailor and to the other prisoners — the casual niggers picked up for gambling or

vagrancy or for selling whiskey in alleys — and to the J. P. who arraigned him and the lawyer appointed by the Court, and to the Court and the jury.

Even an hour after the killing he could not seem to remember where it had happened; he could not even remember the man whom he affirmed that he had killed; he named as his victim (this on suggestion, prompting) several men who were alive, and even one who was present in the J. P.'s office at the time. But he never denied that he had killed somebody.

It was not insistence; it was just a serene reiteration of the fact in that voice bright, eager, and sympathetic while he tried to make his speech, trying to tell them something of which they could make neither head nor tail and to which they refused to listen.

He was not confessing, not trying to establish grounds for lenience in order to escape what he had done. It was as though he were trying to postulate something, using this opportunity to bridge the hitherto abyss between himself and the living world, the world of living men, the ponderable and travailing earth — as witness the curious speech which he made on the gallows five years later.

But then, he never should have lived, either. He came — emerged: whether he was born there or not, no one knew — from the pine hill country in the eastern part of our county: a country which twenty-five years ago (Monk was about twenty-five) was without roads almost and where even the sheriff of the county did not go — a country impenetrable and almost uncultivated and populated by a clannish people who owned allegiance to no one and no thing and whom outsiders never saw until a few years back when good roads and

automobiles penetrated the green fastnesses where the denizens with their corrupt Scotch-Irish names intermarried and made whiskey and shot at all strangers from behind log barns and snake fences.

It was the good roads and the fords which not only brought Monk to Jefferson but brought the half-rumored information about his origin. Because the very people among whom he had grown up seemed to know almost as little about him as we did — a tale of an old woman who lived like a hermit, even among those fiercely solitary people, in a log house with a loaded shotgun standing just inside the front door, and a son who had been too much even for that country and people, who had murdered and fled, possibly driven out, where gone none knew for ten years, when one day he returned, with a woman — a woman with hard, bright, metallic, city hair and a hard, blonde, city face seen about the place from a distance, crossing the yard or just standing in the door and looking out upon the green solitude with an expression of cold and sullen and unseeing inscrutability: and deadly, too, but as a snake is deadly, in a different way from their almost conventional ritual of warning and then powder.

Then they were gone. The others did not know when they departed nor why, any more than they knew when they had arrived nor why. Some said that one night the old lady, Mrs. Odlethrop, had got the drop on both of them with the shotgun and drove them out of the house and out of the country.

But they were gone; and it was months later before the neighbors discovered that there was a child, an infant, in the house; whether brought there or born there — again they did not know. This was Monk; and the further tale how six or seven years later they began to smell the body and some of them went into the house where old Mrs. Odlethrop had been dead for a week and found a small creature in a

single shift made from bedticking trying to raise the shotgun from its corner beside the door. They could not catch Monk at all.

That is, they failed to hold him that first time, and they never had another chance. But he did not go away. They knew that he was somewhere watching them while they prepared the body for burial, and that he was watching from the undergrowth while they buried it. They never saw him again for some time, though they knew that he was about the place, and on the following Sunday they found where he had been digging into the grave, with sticks and with his bare hands.

He had a pretty big hole by then, and they filled it up and that night some of them lay in ambush for him, to catch him and give him food. But again they could not hold him, the small furious body (it was naked now) which writhed out of their hands as if it had been greased, and fled with no human sound. After that, certain of the neighbors would carry food to the deserted house and leave it for him. But they never saw him. They just heard, a few months later, that he was living with a childless widower, an old man named Fraser who was a whiskey maker of wide repute.

He seems to have lived there for the next ten years, until Fraser himself died. It was probably Fraser who gave him the name which he brought to town with him, since nobody ever knew what old Mrs. Odlethrop had called him, and now the country got to know him or become familiar with him, at least — a youth not tall and already a little pudgy, as though he were thirty-eight instead of eighteen, with the ugly, shrewdly foolish, innocent face whose features rather than expression must have gained him his nickname, who gave to the man who had taken him up and fed him the absolute and unquestioning devotion of a dog and who at eighteen was said to be able to make Fraser's whiskey as well as Fraser could.

That was all that he had ever learned to do — to make and sell whiskey where it was against the law and so had to be done in secret, which further increases the paradox of his public statement when they drew the black cap over his head for killing the warden of the penitentiary five years later.

That was all he knew: that, and fidelity to the man who fed him and taught him what to do and how and when; so that after Fraser died and the man, whoever it was, came along in the truck or the car and said, 'All right, Monk. Jump in,' he got into it exactly as the homeless dog would have, and came to Jefferson.

This time it was a filling station two or three miles from town, where he slept on a pallet in the back room, what time the pallet was not already occupied by a customer who had got too drunk to drive his car or walk away, where he even learned to work the gasoline pump and to make correct change, though his job was mainly that of remembering just where the half-pint bottles were buried in the sand ditch five hundred yards away.

He was known about town now, in the cheap, bright town clothes for which he had discarded his overalls — the colored shirts which faded with the first washing, the banded straw hats which dissolved at the first shower, the striped shoes which came to pieces on his very feet — pleasant, impervious to affront, talkative when anyone would listen, with that shrewd, foolish face, that face at once cunning and dreamy, pasty even beneath the sunburn, with that curious quality of imperfect connection between sense and ratiocination.

The town knew him for seven years until that Saturday midnight and the dead man (he was no loss to anyone, but then as I said, Monk had neither friends, money, nor lawyer) lying on the ground behind the filling station and Monk standing there with the pistol in his hand — there were two others present, who had been with the dead man all evening — trying to tell the ones who held him and then the deputy himself whatever it was that he was trying to say in his eager, sympathetic voice, as though the sound of the shot had broken the barrier behind which he had lived for twenty-five years and that he had now crossed the chasm into the world of living men by means of the dead body at his feet.

Because he had no more conception of death than an animal has — of that of the man at his feet nor of the warden's later nor of his own. The thing at his feet was just something that would never walk or talk or eat again and so was a source neither of good nor harm to anyone; certainly not of good nor use. He had no comprehension of bereavement, irreparable finality. He was sorry for it, but that was all. I don't think he realized that in lying there it had started a train, a current of retribution that someone would have to pay.

Because he never denied that he had done it, though denial would have done him no good, since the two companions of the dead man were there to testify against him. But he did not deny it, even though he was never able to tell what happened, what the quarrel was about, nor (as I said), later, even where it had occurred and who it was that he had killed, stating once (as I also said) that his victim was a man standing at the moment in the crowd which had followed him into the J. P.'s office.

He just kept on trying to say whatever it was that had been inside him for twenty-five years and that he had only now found the chance (or perhaps the words) to free himself of, just as five years later on the

scaffold he was to get it (or something else) said at last, establishing at last that contact with the old, fecund, ponderable, travailing earth which he wanted but had not been able to tell about because only then had they told him how to say what it was that he desired.

He tried to tell it to the deputy who arrested him and to the J. P. who arraigned him; he stood in the courtroom with that expression on his face which people have when they are waiting for a chance to speak, and heard the indictment read:... against the peace and dignity of the Sovereign State of Mississippi, that the aforesaid Monk Odlethrop did willfully and maliciously and with premeditated — and interrupted, in a voice reedy and high, the sound of which in dying away left upon his face the same expression of amazement and surprise which all our faces wore:

‘My name ain’t Monk; it’s Stonewall Jackson Odlethrop.’

You see? If it were true, he could not have heard it in almost twenty years since his grandmother (if grandmother she was) had died: and yet he could not even recall the circumstances of one month ago when he had committed a murder. And he could not have invented it. He could not have known who Stonewall Jackson was, to have named himself. He had been to school in the country, for one year. Doubtless old Fraser sent him, but he did not stay. Perhaps even the first-grade work in a country school was too much for him. He told my uncle about it when the matter of his pardon came up.

He did not remember just when, nor where the school was, nor why he had quit. But he did remember being there, because he had liked it. All he could remember was how they would all read together out of the books. He did not know what they were reading, because he did not know what the book said; he could not even write his name now.

But he said it was fine to hold the book and hear all the voices together and then to feel (he said he could not hear his own voice) his voice too, along with the others, by the way his throat would buzz, he called it. So he could never have heard of Stonewall Jackson. Yet there it was, inherited from the earth, the soil, transmitted to him through a self-pariahed people — something of bitter pride and indomitable undefeat of a soil and the men and women who trod upon it and slept within it.

They gave him life. It was one of the shortest trials ever held in our county, because, as I said, nobody regretted the deceased and nobody except my Uncle Gavin seemed to be concerned about Monk. He had never been on a train before. He got on, handcuffed to the deputy, in a pair of new overalls which someone, perhaps the sovereign state whose peace and dignity he had outraged, had given him, and the still new, still pristine, gaudy-banded, imitation Panama hat (it was still only the first of June, and he had been in jail six weeks) which he had just bought during the week of the fatal Saturday night.

He had the window side in the car and he sat there looking at us with his warped, pudgy, foolish face, waving the fingers of the hand, the free arm propped in the window until the train began to move, accelerating slowly, huge and dingy as the metal gangways clashed, drawing him from our sight hermetically sealed and leaving upon us a sense of finality more irrevocable than if we had watched the penitentiary gates themselves close behind him, never to open again in his life, the face looking back at us, craning to see us, wan and small behind the dingy glass, yet wearing that expression questioning yet unalarmed, eager, serene, and grave.

Five years later one of the dead man's two companions on that Saturday night, dying of pneumonia and whiskey, confessed that he had fired the shot and thrust the pistol into Monk's hand, telling Monk to look at what he had done.

My Uncle Gavin got the pardon, wrote the petition, got the signatures, went to the capitol and got it signed and executed by the Governor, and took it himself to the penitentiary and told Monk that he was free. And Monk looked at him for a minute until he understood, and cried. He did not want to leave. He was a trusty now; he had transferred to the warden the same doglike devotion which he had given to old Fraser.

He had learned to do nothing well, save manufacture and sell whiskey, though after he came to town he had learned to sweep out the filling station. So that's what he did here; his life now must have been something like that time when he had gone to school. He swept and kept the warden's house as a woman would have, and the warden's wife had taught him to knit; crying, he showed my uncle the sweater which he was knitting for the warden's birthday and which would not be finished for weeks yet.

So Uncle Gavin came home. He brought the pardon with him, though he did not destroy it, because he said it had been recorded and that the main thing now was to look up the law and see if a man could be expelled from the penitentiary as he could from a college. But I think he still hoped that maybe some day Monk would change his mind; I think that's why he kept it. Then Monk did set himself free, without any help.

It was not a week after Uncle Gavin had talked to him; I don't think Uncle Gavin had even decided where to put the pardon for

safekeeping, when the news came. It was a headline in the Memphis papers next day, but we got the news that night over the telephone: how Monk Oglethrop, apparently leading an abortive jailbreak, had killed the warden with the warden's own pistol, in cold blood.

There was no doubt this time; fifty men had seen him do it, and some of the other convicts overpowered him and took the pistol away from him. Yes. Monk, the man who a week ago cried when Uncle Gavin told him that he was free, leading a jailbreak and committing a murder (on the body of the man for whom he was knitting the sweater which he cried for permission to finish) so cold-blooded that his own confederates had turned upon him.

Uncle Gavin went to see him again. He was in solitary confinement now, in the death house. He was still knitting on the sweater. He knitted well, Uncle Gavin said, and the sweater was almost finished. 'I ain't got but three days more,' Monk said. 'So I ain't got no time to waste.'

'But why, Monk?' Uncle Gavin said. 'Why? Why did you do it?' He said that the needles would not cease nor falter, even while Monk would look at him with that expression serene, sympathetic, and almost exalted. Because he had no conception of death. I don't believe he had ever connected the carrion at his feet behind the filling station that night with the man who had just been walking and talking, or that on the ground in the compound with the man for whom he was knitting the sweater.

'I knowed that making and selling that whiskey wasn't right,' he said. 'I knowed that wasn't it. Only I...' He looked at Uncle Gavin. The serenity

was still there, but for the moment something groped behind it: not bafflement nor indecision, just seeking, groping.

‘Only what?’ Uncle Gavin said. ‘The whiskey wasn’t it? Wasn’t what? It what?’

‘No. Not it.’ Monk looked at Uncle Gavin. ‘I mind that day on the train, and that fellow in the cap would put his head in the door and holler, and I would say “Is this it? Is this where we get off?” and the deppity would say No. Only if I had been there without that deppity to tell me, and that fellow had come in and hollered, I would have...’

‘Got off wrong? Is that it? And now you know what is right, where to get off right? Is that it?’

‘Yes,’ Monk said. ‘Yes. I know right, now.’

‘What? What is right? What do you know now that they never told you before?’

He told them. He walked up onto the scaffold three days later and stood where they told him to stand and held his head docilely (and without being asked) to one side so they could knot the rope comfortably, his face still serene, still exalted, and wearing that expression of someone waiting his chance to speak, until they stood back. He evidently took that to be his signal, because he said, ‘I have sinned against God and man and now I have done paid it out with my suffering.

And now—’ they say he said this part loud, his voice clear and serene. The words must have sounded quite loud to him and irrefutable, and his heart uplifted, because he was talking inside the black cap now: ‘And now I am going out into the free world, and farm.’

You see? It just does not add up. Granted that he did not know that he was about to die, his words still do not make sense. He could have known but little more about farming than about Stonewall Jackson; certainly he had never done any of it. He had seen it, of course, the cotton and the com in the fields, and men working it. But he could not have wanted to do it himself before, or he would have, since he could have found chances enough.

Yet he turns and murders the man who had befriended him and, whether he realized it or not, saved him from comparative hell and upon whom he had transferred his capacity for doglike fidelity and devotion and on whose account a week ago he had refused a pardon: his reason being that he wanted to return into the world and farm land — this, the change, to occur in one week's time and after he had been for five years more completely removed and insulated from the world than any nun.

Yes, granted that this could be the logical sequence in that mind which he hardly possessed and granted that it could have been powerful enough to cause him to murder his one friend (Yes, it was the warden's pistol; we heard about that: how the warden kept it in the house and one day it disappeared and to keep word of it getting out the warden had his Negro cook, another trusty and who would have been the logical one to have taken it, severely beaten to force the truth from him.

Then Monk himself found the pistol, where the warden now recalled having hidden it himself, and returned it.) — granted all this, how in the world could the impulse have reached him, the desire to farm land have got into him where he now was? That's what I told Uncle Gavin.

'It adds up, all right,' Uncle Gavin said. 'We just haven't got the right ciphers yet. Neither did they.'

'They?'

'Yes. They didn't hang the man who murdered Gambrell. They just crucified the pistol.'

'What do you mean?' I said.

'I don't know. Maybe I never shall. Probably never shall. But it adds up, as you put it, somewhere, somehow. It has to. After all, that's too much buffooning even for circumstances, let alone a mere flesh-and-blood imbecile. But probably the ultimate clowning of circumstances will be that we won't know it.'

But we did know. Uncle Gavin discovered it by accident, and he never told anyone but me, and I will tell you why.

At that time we had for Governor a man without ancestry and with but little more divulged background than Monk had; a politician, a shrewd man who (some of us feared, Uncle Gavin and others about the state) would go far if he lived. About three years after Monk died he declared, without warning, a kind of jubilee.

He set a date for the convening of the Pardon Board at the penitentiary, where he inferred that he would hand out pardons to various convicts in the same way that the English king gives out knighthoods and garters on his birthday. Of course, all the Opposition said that he was frankly auctioning off the pardons, but Uncle Gavin didn't think so.

He said that the Governor was shrewder than that, that next year was election year, and that the Governor was not only gaining votes from the kin of the men he would pardon but was laying a trap for the purists and moralists to try to impeach him for corruption and then fail for lack of evidence. But it was known that he had the Pardon Board completely under his thumb, so the only protest the Opposition could make was to form committees to be present at the time, which step the Governor — oh, he was shrewd — courteously applauded, even to the extent of furnishing transportation for them. Uncle Gavin was one of the delegates from our county.

He said that all these unofficial delegates were given copies of the list of those slated for pardon (the ones with enough voting kin to warrant it, I suppose) — the crime, the sentence, the time already served, prison record, etc. It was in the mess hall; he said he and the other delegates were seated on the hard, backless benches against one wall, while the Governor and his Board sat about the table on the raised platform where the guards would sit while the men ate, when the convicts were marched in and halted.

Then the Governor called the first name on the list and told the man to come forward to the table. But nobody moved. They just huddled there in their striped overalls, murmuring to one another while the guards began to holler at the man to come out and the Governor looked up from the paper and looked at them with his eyebrows raised. Then somebody said from back in the crowd: 'Let Terrel speak for us, Governor. We done 'lected him to do our talking.'

Uncle Gavin didn't look up at once. He looked at his list until he found the name: Terrel, Bill. Manslaughter. Twenty years. Served since May 9, 19 — . Applied for pardon January, 19 — . Vetoed by Warden C. L.

Gambrell. Applied for pardon September, 19 — . Vetoed by Warden C. L. Gambrell. Record, Troublemaker.

Then he looked up and watched Terrel walk out of the crowd and approach the table — a tall man, a huge man, with a dark aquiline face like an Indian's, except for the pale yellow eyes and a shock of wild, black hair — who strode up to the table with a curious blend of arrogance and servility and stopped and, without waiting to be told to speak, said in a queer, high singsong filled with that same abject arrogance: 'Your Honor, and honorable gentlemen, we have done sinned against God and man but now we have done paid it out with our suffering. And now we want to go out into the free world, and farm.'

Uncle Gavin was on the platform almost before Terrel quit speaking, leaning over the Governor's chair, and the Governor turned with his little, shrewd, plump face and his inscrutable, speculative eyes toward Uncle Gavin's urgency and excitement. 'Send that man back for a minute,' Uncle Gavin said. 'I must speak to you in private.' For a moment longer the Governor looked at Uncle Gavin, the puppet Board looking at him too, with nothing in their faces at all, Uncle Gavin said.

'Why, certainly, Mr. Stevens,' the Governor said. He rose and followed Uncle Gavin back to the wall, beneath the barred window, and the man Terrel still standing before the table with his head jerked suddenly up and utterly motionless and the light from the window in his yellow eyes like two match flames as he stared at Uncle Gavin.

'Governor, that man's a murderer,' Uncle Gavin said. The Governor's face did not change at all.

‘Manslaughter, Mr. Stevens,’ he said. ‘Manslaughter. As private and honorable citizens of the state, and as humble servants of it, surely you and I can accept the word of a Mississippi jury.’

‘I’m not talking about that,’ Uncle Gavin said. He said he said it like that, out of his haste, as if Terrel would vanish if he did not hurry; he said that he had a terrible feeling that in a second the little inscrutable, courteous man before him would magic Terrel out of reach of all retribution by means of his cold will and his ambition and his amoral ruthlessness. ‘I’m talking about Gambrell and that half-wit they hanged. That man there killed them both as surely as if he had fired the pistol and sprung that trap.’

Still the Governor’s face did not change at all. ‘That’s a curious charge, not to say serious,’ he said. Of course you have proof of it.’

‘No. But I will get it. Let me have ten minutes with him, alone. I will get proof from him. I will make him give it to me.’

‘Ah,’ the Governor said. Now he did not look at Uncle Gavin for a whole minute. When he did look up again, his face still had not altered as to expression, yet he had wiped something from it as he might have done physically, with a handkerchief. (‘You see, he was paying me a compliment,’ Uncle Gavin told me. ‘A compliment to my intelligence. He was telling the absolute truth now. He was paying me the highest compliment in his power.’) ‘What good do you think that would do?’ he said.

‘You mean.,’ Uncle Gavin said. They looked at one another. ‘So you would still turn him loose on the citizens of this state, this country, just for a few votes?’

Why not? If he murders again, there is always this place for him to come back to.’ Now it was Uncle Gavin who thought for a minute, though he did not look down.

‘Suppose I should repeat what you have just said. I have no proof of that, either, but I would be believed. And that would—’

‘Lose me votes? Yes. But you see, I have already lost those votes because I have never had them. You see? You force me to do what, for all you know, may be against my own principles too — or do you grant me principles?’ Now Uncle Gavin said the Governor looked at him with an expression almost warm, almost pitying — and quite curious. ‘Mr. Stevens, you are what my grandpap would have called a gentleman.

He would have snarled it at you, hating you and your kind; he might very probably have shot your horse from under you someday from behind a fence — for a principle. And you are trying to bring the notions of 1860 into the politics of the nineteen hundreds.

And politics in the twentieth century is a sorry thing. In fact, I sometimes think that the whole twentieth century is a sorry thing, smelling to high heaven in somebody’s nose. But, no matter.’ He turned now, back toward the table and the room full of faces watching them. ‘Take the advice of a well-wisher even if he cannot call you friend, and let this business alone. As I said before, if we let him out and he murders again, as he probably will, he can always come back here.’

‘And be pardoned again,’ Uncle Gavin said.

‘Probably. Customs do not change that fast, remember.’

‘But you will let me talk to him in private, won’t you?’ The Governor paused, looking back, courteous and pleasant.

‘Why, certainly, Mr. Stevens. It will be a pleasure to oblige you.’

They took them to a cell, so that a guard could stand opposite the barred door with a rifle. Watch yourself,’ the guard told Uncle Gavin. ‘He’s a bad egg. Don’t fool with him.’

‘I’m not afraid,’ Uncle Gavin said; he said he wasn’t even careful now, though the guard didn’t know what he meant. ‘I have less reason to fear him than Mr. Gambrell even, because Monk Odlethrop is dead now.’ So they stood looking at one another in the bare cell — Uncle Gavin and the Indian-looking giant with the fierce, yellow eyes.

‘So you’re the one that crossed me up this time,’ Terrel said, in that queer, almost whining singsong. We knew about that case, too; it was in the Mississippi reports, besides it had not happened very far away, and Terrel not a farmer, either.

Uncle Gavin said that that was it, even before he realized that Terrel had spoken the exact words which Monk had spoken on the gallows and which Terrel could not have heard or even known that Monk had spoken; not the similarity of the words, but the fact that neither Terrel nor Monk had ever farmed anything, anywhere.

It was another filling station, near a railroad this time, and a brakeman on a night freight testified to seeing two men rush out of the bushes as the train passed, carrying something which proved later to be a man, and whether dead or alive at the time the brakeman could not tell, and fling it under the train.

The filling station belonged to Terrel, and the fight was proved, and Terrel was arrested. He denied the fight at first, then he denied that the

deceased had been present, then he said that the deceased had seduced his (Terrel's) daughter and that his (Terrel's) son had killed the man, and he was merely trying to avert suspicion from his son. The daughter and the son both denied this, and the son proved an alibi, and they dragged Terrel, cursing both his children, from the courtroom.

'Wait,' Uncle Gavin said. 'I'm going to ask you a question first. What did you tell Monk Odlethrop?'

'Nothing!' Terrel said. 'I told him nothing!'

'All right,' Uncle Gavin said. That's all I wanted to know.' He turned and spoke to the guard beyond the door. 'We're through. You can let us out.'

'Wait,' Terrel said. Uncle Gavin turned. Terrel stood as before, tall and hard and lean in his striped overalls, with his fierce, depthless, yellow eyes, speaking in that half-whining singsong. What do you want to keep me locked up in here for? What have I ever done to you? You, rich and free, that can go wherever you want, while I have to—' Then he shouted.

Uncle Gavin said he shouted without raising his voice at all, that the guard in the corridor could not have heard him: 'Nothing, I tell you! I told him nothing!' But this time Uncle Gavin didn't even have time to begin to turn away.

He said that Terrel passed him in two steps that made absolutely no sound at all, and looked out into the corridor. Then he turned and looked at Uncle Gavin. 'Listen,' he said. 'If I tell you, will you give me your word not to vote agin me?'

'Yes,' Uncle Gavin said. 'I won't vote agin you, as you say.'

'But how will I know you ain't lying?'

'Ah,' Uncle Gavin said. 'How will you know, except by trying it?' They looked at one another. Now Terrel looked down; Uncle Gavin said Terrel held one hand in front of him and that he (Uncle Gavin) watched the knuckles whiten slowly as Terrel closed it.

'It looks like I got to,' he said. 'It just looks like I got to.' Then he looked up; he cried now, with no louder sound than when he had shouted before: 'But if you do, and if I ever get out of here, then look out! See? Look out.'

'Are you threatening me?' Uncle Gavin said. 'You, standing there, in those striped overalls, with that wall behind you and this locked door and a man with a rifle in front of you? Do you want me to laugh?'

'I don't want nothing,' Terrel said. He whimpered almost now. 'I just want justice. That's all.' Now he began to shout again, in that repressed voice, watching his clenched, white knuckles too apparently. 'I tried twice for it; I tried for justice and freedom twice. But it was him. He was the one; he knowed I knowed it too. I told him I was going to—' He stopped, as sudden as he began; Uncle Gavin said he could hear him breathing, panting.

That was Gambrell,' Uncle Gavin said. 'Go on.'

‘Yes. I told him I was. I told him. Because he laughed at me. He didn’t have to do that. He could have voted agin me and let it go at that. He never had to laugh. He said I would stay here as long as he did or could keep me, and that he was here for life. And he was. He stayed here all his life. That’s just exactly how long he stayed.’ But he wasn’t laughing, Uncle Gavin said. It wasn’t laughing.

‘Yes. And so you told Monk—’

‘Yes. I told him. I said here we all were, pore ignorant country folks that hadn’t had no chance. That God had made to live outdoors in the free world and farm His land for Him; only we were pore and ignorant and didn’t know it, and the rich folks wouldn’t tell us until it was too late.

That we were pore ignorant country folks that never saw a train before, getting on the train and nobody caring to tell us where to get off and farm in the free world like God wanted us to do, and that he was the one that held us back, kept us locked up outen the free world to laugh at us agin the wishes of God. But I never told him to do it.

I just said “And now we can’t never get out because we ain’t got no pistol. But if somebody had a pistol we would walk out into the free world and farm it, because that’s what God aimed for us to do and that’s what we want to do. Ain’t that what we want to do?” and he said, ‘Yes. That’s it.

That’s what it is.” And I said, “Only we ain’t got nara pistol.” And he said, “I can get a pistol.” And I said, “Then we will walk in the free world because we have sinned against God but it wasn’t our fault because they hadn’t told us what it was He aimed for us to do. But now we

know what it is because we want to walk in the free world and farm for God!" That's all I told him. I never told him to do nothing. And now go tell them. Let them hang me too. Gambrell is rotted, and that batbrain is rotted, and I just as soon rot under ground as to rot in here. Go on and tell them.'

'Yes,' Uncle Gavin said. 'All right. You will go free.'

For a minute he said Terrel did not move at all. Then he said, 'Free?'

'Yes,' Uncle Gavin said. 'Free. But remember this. A while ago you threatened me. Now I am going to threaten you. And the curious thing is, I can back mine up. I am going to keep track of you. And the next time anything happens, the next time anybody tries to frame you with a killing and you can't get anybody to say you were not there nor any of your kinsfolks to take the blame for it — You understand?' Terrel had looked up at him when he said Free, but now he looked down again. 'Do you?' Uncle Gavin said.

'Yes,' Terrel said. 'I understand.'

'All right,' Uncle Gavin said. He turned; he called to the guard. 'You can let us out this time,' he said. He returned to the mess hall, where the Governor was calling the men up one by one and giving them their papers and where again the Governor paused, the smooth, inscrutable face looking up at Uncle Gavin. He did not wait for Uncle Gavin to speak.

'You were successful, I see,' he said.

'Yes. Do you want to hear—'

‘My dear sir, no. I must decline. I will put it stronger than that: I must refuse.’ Again Uncle Gavin said he looked at him with that expression warm, quizzical, almost pitying, yet profoundly watchful and curious. ‘I really believe that you never have quite given up hope that you can change this business. Have you?’

Now Uncle Gavin said he did not answer for a moment. Then he said, ‘No. I haven’t. So you are going to turn him loose? You really are?’ Now he said that the pity, the warmth vanished, that now the face was as he first saw it: smooth, completely inscrutable, completely false.

‘My dear Mr. Stevens,’ the Governor said. ‘You have already convinced me. But I am merely the moderator of this meeting; here are the votes. But do you think that you can convince these gentlemen?’ And Uncle Gavin said he looked around at them, the identical puppet faces of the seven or eight of the Governor’s battalions and battalions of factory-made colonels.

‘No,’ Uncle Gavin said. ‘I can’t.’ So he left then. It was in the middle of the morning, and hot, but he started back to Jefferson at once, riding across the broad, heat-miraged land, between the cotton and the corn of God’s long-fecund, remorseless acres, which would outlast any corruption and injustice. He was glad of the heat, he said; glad to be sweating, sweating out of himself the smell and the taste of where he had been.

The end