



Smoke, William Faulkner

Smoke

ANSELM HOLLAND CAME to Jefferson many years ago. Where from, no one knew. But he was young then and a man of parts, or of presence at least, because within three years he had married the only daughter of a man who owned two thousand acres of some of the best land in the county, and he went to live in his father-in-law's house, where two years later his wife bore him twin sons and where a few years later still the father-in-law died and left Holland in full possession of the property, which was now in his wife's name.

But even before that event, we in Jefferson had already listened to him talking a trifle more than loudly of "my land, my crops"; and those of us whose fathers and grandfathers had been bred here looked upon him a little coldly and a little askance for a ruthless man and (from tales told about him by both white and negro tenants and by others with whom he had dealings) for a violent one.

But out of consideration for his wife and respect for his father-in-law, we treated him with courtesy if not with regard. So when his wife, too, died while the twin sons were still children, we believed that he was responsible, that her life had been worn out by the crass violence of an underbred outlander. And when his sons reached maturity and first one and then the other left home for good and all, we were not surprised.

And when one day six months ago he was found dead, his foot fast in the stirrup of the saddled horse which he rode, and his body pretty

badly broken where the horse had apparently dragged him through a rail fence (there still showed at the time on the horse's back and flanks the marks of the blows which he had dealt it in one of his fits of rage), there was none of us who was sorry, because a short time before that he had committed what to men of our town and time and thinking was the unpardonable outrage. On the day he died it was learned that he had been digging up the graves in the family cemetery where his wife's people rested, among them the grave in which his wife had lain for thirty years.

So the crazed, hate-ridden old man was buried among the graves which he had attempted to violate, and in the proper time his will was offered for probate. And we learned the substance of the will without surprise. We were not surprised to learn that even from beyond the grave he had struck one final blow at those alone whom he could now injure or outrage: his remaining flesh and blood.

At the time of their father's death the twin sons were forty. The younger one, Anselm, Junior, was said to have been the mother's favorite — perhaps because he was the one who was most like his father. Anyway, from the time of her death, while the boys were still children almost, we would hear of trouble between Old Anse and Young Anse, with Virginius, the other twin, acting as mediator and being cursed for his pains by both father and brother; he was that sort, Virginius was. And Young Anse was his sort too; in his late teens he ran away from home and was gone ten years.

When he returned he and his brother were of age, and Anselm made formal demand upon his father that the land which we now learned was held by Old Anse only in trust, be divided and he — Young Anse — be given his share. Old Anse refused violently. Doubtless the request had been as violently made, because the two of them, Old Anse and

Young Anse, were so much alike. And we heard that, strange to say, Virginius had taken his father's side.

We heard that, that is. Because the land remained intact, and we heard how, in the midst of a scene of unparalleled violence even for them — a scene of such violence that the Negro servants all fled the house and scattered for the night — Young Anse departed, taking with him the team of mules which he did own; and from that day until his father's death, even after Virginius also had been forced to leave home, Anselm never spoke to his father and brother again.

He did not leave the county this time, however. He just moved back into the hills ('where he can watch what the old man and Virginius are doing,' some of us said and all of us thought); and for the next fifteen years he lived alone in a dirt-floored, two-room cabin, like a hermit, doing his own cooking, coming into town behind his two mules not four times a year. Some time earlier he had been arrested and tried for making whiskey.

He made no defense, refusing to plead either way, was fined both on the charge and for contempt of court, and flew into a rage exactly like his father when his brother Virginius offered to pay the fine. He tried to assault Virginius in the courtroom and went to the penitentiary at his own demand and was pardoned eight months later for good behavior and returned to his cabin — a dark, silent, aquiline-faced man whom both neighbors and strangers let severely alone.

The other twin, Virginius, stayed on, farming the land which his father had never done justice to even while he was alive. (They said of Old Anse, 'wherever he came from and whatever he was bred to be, it was not a farmer.'

And so we said among ourselves, taking it to be true, 'That's the trouble between him and Young Anse: watching his father mistreat the land which his mother aimed for him and Virginius to have.') But Virginius stayed on. It could not have been much fun for him, and we said later that Virginius should have known that such an arrangement could not last. And then later than that we said, 'Maybe he did know.' Because that was Virginius. You didn't know what he was thinking at the time, any time. Old Anse and Young Anse were like water. Dark water, maybe; but men could see what they were about. But no man ever knew what Virginius was thinking or doing until afterward. We didn't even know what happened that time when Virginius, who had stuck it out alone for ten years while Young Anse was away, was driven away at last; he didn't tell it, not even to Granby Dodge, probably. But we knew Old Anse and we knew Virginius, and we could imagine it, about like this:

We watched Old Anse smoldering for about a year after Young Anse took his mules and went back into the hills. Then one day he broke out; maybe like this, 'You think that, now your brother is gone, you can just hang around and get it all, don't you?'

'I don't want it all,' Virginius said. 'I just want my share.'

'Ah,' Old Anse said. 'You'd like to have it parceled out right now too, would you? Claim like him it should have been divided up when you and him came of age.'

'I'd rather take a little of it and farm it right than to see it all in the shape it's in now,' Virginius said, still just, still mild — no man in the

county ever saw Virginius lose his temper or even get ruffled, not even when Anselm tried to fight him in the courtroom about that fine.

‘You would, would you?’ Old Anse said. ‘And me that’s kept it working at all, paying the taxes on it, while you and your brother have been putting money by every year, tax-free.’

‘You know Anse never saved a nickel in his life,’ Virginius said. ‘Say what you want to about him, but don’t accuse him of being forehanded.’

‘Yes, by heaven! He was man enough to come out and claim what he thought was his and get out when he never got it. But you. You’ll just hang around, waiting for me to go, with that damned meal mouth of yours. Pay me the taxes on your half back to the day your mother died, and take it.’

‘No,’ Virginius said. ‘I won’t do it.’

‘No,’ Old Anse said. ‘No. Oh, no. Why spend your money for half of it when you can set down and get all of it some day without putting out a cent.’ Then we imagined Old Anse (we thought of them as sitting down until now, talking like two civilized men) rising, with his shaggy head and his heavy eyebrows. ‘Get out of my house!’ he said. But Virginius didn’t move, didn’t get up, watching his father. Old Anse came toward him, his hand raised. ‘Get. Get out of my house. By heaven, I’ll....’

Virginius went, then. He didn’t hurry, didn’t run. He packed up his belongings (he would have more than Anse; quite a few little things) and went four or five miles to live with a cousin, the son of a remote kinsman of his mother. The cousin lived alone, on a good farm too, though now eaten up with mortgages, since the cousin was no farmer

either, being half a stock-trader and half a lay preacher — a small, sandy, nondescript man whom you would not remember a minute after you looked at his face and then away — and probably no better at either of these than at fanning.

Without haste Virginius left, with none of his brother's foolish and violent finality; for which, strange to say, we thought none the less of Young Anse for showing, possessing. In fact, we always looked at Virginius a little askance too; he was a little too much master of himself. For it is human nature to trust quickest those who cannot depend on themselves.

We called Virginius a deep one; we were not surprised when we learned how he had used his savings to disencumber the cousin's farm. And neither were we surprised when a year later we learned how Old Anse had refused to pay the taxes on his land and how, two days before the place would have gone delinquent, the sheriff received anonymously in the mail cash to the exact penny of the Holland assessment. 'Trust Virginius,' we said, since we believed we knew that the money needed no name to it. The sheriff had notified Old Anse.

'Put it up for sale and be damned,' Old Anse said. 'If they think that all they have to do is set there waiting, the whole brood and biling of them...'

The sheriff sent Young Anse word. 'It's not my land,' Young Anse sent back.

The sheriff notified Virginius. Virginius came to town and looked at the tax books himself. 'I got all I can carry myself, now,' he said. 'Of course, if he lets it go, I hope I can get it. But I don't know. A good farm like that won't last long or go cheap.' And that was all. No anger, no

astonishment, no regret. But he was a deep one; we were not surprised when we learned how the sheriff had received that package of money, with the unsigned note: Tax money for Anselm Holland farm. Send receipt to Anselm Holland, Senior.

'Trust Virginius,' we said. We thought about Virginius quite a lot during the next year, out there in a strange house, farming strange land, watching the farm and the house where he was born and that was rightfully his going to ruin. For the old man was letting it go completely now: year by year the good broad fields were going back to jungle and gully, though still each January the sheriff received that anonymous money in the mail and sent the receipt to Old Anse, because the old man had stopped coming to town altogether now, and the very house was falling down about his head, and nobody save Virginius ever stopped there.

Five or six times a year he would ride up to the front porch, and the old man would come out and bellow at him in savage and violent vituperation, Virginius taking it quietly, talking to the few remaining negroes once he had seen with his own eyes that his father was all right, then riding away again. But nobody else ever stopped there, though now and then from a distance someone would see the old man going about the mournful and shaggy fields on the old white horse which was to kill him.

Then last summer we learned that he was digging up the graves in the cedar grove where five generations of his wife's people rested. A negro reported it, and the county health officer went out there and found the white horse tied in the grove, and the old man himself came out of the grove with a shotgun. The health officer returned, and two days later a deputy went out there and found the old man lying beside the horse, his foot fast in the stirrup, and on the horse's rump the savage marks of

the stick — not a switch: a stick — where it had been struck again and again and again.

So they buried him, among the graves which he had violated. Virginius and the cousin came to the funeral. They were the funeral, in fact. For Anse, Junior, didn't come. Nor did he come near the place later, though Virginius stayed long enough to lock the house and pay the negroes off. But he too went back to the cousin's, and in due time Old Anse's will was offered for probate to Judge Dukinfield. The substance of the will was no secret; we all learned of it.

Regular it was, and we were surprised neither at its regularity nor at its substance nor its wording:... with the exception of these two bequests, I give and bequeath... my property to my elder son Virginius, provided it be proved to the satisfaction of the... Chancellor that it was the said Virginius who has been paying the taxes on my land, the... Chancellor to be the sole and unchallenged judge of the proof.

The other two bequests were:

To my younger son Anselm, I give... two full sets of mule harness, with the condition that this... harness be used by... Anselm to make one visit to my grave. Otherwise this... harness to become and remain part... of my property as described above.

To my cousin-in-law Granby Dodge I give... one dollar in cash, to be used by him for the purchase of a hymn book or hymn books, as a token of my gratitude for his having fed and lodged my son Virginius since... Virginius quitted my roof.

That was the will. And we watched and listened to hear or see what Young Anse would say or do. And we heard and saw nothing. And we watched to see what Virginius would do. And he did nothing. Or we didn't know what he was doing, what he was thinking. But that was Virginius. Because it was all finished then, anyway. All he had to do was to wait until Judge Dukinfield validated the will, then Virginius could give Anse his half — if he intended to do this. We were divided there. 'He and Anse never had any trouble,' some said. 'Virginius never had any trouble with anybody,' others said. 'If you go by that token, he will have to divide that farm with the whole county.'

'But it was Virginius that tried to pay Anse's fine that,' the first ones said. 'And it was Virginius that sided with his father when Young Anse wanted to divide the land, too,' the second ones said.

So we waited and we watched. We were watching Judge Dukinfield now; it was suddenly as if the whole thing had sifted into his hands; as though he sat godlike above the vindictive and jeering laughter of that old man who even underground would not die, and above these two irreconcilable brothers who for fifteen years had been the same as dead to each other.

But we thought that in his last coup, Old Anse had overreached himself; that in choosing Judge Dukinfield the old man's own fury had checkmated him; because in Judge Dukinfield we believed that Old Anse had chosen the one man among us with sufficient probity and honor and good sense — that sort of probity and honor which has never had time to become confused and self-doubting with too much learning in the law.

The very fact that the validating of what was a simple enough document appeared to be taking him an overlong time, was to us hut fresh proof that Judge Dukinfield was the one man among us who believed that justice is fifty per cent legal knowledge and fifty per cent unhaste and confidence in himself and in God.

So as the expiration of the legal period drew near, we watched Judge Dukinfield as he went daily between his home and his office in the courthouse yard. Deliberate and unhurried he moved — a widower of sixty and more, portly, white-headed, with an erect and dignified carriage which the Negroes called 'rear-backed.' He had been appointed Chancellor seventeen years ago; he possessed little knowledge of the law and a great deal of hard common SENSE; AND FOR thirteen years now no man had opposed him for reelection and even those who would be most enraged by his air of bland and affable condescension voted for him on occasion with a kind of childlike confidence and trust.

So we watched him without impatience, knowing that what he finally did would be right, not because he did it, but because he would not permit himself or anyone else to do anything until it was right. So each morning we would see him cross the square at exactly ten minutes past eight o'clock and go on to the courthouse, where the negro janitor had preceded him by exactly ten minutes, with the clocklike precision with which the block signal presages the arrival of the train, to open the office for the day. The Judge would enter the office, and the Negro would take his position in a wire-mended splint chair in the flagged passage which separated the office from the courthouse proper where he would sit all day long and doze, as he had done for seventeen years.

Then at five in the afternoon the negro would wake and enter the office and perhaps wake the Judge too, who had lived long enough to have

learned that the onus of any business is usually in the hasty minds of those theoreticians who have no business of their own; and then we would watch them cross the square again in single file and go on up the street toward home, the two of them, eyes front and about fifteen feet apart, walking so erect that the two frock coats made by the same tailor and to the Judge's measure fell from the two pairs of shoulders in single hoardlike planes, without intimation of waist or of hips.

Then one afternoon, a little after five o'clock, men began to run suddenly across the square, toward the courthouse. Other men saw them and ran too, their feet heavy on the paving, among the wagons and the cars, their voices tense, urgent, What? What is it?

'Judge Dukinfield,' the word went; and they ran on and entered the flagged passage between the courthouse and the office, where the old negro in his castoff frock coat stood beating his hands on the air. They passed him and ran into the office. Behind the table the Judge sat, leaning a little back in his chair, quite comfortable. His eyes were open, and he had been shot neatly once through the bridge of the nose, so that he appeared to have three eyes in a row. It was a bullet, yet no man about the square that day, or the old negro who had sat all day long in the chair in the passage, had heard any sound.

It took Gavin Stevens a long time, that day — he and the little brass box. Because the Grand Jury could not tell at first what he was getting at — if any man in that room that day, the jury, the two brothers, the cousin, the old negro, could tell. So at last the Foreman asked him point blank:

'Is it your contention, Gavin, that there is a connection between Mr. Holland's will and Judge Dukinfield's murder?'

‘Yes,’ the county attorney said. ‘And I’m going to contend more than that.’

They watched him: the jury, the two brothers. The old negro and the cousin alone were not looking at him. In the last week the negro had apparently aged fifty years. He had assumed public office concurrently with the Judge; indeed, because of that fact, since he had served the Judge’s family for longer than some of us could remember. He was older than the Judge, though until that afternoon a week ago he had looked forty years younger — a wizened figure, shapeless in the voluminous frock coat, who reached the office ten minutes ahead of the Judge and opened it and swept it and dusted the table without disturbing an object upon it, all with a skillful slovenliness that was fruit of seventeen years of practice, and then repaired to the wire-bound chair in the passage to sleep.

He seemed to sleep, that is. (The only other way to reach the office was by means of the narrow private stair which led down from the courtroom, used only by the presiding judge during court term, who even then had to cross the passage and pass within eight feet of the negro’s chair unless he followed the passage to where it made an L beneath the single window in the office, and climbed through that window.) For no man or woman had ever passed that chair without seeing the wrinkled eyelids of its occupant open instantaneously upon the brown, irisless eyes of extreme age.

Now and then we would stop and talk to him, to hear his voice roll in rich mispronunciation of the orotund and meaningless legal phraseology which he had picked up unawares, as he might have disease germs, and which he reproduced with an ex-cathedra profundity that caused more than one of us to listen to the Judge himself with affectionate amusement.

But for all that he was old; he forgot our names at times and confused us with one another; and, confusing our faces and our generations too, he waked sometimes from his light slumber to challenge callers who were not there, who had been dead for many years. But no one had ever been known to pass him unawares.

But the others in the room watched Stevens — the jury about the table, the two brothers sitting at opposite ends of the bench, with their dark, identical, aquiline faces, their arms folded in identical attitudes. ‘Are you contending that Judge Dukinfield’s slayer is in this room?’ the Foreman asked.

The county attorney looked at them, at the faces watching him. ‘I’m going to contend more than that,’ he said.

‘Contend?’ Anselm, the younger twin, said. He sat alone at his end of the bench, with the whole span of bench between him and the brother to whom he had not spoken in fifteen years, watching Stevens with a hard, furious, unwinking glare.

‘Yes,’ Stevens said. He stood at the end of the table. He began to speak, looking at no one in particular, speaking in an easy, anecdotal tone, telling what we already knew, referring now and then to the other twin, Virginius, for corroboration. He told about Young Anse and his father. His tone was fair, pleasant. He seemed to be making a case for the living, telling about how Young Anse left home in anger, in natural anger at the manner in which his father was treating that land which had been his mother’s and half of which was at the time rightfully his. His tone was quite just, specious, frank; if anything, a little partial to Anselm, Junior. That was it.

Because of that seeming partiality, that seeming glozing, there began to emerge a picture of Young Anse that was damning him to something which we did not then know, damned him because of that very desire for justice and affection for his dead mother, warped by the violence which he had inherited from the very man who had wronged him. And the two brothers sitting there, with that space of friction-smooth plank between them, the younger watching Stevens with that leashed, violent glare, the elder as intently, but with a face unfathomable. Stevens now told how Young Anse left in anger, and how a year later Virginius, the quieter one, the calmer one, who had tried more than once to keep peace between them, was driven away in turn. And again he drew a specious, frank picture: of the brothers separated, not by the living father, but by what each had inherited from him; and drawn together, bred together, by that land which was not only rightfully theirs, but in which their mother's bones lay.

'So there they were, watching from a distance that good land going to min, the house in which they were born and their mother was born falling to pieces because of a crazed old man who attempted at the last, when he had driven them away and couldn't do anything else to them, to deprive them of it for good and all by letting it be sold for nonpayment of taxes. But somebody foiled him there, someone with foresight enough and self-control enough to keep his own counsel about what wasn't anybody else's business anyway so long as the taxes were paid. So then all they had to do was to wait until the old man died.

He was old anyway and, even if he had been young, the waiting would not have been very hard for a self-controlled man, even if he did not know the contents of the old man's will. Though that waiting wouldn't have been so easy for a quick, violent man, especially if the violent man

happened to know or suspect the substance of the will and was satisfied and, further, knew himself to have been irrevocably wronged; to have had citizenship and good name robbed through the agency of a man who had already despoiled him and had driven him out of the best years of his life among men, to live like a hermit in a hill cabin. A man like that would have neither the time nor the inclination to bother much with either waiting for something or not waiting for it.'

They stared at him, the two brothers. They might have been carved in stone, save for Anselm's eyes. Stevens talked quietly, not looking at anyone in particular. He had been county attorney for almost as long as Judge Dukinfield had been chancellor. He was a Harvard graduate: a loose-jointed man with a mop of untidy iron-gray hair, who could discuss Einstein with college professors and who spent whole afternoons among the squatting men against the walls of country stores, talking to them in their idiom. He called these his Then in time the father died, as any man who possessed self-control and foresight would have known.

And his will was submitted for probate; and even folks way back in the hills heard what was in it, heard how at last that mistreated land would belong to its rightful owner. Or owners, since Anse Holland knows as well as we do that Virge would no more take more than his rightful half, will or no will, now than he would have when his father gave him the chance. Anse knows that because he knows that he would do the same thing — give Virge his half — if he were Virge.

Because they were both born to Anselm Holland, but they were born to Cornelia Mardis too. But even if Anse didn't know, believe, that, he would know that the land which had been his mother's and in which her bones now lie would now be treated right. So maybe that night when he heard that his father was dead, maybe for the first time since

Anse was a child, since before his mother died maybe and she would come upstairs at night and look into the room where he was asleep and go away; maybe for the first time since then, Anse slept.

Because it was all vindicated then, you see: the outrage, the injustice, the lost good name, and the penitentiary stain — all gone now like a dream. To be forgotten now, because it was all right.

By that time, you see, he had got used to being a hermit, to being alone; he could not have changed after that long. He was happier where he was, alone back there. And now to know that it was all past like a bad dream, and that the land, his mother's land, her heritage and her mausoleum, was now in the hands of the one man whom he could and would trust, even though they did not speak to each other. Don't you see?'

We watched him as we sat about the table which had not been disturbed since the day Judge Dukinfield died, upon which lay still the objects which had been, next to the pistol muzzle, his last sight on earth, and with which we were all familiar for years — the papers, the foul inkwell, the stubby pen to which the Judge clung, the small brass box which had been his superfluous paper weight. At their opposite ends of the wooden bench, the twin brothers watched Stevens, motionless, intent.

'No, we don't see,' the Foreman said. 'What are you getting at? What is the connection between all this and Judge Dukinfield's murder?'

'Here it is,' Stevens said. 'Judge Dukinfield was validating that will when he was killed. It was a queer will; but we all expected that of Mr.

Holland. But it was all regular, the beneficiaries are all satisfied; we all know that half of that land is Anse's the minute he wants it. So the will is all right. Its probate should have been just a formality. Yet Judge Dukinfield had had it in abeyance for over two weeks when he died. And so that man who thought that all he had to do was to wait—'

'What man?' the Foreman said.

'Wait,' Stevens said. 'All that man had to do was to wait. But it wasn't the waiting that worried him, who had already waited fifteen years. That wasn't it. It was something else, which he learned (or remembered) when it was too late, which he should not have forgotten; because he is a shrewd man, a man of self-control and foresight; self-control enough to wait fifteen years for his chance, and foresight enough to have prepared for all the incalculables except one: his own memory. And when it was too late, he remembered that there was another man who would also know what he had forgotten about. And that other man who would know it was Judge Dukinfield. And that thing which he would also know was that that horse could not have killed Mr. Holland.'

When his voice ceased there was no sound in the room. The jury sat quietly about the table, looking at Stevens. Anselm turned his leashed, furious face and looked once at his brother, then he looked at Stevens again, leaning a little forward now. Virginius had not moved; there was no change in his grave, intent expression.

Between him and the wall the cousin sat. His hands lay on his lap and his head was bowed a little, as though he were in church. We knew of him only that he was some kind of an itinerant preacher, and that now and then he gathered up strings of scrubby horses and mules and took

them somewhere and swapped or sold them. Because he was a man of infrequent speech who in his dealings with men betrayed such an excruciating shyness and lack of confidence that we pitied him, with that kind of pitying disgust you feel for a crippled worm, dreading even to put him to the agony of saying yes' or no' to a question.

But we heard how on Sundays, in the pulpits of country churches, he became a different man, changed; his voice then timbrous and moving and assured out of all proportion to his nature and his size.

'Now, imagine the waiting,' Stevens said, 'with that man knowing what was going to happen before it had happened, knowing at last that the reason why nothing was happening, why that will had apparently gone into Judge Dukinfield's office and then dropped out of the world, out of the knowledge of man, was because he had forgotten something which he should not have forgotten. And that was that Judge Dukinfield also knew that Mr. Holland was not the man who beat that horse. He knew that Judge Dukinfield knew that the man who struck that horse with that stick so as to leave marks on its back was the man who killed Mr. Holland first and then hooked his foot in that stirrup and struck that horse with a stick to make it bolt. But the horse didn't bolt.

The man knew beforehand that it would not; he had known for years that it would not, but he had forgotten that. Because while it was still a colt it had been beaten so severely once that ever since, even at the sight of a switch in the rider's hand, it would lie down on the ground, as Mr. Holland knew, and as all who were close to Mr. Holland's family knew. So it just lay down on top of Mr. Holland's body. But that was all right too, at first; that was just as well.

That's what that man thought for the next week or so, lying in his bed at night and waiting, who had already waited fifteen years. Because even then, when it was too late and he realized that he had made a mistake, he had not even then remembered all that he should never have forgotten. Then he remembered that too, when it was too late, after the body had been found and the marks of the stick on the horse seen and remarked and it was too late to remove them. They were probably gone from the horse by then, anyway.

But there was only one tool he could use to remove them from men's minds. Imagine him then, his terror, his outrage, his feeling of having been tricked by something beyond retaliation: that furious desire to turn time back for just one minute, to undo or to complete when it is too late. Because the last thing which he remembered when it was too late was that Mr. Holland had bought that horse from Judge Dukinfield, the man who was sitting here at this table, passing on the validity of a will giving away two thousand acres of some of the best land in the county.

And he waited, since he had but one tool that would remove those stick marks, and nothing happened. And nothing happened, and he knew why. And he waited as long as he dared, until he believed that there was more at stake than a few roods and squares of earth. So what else could he do but what he did?' L His voice had hardly ceased before Anselm was speaking. His voice was harsh, abrupt. 'You're wrong,' he said.

As one, we looked at him where he sat forward on the bench, in his muddy boots and his worn overalls, glaring at Stevens; even Virginius turned and looked at him for an instant. The cousin and the old negro alone had not moved. They did not seem to be listening. 'Where am I wrong?' Stevens said.

But Anselm did not answer. He glared at Stevens. Will Virginius get the place in spite of... of....'

'In spite of what?' Stevens said.

Whether he... that....'

'You mean your father? Whether he died or was murdered?'

'Yes,' Anselm said.

'Yes. You and Virge get the land whether the will stands up or not, provided, of course, that Virge divides with you if it does. But the man that killed your father wasn't certain of that and he didn't dare to ask. Because he didn't want that. He wanted Virge to have it all. That's why he wants that will to stand.'

'You're wrong,' Anselm said, in that harsh, sudden tone. I killed him. But it wasn't because of that damned farm. Now bring on your sheriff.'

And now it was Stevens who, gazing steadily at Anselm's furious face, said quietly: 'And I say that you are wrong, Anse.'

For some time after that we who watched and listened dwelt in anticlimax, in a dreamlike state in which we seemed to know beforehand what was going to happen, aware at the same time that it didn't matter because we should soon wake. It was as though we were outside of time, watching events from outside; still outside of and beyond time since that first instant when we looked again at Anselm as though we had never seen him before. There was a sound, a slow, sighing sound, not loud; maybe of relief — something.

Perhaps we were all thinking how Anse's nightmare must be really over at last; it was as though we too had rushed suddenly back to where he lay as a child in his bed and the mother who they said was partial to him, whose heritage had been lost to him, and even the very resting place of her tragic and long quiet dust outraged, coming in to look at him for a moment before going away again. Far back down time that was, straight though it be.

And straight though that corridor was, the boy who had lain unawares in that bed had got lost in it, as we all do, must, ever shall; that boy was as dead as any other of his blood in that violated cedar grove, and the man at whom we looked, we looked at across the irrevocable chasm, with pity perhaps, but not with mercy. So it took the sense of Stevens' words about as long to penetrate to us as it did to Anse; he had to repeat himself, 'Now I say that you are wrong, Anse.'

'What?' Anse said. Then he moved. He did not get up, yet somehow he seemed to lunge suddenly, violently. 'You're a liar. You—'

'You're wrong, Anse. You didn't kill your father. The man who killed your father was the man who could plan and conceive to kill that old man who sat here behind this table every day, day after day, until an old negro would come in and wake him and tell him it was time to go home — a man who never did man, woman, or child aught but good as he believed that he and God saw it. It wasn't you that killed your father. You demanded of him what you believed was yours, and when he refused to give it, you left, went away, never spoke to him again. You heard how he was mistreating the place but you held your peace, because the land was just 'that damned farm.'

You held your peace until you heard how a crazy man was digging up the graves where your mother's flesh and blood and your own was buried. Then, and then only, you came to him, to remonstrate. But you were never a man to remonstrate, and he was never a man to listen to it. So you found him there, in the grove, with the shotgun. I didn't even expect you paid much attention to the shotgun.

I reckon you just took it away from him and whipped him with your bare hands and left him there beside the horse; maybe you thought that he was dead. Then somebody happened to pass there after you were gone and found him; maybe that someone had been there all the time, watching. Somebody that wanted him dead too; not in anger and outrage, but by calculation. For profit, by a will, maybe.

So he came there and he found what you had left and he finished it: hooked your father's foot in that stirrup and tried to beat that horse into bolting to make it look well, forgetting in his haste what he should not have forgot. But it wasn't you. Because you went back home, and when you heard what had been found, you said nothing.

Because you thought something at the time which you did not even say to yourself. And when you heard what was in the will you believed that you knew. And you were glad then. Because you had lived alone until youth and wanting things were gone out of you; you just wanted to be quiet as you wanted your mother's dust to be quiet. And besides, what could land and position among men be to a man without citizenship, with a blemished name?'

We listened quietly while Stevens' voice died in that little room in which no air ever stirred, no draft ever blew because of its position, its natural lee beneath the courthouse wall.

‘It wasn’t you that killed your father or Judge Dukinfield either, Anse. Because if that man who killed your father had remembered in time that Judge Dukinfield once owned that horse, Judge Dukinfield would be alive to-day.’

We breathed quietly, sitting about the table behind which Judge Dukinfield had been sitting when he looked up into the pistol. The table had not been disturbed. Upon it still lay the papers, the pens, the inkwell, the small, curiously chased brass box which his daughter had fetched him from Europe twelve years ago — for what purpose neither she nor the Judge knew, since it would have been suitable only for bath salts or tobacco, neither of which the Judge used — and which he had kept for a paper weight, that, too, superfluous where no draft ever blew. But he kept it there on the table, and all of us knew it, had watched him toy with it while he talked, opening the spring lid and watching it snap viciously shut at the slightest touch.

When I look back on it now, I can see that the rest of it should not have taken as long as it did. It seems to me now that we must have known all the time; I still seem to feel that kind of disgust without mercy which after all does the office of pity, as when you watch a soft worm impaled on a pin, when you feel that retching revulsion — would even use your naked palm in place of nothing at all, thinking, ‘Go on.

Mash it. Smear it. Get it over with.’ But that was not Stevens’ plan. Because he had a plan, and we realized afterward that, since he could not convict the man, the man himself would have to. And it was unfair, the way he did it; later we told him so. (‘Ah,’ he said. ‘But isn’t justice always unfair? Isn’t it always composed of injustice and luck and platitude in unequal parts?’)

But anyway we could not see yet what he was getting at as he began to speak again in that tone — easy, anecdotal, his hand resting now on the brass box. But men are moved so much by preconceptions. It is not realities, circumstances, that astonish us; it is the concussion of what we should have known, if we had only not been so busy believing what we discover later we had taken for the truth for no other reason than that we happened to be believing it at the moment.

He was talking about smoking again, about how a man never really enjoys tobacco until he begins to believe that it is harmful to him, and how non-smokers miss one of the greatest pleasures in life for a man of sensibility: the knowledge that he is succumbing to a vice which can injure himself alone. ‘Do you smoke, Anse?’ he said.

‘No,’ Anse said.

‘You don’t either, do you, Virge?’

‘No,’ Virginius said. ‘None of us ever did — father or Anse or me. We heired it, I reckon.’

‘A family trait,’ Stevens said. ‘Is it in your mother’s family too? Is it in your branch, Granby?’

The cousin looked at Stevens, for less than a moment. Without moving he appeared to writhe slowly within his neat, shoddy suit. ‘No sir. I never used it.’

‘Maybe because you are a preacher,’ Stevens said. The cousin didn’t answer. He looked at Stevens again with his mild, still, hopelessly abashed face. ‘I’ve always smoked,’ Stevens said. ‘Ever since I finally recovered from being sick at it at the age of fourteen. That’s a long time, long enough to have become finicky about tobacco. But most

smokers are, despite the psychologists and the standardized tobacco. Or maybe it's just cigarettes that are standardized.

Or maybe they are just standardized to laymen, non-smokers. Because I have noticed how non-smokers are apt to go off half cocked about tobacco, the same as the rest of us go off half cocked about what we do not ourselves use, are not familiar with, since man is led by his pre-(or mis-) conceptions.

Because you take a man who sells tobacco even though he does not use it himself, who watches customer after customer tear open the pack and light the cigarette just across the counter from him. You ask him if all tobacco smells alike, if he cannot distinguish one kind from another by the smell. Or maybe it's the shape and color of the package it comes in; because even the psychologists have not yet told us just where seeing stops and smelling begins, or hearing stops and seeing begins. Any lawyer can tell you that.'

Again the Foreman checked him. We had listened quietly enough, but I think we all felt that to keep the murderer confused was one thing, but that we, the jury, were another. 'You should have done all this investigating before you called us together,' the Foreman said. 'Even if this be evidence, what good will it do without the body of the murderer be apprehended? Conjecture is all well enough—'

'All right,' Stevens said. 'Let me conjecture a little more, and if I don't seem to progress any, you tell me so, and I'll stop my way and do yours. And I expect that at first you are going to call this taking a right smart of liberty even with conjecture. But we found Judge Dukinfield dead, shot between the eyes, in this chair behind this table.

That's not conjecture. And Uncle Job was sitting all day long in that chair in the passage, where anyone who entered this room (unless he came down the private stair from the courtroom and climbed through the window) would have to pass within three feet of him. And no man that we know of has passed Uncle Job in that chair in seventeen years. That's not conjecture.'

'Then what is your conjecture?'

But Stevens was talking about tobacco again, about smoking. 'I stopped in West's drug store last week for some tobacco, and he told me about a man who was particular about his smoking also. While he was getting my tobacco from the case, he reached out a box of cigarettes and handed it to me. It was dusty, faded, like he had had it a long time, and he told me how a drummer had left two of them with him years ago. "Ever smoke them?" he said.

"No," I said. "They must be city cigarettes." Then he told me how he had sold the other package just that day. He said he was behind the counter, with the newspaper spread on it, sort of half reading the paper and half keeping the store while the clerk was gone to dinner. And he said he never heard or saw the man at all until he looked up and the man was just across the counter, so close that it made him jump. A smallish man in city clothes, West said, wanting a kind of cigarette that West had never heard of. "I haven't got that kind," West said.

"I don't carry them." 'Why don't you carry them?' the man said. "I have no sale for them," West said. And he told about the man in his city clothes, with a face like a shaved wax doll, and eyes with a still way of looking and a voice with a still way of talking. Then West said he saw the man's eyes and he looked at his nostrils, and then he knew what

was wrong. Because the man was full of dope right then. T don't have any calls for them," West said.

"What am I trying to do now?" the man said. "Trying to sell you flypaper?" Then the man bought the other package of cigarettes and went out. And West said that he was mad and he was sweating too, like he wanted to vomit, he said. He said to me, "If I had some devilment I was scared to do myself, you know what I'd do? I'd give that fellow about ten dollars and I'd tell him where the devilment was and tell him not to never speak to me again. When he went out, I felt just exactly like that. Like I was going to be sick."

Stevens looked about at us; he paused for a moment. We watched him: 'He came here from somewhere in a car, a big roadster, that city man did. That city man that ran out of his own kind of tobacco.' He paused again, and then he turned his head slowly and he looked at Virginius Holland. It seemed like a full minute that we watched them looking steadily at one another. 'And a nigger told me that that big car was parked in Virginius Holland's bam the night before Judge Dukinfield was killed.'

And for another time we watched the two of them looking steadily at each other, with no change of expression on either face. Stevens spoke in a tone quiet, speculative, almost musing. 'Someone tried to keep him from coming out here in that car, that big car that anyone who saw it once would remember and recognize. Maybe that someone wanted to forbid him to come in it, threaten him. Only the man that Doctor West sold those cigarettes to wouldn't have stood for very much threatening.'

‘Meaning me, by “someone,”’ Virginius said. He did not move or turn away his steady stare from Stevens’ face. But Anselm moved. He turned his head and he looked at his brother, once. It was quite quiet, yet when the cousin spoke we could not hear or understand him at once; he had spoken but one time since we entered the room and Stevens locked the door. His voice was faint; again and without moving he appeared to writhe faintly beneath his clothes. He spoke with that abashed faintness, that excruciating desire for effacement with which we were all familiar.

‘That fellow you’re speaking of, he come to see me,’ Dodge said. ‘Stopped to see me. He stopped at the house about dark that night and said he was hunting to buy up little-built horses to use for this — this game—’

‘Polo?’ Stevens said. The cousin had not looked at anyone while he spoke; it was as though he were speaking to his slowly moving hands upon his lap.

‘Yes, sir. Virginius was there. We talked about horses. Then the next morning he took his car and went on. I never had anything that suited him. I don’t know where he come from nor where he went.’

‘Or who else he came to see,’ Stevens said. ‘Or what else he came to do. You can’t say that.’

Dodge didn’t answer. It was not necessary, and again he had fled behind the shape of his effacement like a small and weak wild creature into a hole.

‘That’s my conjecture,’ Stevens said.

And then we should have known. It was there to be seen, bald as a naked hand. We should have felt it — the someone in that room who felt that Stevens had called that horror, that outrage, that furious desire to turn time back for a second, to unsay, to undo. But maybe the someone had not felt it yet, had not yet felt the blow, the impact, as for a second or two a man may be unaware that he has been shot. Because now it was Virge that spoke, abruptly, harshly, 'How are you going to prove that?'

'Prove what, Virge?' Stevens said. Again they looked at each other, quiet, hard, like two boxers. Not swordsmen, but boxers; or at least with pistols. Who it was who hired that gorilla, that thug, down here from Memphis? I don't have to prove that. He told that.

On the way back to Memphis he ran down a child at Battenburg (he was still full of dope; likely he had taken another shot of it when he finished his job here), and they caught him and locked him up and when the dope began to wear off he told where he had been, whom he had been to see, sitting in the cell in the jail there, jerking and snarling, after they had taken the pistol with the silencer on it away from him.'

'Ah,' Virginius said. That's nice. So all you've got to do is to prove that he was in this room that day. And how will you do that? Give that old nigger another dollar and let him remember again?'

But Stevens did not appear to be listening. He stood at the end of the table, between the two groups, and while he talked now he held the brass box in his hand, turning it, looking at it, talking in that easy, musing tone. 'You all know the peculiar attribute which this room has. How no draft ever blows in it. How when there has been smoking here on a Saturday, say, the smoke will still be here on Monday morning

when Uncle Job opens the door, lying against the baseboard there like a dog asleep, kind of. You've all seen that.'

We were sitting a little forward now, like Anse, watching Stevens.

'Yes,' the Foreman said. 'We've seen that.'

'Yes,' Stevens said, still as though he were not listening, turning the closed box this way and that in his hand. 'You asked me for my conjecture. Here it is. But it will take a conjecturing man to do it — a man who could walk up to a merchant standing behind his counter, reading a newspaper with one eye and the other eye on the door for customers, before the merchant knew he was there. A city man, who insisted on city cigarettes.

So this man left that store and crossed to the courthouse and entered and went on upstairs, as anyone might have done. Perhaps a dozen men saw him; perhaps twice that many did not look at him at all, since there are two places where a man does not look at faces: in the sanctuaries of civil law, and in public lavatories. So he entered courtroom and came down the private stairs and into the passage, and saw Uncle Job asleep in his chair. So maybe he followed the passage, and climbed through the window behind Judge Dukinfield's back.

Or maybe he walked right past Uncle Job, coming up from behind, you see. And to pass within eight feet of a man asleep in a chair would not be very hard for a man who could walk up to a merchant leaning on the counter of his own store. Perhaps he even lighted the cigarette from the pack that West had sold him before even Judge Dukinfield knew that he was in the room. Or perhaps the Judge was asleep in his chair, as he sometimes was.

So perhaps the man stood there and finished the cigarette and watched the smoke pour slowly across the table and bank up against the wall, thinking about the easy money, the easy hicks, before he even drew the pistol. And it made less noise than the striking of the match which lighted the cigarette, since he had guarded so against noise that he forgot about silence. And then he went back as he came, and the dozen men and the two dozen saw him and did not see him, and at five that afternoon Uncle Job came in to wake the Judge and tell him it was time to go home. Isn't that right, Uncle Job?'

The old Negro looked up. 'I looked after him, like I promised Mistis,' he said. 'And I worried with him, like I promised Mistis I would. And I come in here and I thought at first he was asleep, like he sometimes—'

'Wait,' Stevens said. 'You came in and you saw him in the chair, as always, and you noticed the smoke against the wall behind the table as you crossed the floor. Wasn't that what you told me?'

Sitting in his mended chair, the old negro began to cry. He looked like an old monkey, weakly crying black tears, finishing at his face with the back of a gnarled hand that shook with age, with something. 'I come in here many's the time in the morning, to clean up. It would be laying there, that smoke, and him that never smoked a lick in his life coming in and sniffing with that high nose of hisn and saying, "Well, Job, we sholy smoked out that corpus juris coon last night."' "

'No,' Stevens said. Tell about how the smoke was there behind that table that afternoon when you came to wake him to go home, when there hadn't anybody passed you all that day except Mr. Virge Holland

yonder. And Mr. Virge don't smoke, and the Judge didn't smoke. But that smoke was there. Tell what you told me.'

'It was there. And I thought that he was asleep like always, and I went to wake him up—'

'And this little box was sitting on the edge of the table where he had been handling it while he talked to Mr. Virge, and when you reached your hand to wake him—'

'Yes, sir. It jumped off the table and I thought he was asleep—'

The box jumped off the table. And it made a noise and you wondered why that didn't wake the Judge, and you looked down at where the box was lying on the floor in the smoke, with the lid open, and you thought that it was broken. And so you reached your hand down to see, because the Judge liked it because Miss Emma had brought it back to him from across the water, even if he didn't need it for a paper weight in his office. So you closed the lid and set it on the table again. And then you found that the Judge was more than asleep.'

He ceased. We breathed quietly, hearing ourselves breathe. Stevens seemed to watch his hand as it turned the box slowly this way and that. He had turned a little from the table in talking with the old negro, so that now he faced the bench rather than the jury, the table. 'Uncle Job calls this a gold: box. Which is as good a name as any. Better than most. Because all metal is about the same; it just happens that some I folks want one kind more than another. But it all has certain general attributes, likenesses.

One of them is, that whatever is shut up in a metal box will stay in it unchanged for a longer time than in a wooden or paper box. You can

shut up smoke, for instance, in a metal box with a tight lid like this one, and even a week later it will still be there. And not only that, a chemist or a smoker or tobacco seller like Doctor West can tell what made the smoke, what kind of tobacco, particularly if it happens to be a strange brand, a kind not sold in Jefferson, and of which he just happened to have two packs and remembered who he sold one of them to.'

We did not move. We just sat there and heard the man's urgent stumbling feet on the floor, then we saw him strike the box from Stevens' hand. But we were not particularly watching him, even then. Like him, we watched the box bounce into two pieces as the lid snapped off, and emit a fading vapor which dissolved sluggishly away. As one we leaned across the table and looked down upon the sandy and hopeless mediocrity of Granby Dodge's head as he knelt on the floor and flapped at the fading smoke with his hands.

'But I still don't..' Virginius said. We were outside now, in the courthouse yard, the five of us, blinking a little at one another as though we had just come out of a cave.

You've got a will, haven't you?' Stevens said. Then Virginius stopped perfectly still, looking at Stevens.

Oh,' he said at last.

'One of those natural mutual deed-of-trust wills that any two business partners might execute,' Stevens said. You and Granby each the other's beneficiary and executor, for mutual protection of mutual holdings. That's natural. Likely Granby was the one who suggested it first, by

telling you how he had made you his heir. So you'd better tear it up, yours, your copy. Make Anse your heir, if you have to have a will.'

'He won't need to wait for that,' Virginius said. 'Half of that land is his.'

'You just treat it right, as he knows you will,' Stevens said. 'Anse don't need any land.'

'Yes,' Virginius said. He looked away. 'But I wish...'

'You just treat it right. He knows you'll do that.'

'Yes,' Virginius said. He looked at Stevens again. 'Well, I reckon I... we both owe you....'

'More than you think,' Stevens said. He spoke quite soberly. 'Or to that horse. A week after your father died, Granby bought enough rat poison to kill three elephants, West told me. But after he remembered what he had forgotten about that horse, he was afraid to kill his rats before that will was settled. Because he is a man both shrewd and ignorant at the same time: a dangerous combination.'

Ignorant enough to believe that the law is something like dynamite: the slave of whoever puts his hand to it first, and even then a dangerous slave; and just shrewd enough to believe that people avail themselves of it, resort to it, only for personal ends. I found that out when he sent a negro to see me one day last summer, to find out if the way in which a man died could affect the probate of his will. And I knew who had sent the negro to me, and I knew that whatever information the negro took back to the man who sent him, that man had already made up his mind to disbelieve it, since I was a servant of the slave, the dynamite. So if that had been a normal horse, or Granby had remembered in time, you would be underground now.

Granby might not be any better off than he is, but you would be dead.’
Oh,’ Virginius said, quietly, soberly. ‘I reckon I’m obliged.’

‘Yes,’ Stevens said. ‘You’ve incurred a right smart of obligation. You owe Granby something.’ Virginius looked at him. ‘You owe him for those taxes he has been paying every year now for fifteen years.’

‘Oh,’ Virginius said. ‘Yes. I thought that father.... Every November, about, Granby would borrow money from me, not much, and not ever the same amount. To buy stock with, he said. He paid some of it back. But he still owes me... no. I owe him now.’ He was quite grave, quite sober. When a man starts doing wrong, it’s not what he does; it’s what he leaves.’

‘But it’s what he does that people will have to hurt him for, the outsiders. Because the folks that’ll be hurt by what he leaves won’t hurt him. So it’s a good thing for the rest of us that what he does takes him out of their hands. I have taken him out of your hands now, Virge, blood or no blood. Do you understand?’

‘I understand,’ Virginius said. ‘I wouldn’t anyway...’ Then suddenly he looked at Stevens. ‘Gavin,’ he said.

What?’ Stevens said.

Virginius watched him. ‘You talked a right smart in yonder about chemistry and such, about that smoke. I reckon I believed some of it and I reckon I didn’t believe some of it. And I reckon if I told you which I believed and didn’t believe, you’d laugh at me.’ His face was quite

sober. Stevens' face was quite grave too. Yet there was something in Stevens' eyes, glance; something quick and eager; not ridiculing, either.

'That was a week ago. If you had opened that box to see if that smoke was still in there, it would have got out. And if there hadn't been any smoke in that box, Granby wouldn't have given himself away. And that was a week ago. How did you know there was going to be any smoke in that box?'

'I didn't,' Stevens said. He said it quickly, brightly, cheerfully, almost happily, almost beaming. 'I didn't. I waited as long as I could before I put the smoke in there. Just before you all came into the room, I filled that box full of pipe smoke and shut it up. But I didn't know. I was a lot scarer than Granby Dodge. But it was all right. That smoke stayed in that box almost an hour.'

The End