

W I L L I A M
STYRON



THE
AUTHORIZED
STYRON
EBOOK

THE CONFESSIONS
OF NAT TURNER

The Winner of the Pulitzer Prize



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The Confessions of Nat Turner

William Styron

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To
JAMES TERRY
to
LILLIAN HELLMAN
and to
MY WIFE * *and* * CHILDREN

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* **AUTHOR'S NOTE** *

In August, 1831, in a remote region of southeastern Virginia, there took place the only effective sustained revolt in the annals of American Negro slavery. The initial passage of this book, entitled "To the Public," is the preface to the single significant contemporary document concerning the insurrection—a brief pamphlet of some twenty pages called "The Confessions of Nat Turner" published in Richmond early in the next year, parts of which have been incorporated in this book. During the narrative that follows I have rarely departed from the *known* facts about Nat Turner and the revolt of which he was the leader. However, in those areas where there is little knowledge in regard to Nat, his early life, and the motivations for the revolt (and such knowledge is lacking most of the time) I have allowed myself the utmost freedom of imagination in reconstructing events—yet I trust remaining within the bounds of what meager enlightenment history has left us about the institution of slavery. The relativity of time allows us elastic definitions: the year 1831 was, simultaneously, a long time ago and only yesterday. Perhaps the reader will wish to draw a moral from this narrative, but it has been my own intention to try to re-create a man and his era, and to produce a work that is less a "historical novel" in conventional terms than a meditation on history.

WILLIAM STYRON

Roxbury, Connecticut
New Year's Day, 1967

Part

I

JUDGMENT
DAY

ABOVE THE BARREN, SANDY CAPE WHERE the river joins the sea, there is a promontory or cliff rising straight up hundreds of feet to form the last outpost of land. One must try to visualize a river estuary below this cliff, wide and muddy and shallow, and a confusion of choppy waves where the river merges with the sea and the current meets the ocean tide. It is afternoon. The day is clear, sparkling and the sun seems to cast no shadow anywhere. It may be the commencement of spring or perhaps the end of summer; it matters less what the season is than that the air is almost seasonless—benign and neutral, windless, devoid of heat or cold. As always, I seem to be approaching this place alone in some sort of boat (it is a small boat, a skiff or maybe a canoe, and I am reclining in it comfortably; at least I have no sense of discomfort nor even of exertion, for I do not row—the boat is moving obediently to the river's sluggish seaward wallow), floating calmly toward the cape past which, beyond and farther, the deep blue, stretches the boundless sea. The shores of the river are unpeopled, silent; no deer run through the forests, nor do any gulls rise up from the deserted, sandy beaches. There is an effect of great silence and of an even greater solitude, as if life here had not so much perished as simply disappeared, leaving all—river shore and estuary and rolling sea—to exist forever unchanged like the landscape beneath the light of a motionless afternoon sun.

Now as I drift near the cape I raise my eyes to the promontory facing out upon the sea. There again I see what I know I will see, as always. In the sunlight the building stands white—stark white and serene against a blue and cloudless sky. It is square and formed of marble, like a temple, and is simply designed, possessing no columns or windows but rather, in place of them, recesses whose purpose I cannot imagine, flowing in a series of arches around its two visible sides. The building has no door, at least there is no door that I can see. Likewise, just as this building possesses neither doors nor windows, it seems to have no purpose, resembling, as I say, a temple—yet a temple in which no one worships, or a sarcophagus in which no one lies buried, or a monument to something mysterious and ineffable, and without name. But as is my custom whenever I have this dream or vision, I don't dwell upon the meaning of the strange building standing so lonely and remote upon its ocean promontory for it seems by its very purposelessness to be endowed with a profound mystery which to explore would yield only a profusion of darker and perhaps more troubling mysteries, as in a maze.

And so again it comes to me, this vision, in the same haunting and recurrent way it has for many years. Again I am in the little boat, floating in the estuary of a silent river toward the sea. And again beyond and ahead of me, faintly booming and imminent yet without menace, is the sweep of sun on the ocean. Then the cape, then the lofty promontory, and finally the stark white temple high and serene above all, inspiring in me neither fear nor peace nor awe, but only the contemplation of a great mystery, as I move out toward the sea ...

Never, from the time I was a child until the present—and I am just past thirty—was I able to discover the meaning behind this dream (or *vision*; for though it occurred mainly as I awoke from sleep, there would be random waking moments when, working in the fields or out trapping rabbits in the woods, or while I was at some odd task or other, the whole scene would flash against my mind with the silence and clearness and fixity of absolute reality, like a picture in the Bible, and in an instant's dumb daydream all would be re-created before my eyes, river and temple and promontory and sea, to dissolve almost as swiftly as it had come), nor was I ever able to understand the emotion it caused me—this emotion of a tranquil and abiding mystery. I have no doubt, however, that it was connected with my childhood, when I would hear white people talk of Norfolk and of “going to the seaside.” For Norfolk was only forty miles eastward from Southampton and the ocean only a few miles past Norfolk, where some of the white people would go to trade. Indeed, I had even known a few Negroes from Southampton who had gone to Norfolk with their masters and then seen the ocean, and

the picture they recalled—that of an infinite vastness of blue water stretching out to the limit of the eye, and past that, as if to the uttermost boundaries of the earth—inflamed my imagination in such a way that my desire to see this sight became a kind of fierce, inward, almost physical hunger, and there were days when my mind seemed filled with nothing but fantasies of the waves and the distant horizon and the groaning seas, the free blue air like an empire above arching eastward to Africa—as if by one single glimpse of this scene I might comprehend all the earth's ancient, oceanic, preposterous splendor. But since luck was against me in this regard, and I was never allowed the opportunity of a trip to Norfolk and the ocean, I had to content myself with the vision which existed in my imagination; hence the recurring phantasm I have already described, even though the temple on the promontory still remained a mystery—and more mysterious this morning than ever before in all the years I could reckon. It lingered for a while, half dream, half waking vision as my eyes came open in the gray dawn, and I shut them again, watching the white temple dwindle in the serene and secret light, fade out, removed from recollection.

I rose up from the cedar plank I'd been sleeping on and sat halfway erect, in the same somnolent motion duplicating the instinctive mistake I'd made four times in as many mornings: swinging my legs sideways off the plank as if to plant them on the floor, only to feel metal bite into my ankles. The chain of the leg irons reached the limit of its slack, holding my feet suspended slantwise in midair. I drew my feet back and let them fall on the plank, then I sat upright and reached down and rubbed my ankles underneath the irons, aware of the flow of blood returning warm beneath my fingers. There was for the first time this year a wintry touch about the morning, damp and cold, and I could see a line of pale frost where the hard clay of the floor met the bottom plank of the jail wall. I sat there for several minutes, rubbing my ankles and shivering some. Suddenly I was very hungry, and I felt my stomach churn and heave. For a while all was still. They had put Hark in the cell next to me the evening before, and now through the planks I could hear his heavy breathing—a choked, clotted sound as if air were escaping through his very wounds. For an instant I was on the verge of waking him with a whisper, for we had had no chance to speak, but the sound of his breathing was slow and heavy with exhaustion. I thought, Let him sleep, and the words I had already formed on my lips went unspoken. I sat still on the board, watching the dawn light grow and fill the cell like a cup, stealthily, blossoming with the color of pearl. Far off in the distance now I heard a rooster crow, a faint call like a remote hurrah, echoing and fading into silence. Then another rooster crowed, nearer now. For a long while I sat there, listening and waiting. Save for Hark's breathing there was no sound at all for many minutes, until at last I heard a distant horn blow, mournful and familiar-sounding, a hollow soft diminishing cry in the fields beyond Jerusalem, rousing up the Negroes on some farm or other.

After a bit I manipulated the chain so that I could slide my legs off the board and stand up. The chain allowed my feet a yard or so of movement, and by shuffling to the length of the chain and then stretching myself forward I could see out the open barred window into the dawn. Jerusalem was waking. From where I was standing I could see two houses nearby, perched at the edge of the riverbank where the cypress bridge began. Through one house someone moved with a candle, a flickering light which passed from bedroom to living room to hallway to kitchen, where it finally came to rest on some table and stood still, yellow and wavering. Behind the other house, closer to the bridge, an old woman covered with a greatcoat came out with a chamber pot; holding the steaming pot before her like a crucible, she hobbled across the frozen yard toward a whitewashed wooden privy, the breath coming from her mouth in puffs of smoke. She opened the door of the privy, went in, and the sound of the hinges grated with a small shriek on the frosty air until abruptly and with a crack like the report of a gun the door slammed shut behind her. Suddenly, more from hunger than anything else, I felt

dizzy and closed my eyes. Tiny freckles of light danced across my vision and I thought for an instant I was going to fall but I caught myself against the sill of the window; when I opened my eyes again, I saw that the candle in the first house had gone out, and gray smoke was pluming upward from the chimney.

Just then from afar I heard a distant drumming noise, a plunging of hoofbeats in erratic muffled tattoo which grew louder and louder as it approached from the west across the river. I raised my eyes to the far riverbank fifty yards away, where the tangled forest wall of cypress and gum trees loomed high over waters flowing muddy and cold and sluggish in the dawn. A rent in the wall marked the passage of the county road, and now through this rent a horse at an easy gallop appeared, carrying a cavalryman, followed closely by another, then still another, three soldiers in all: like a collision of barrels they struck the cypress bridge in a thunderous uproar of hooves and squealing timber, passed swiftly across the river into Jerusalem, guns glinting in the pale light. I watched until they had galloped out of sight and until the noise of hoofbeats faded into a soft dim drumming behind me in the town. Then it was still again. I closed my eyes and rested my forehead against the window sill. The darkness was comforting to my eyes. It had for many years been my custom to pray at this hour of the day, or to read from the Bible; but during the five days that I had been made prisoner I had been refused the Bible, and as for prayer—well, it was no surprise to me any longer that I was totally unable to force a prayer from my lips. I still had this craving to perform a daily act which for the years of my grown-up life had become as simple and as natural as a bodily function, but which now seemed so incapable of accomplishment as to resemble a problem in geometry or some other mysterious science beyond my understanding. I now could not even recall when the ability to pray had left me—one month, two months, perhaps even more. It might have been some consolation, at least, had I known the reason why this power had deserted me; but I was denied even this knowledge and there seemed no way at all to bridge the gulf between myself and God. So for a moment, as I stood with my eyes closed and with my head pressed against the cold wood sill, I felt a terrible emptiness. Again I tried to pray but my mind was a void, and all that filled my consciousness was the still fading echo of plunging hoofbeats and roosters crowing far off in the fields beyond Jerusalem.

Suddenly I heard a rattling at the bars behind me and I opened my eyes, turning to see Kitchen's face in the lantern light. It was a young face, eighteen perhaps nineteen, pimpled and pockmarked and slack-jawed, quite stupid and so pitifully scared as to make me feel that I had perhaps wreaked upon him some irreversible mental change. For what had begun five days ago as apprehension had changed to constant fright, and this finally, it was plain to see, to a hopeless and demoralizing terror as each day passed and I slept and ate and breathed, still unclaimed by death. I heard his voice behind the bars quaver with dread. "Nat," he said. Then, "Hey, old Nat," in a skittish hesitant voice. "Nat, wake up!"

For a moment I wanted to shout out, yell "Scat!" and watch him fly out of his britches, but I said only: "I'm awake now."

He was obviously confounded to find me at the window. "Nat," he said quickly. "The lawyer's coming. Remember? He wants to see you. You awake?" He stammered a bit as he spoke, and by the lantern's glow I could see his white drawn young face with bulging eyes and a bloodless area of frigidity around the mouth. Just then I again felt a great empty aching in my stomach.

"Marse Kitchen," I said, "I'm hungry. Please. I wonder if you could fetch me a little bite to eat. Kindly please, young mastah."

"Breakfast ain't until eight," he replied in a croak.

I said nothing for a moment, watching him. Maybe it was hunger alone which stirred up a la-

breath, the ultimate gasp of a fury I thought I had safely laid to rest six weeks before. I looked back into the infantine slack-jawed face, thinking: Mooncalf, you are just a lucky child. You are the kind of sweet meat Will was after ... And for no reason at all a vision of mad Will came back, and I thought in spite of myself, the moment's rage persisting: Will, Will. How that mad black man would have relished this simpleton's flesh ... The rage shriveled, died within me, leaving me with a momentary sense of waste and shame and exhaustion. "Maybe you could fetch me just a little piece of pone," I said, pleading, thinking: Big talk will fetch you nothing but nigger talk might work. Certainly I had nothing to lose, least of all my pride. "Just a little bitty piece of pone," I coaxed, coarse and wheedling. "Please, young mastah. I'm most dreadful hungry."

"Breakfast ain't until eight!" he blurted in a voice too loud, a shout, his breath making the lantern flame tremble and flicker. Then he darted off and I was standing in the dawn, shivering, listening to the growling in my guts. After a moment I shuffled back over to the plank and sat down and thrust my head into my hands and closed my eyes. Prayer again hovered at the margin of my consciousness prowling there restlessly like some great gray cat yearning for entry into my mind. Yet once again prayer remained outside and apart from me, banned, excluded, unattainable, shut out as decisively as if walls as high as the sun had been interposed between myself and God. So instead of prayer I began to whisper aloud: "*It is a good thing to give thanks unto the Lord, and to sing praises unto thy name, most High. To show forth thy lovingkindness in the morning ...*" But even these harmless words came out wrong, and as quickly as I had begun I ceased, the familiar diurnal Psalm foul and sour in my mouth and as meaningless and empty as all my blighted attempts at prayer. Beyond my maddest imaginings I had never known it possible to feel so removed from God—a separation which had nothing to do with faith or desire, for both of these I still possessed, but with a forsaken solitariness so apartness so beyond hope that I could not have felt more sundered from the divine spirit had I been cast alive like some wriggling insect beneath the largest rock on earth, there to live in hideous perpetual dark. The chill and damp of the morning began to spread out like ooze through my bones. Hark's breathing came through the wall like the sound of an old dog dying, all gurgles and shudders and unholy vibrations, stitched together by a sickly thread of air.

A person who has lived as I have for many years—close to the ground, so to speak, in the woods and the swamp, where no animal sense is superior to another—eventually comes to own a supremely good nose; thus I smelled Gray almost before I saw him. Not that the odor that Gray put out demanded great sensibility: suddenly the cold dawn was a May morning, rank with the odor of apple blossoms, his sweet fragrance preceding him as he approached the cell. Kitchen was carrying two lanterns this time. He put one down on the floor and unlocked the door. Then he came in, holding both lanterns high, followed by Gray. The slop bucket was inside by the door and Kitchen jarred it with one of his uncertain, nervous feet, setting the whole bucket to gulping and sloshing. Gray caught a hint of Kitchen's terror, because at that instant I heard him say: "Calm yourself, boy, for pity's sake! What on earth do you think he can *do* to you?" It was a round, hearty voice, jovial even, booming with voracious good will. At this hour I was unable to tell which I resented more, that doughty voice or the honeyed, overpowering perfume. "Lawd amercy, you'd think he was going to eat you alive!" Kitchen made no reply, set a lamp down on the other plank which stuck out, like the one I was sitting on, at right angles from the opposite wall, then picked up the slop bucket and fled, banging the door behind him and throwing the bolt home with a slippery chunking noise. For a moment, after Kitchen was gone, Gray said nothing, standing near the door and blinking slow, tentative blinks past me—I had already noticed he was a bit near-sighted—then he eased himself down on the board beside the lantern. We would not need the lantern long: even as he seated himself morning was pouring with

cool white glow through the window, and I had begun to hear outside beyond the jail a slow-moving fuss and clatter of creaking pumps and banging windows and yapping dogs as the town came awake. Gray was a fleshy, redfaced man—he must have been fifty or a little more—and his eyes were hollow and bloodshot as if he needed sleep. He stirred about to find a comfortable resting place on the plan then threw open his greatcoat abruptly, revealing beneath a fancy brocaded waistcoat, now more grease-stained than ever and with the lower button unloosened to accommodate his paunch. Again he gazed toward me, blinking past me as if still unable to see or find his focus; then he yawned and removed, finger by delicate pudgy finger, his gloves, which must once have been pink but now were seedy and begrimed.

“Mornin’, Reverend,” he said finally. When I made no reply, he reached inside his waistcoat and took out a sheaf of papers, unfolding and flattening them against his lap. He said nothing more for a bit as he held the papers close to the lantern, shuffling them in and out, humming to himself, pausing from time to time to stroke his mustache, which was gray and indecisive, a faint shadow. His jaw was in need of a shave. With such an empty feeling in my stomach the over-sweet smell of him almost made me puke as I sat there watching him, saying nothing. I was worn out from talking to him and seeing him, and for the first time—perhaps it was my hunger or the cold or a combination of both, or my general frustration about prayer—I felt my dislike of him begin to dominate my better nature, my equanimity. For although I had disliked him at the very beginning five full days before, disliked the mode and method of the trickery behind his very presence, despised his person and the mellifluous sugarplum stench of him, I quickly understood how foolish it would be not to yield, not to be acquiescent and blab everything now that it all was over—fully aside from his bribery and threat, what else had I to lose? Thus even at the outset I figured that hostility would avail me nothing and managed if not completely to stifle my dislike (and dislike it was, not hatred, which I have only once felt for any single man) then to mask it, to submerge it beneath the general polite compliance which the situation demanded.

For I had said nothing when first I laid eyes on him, and he had slouched there in the yellow autumnal light (an afternoon, hazy with smoke; I recall the curled and brittle sycamore leaves drifting through the window bars), sluggish and sleepy-eyed, the words coming wearily deliberate while with pink-gloved fingers he scraped at his crotch: “Well now, looky-here, Reverend, ain’t nothin’ good goin’ to come of you shuttin’ up like a old walnut.” He paused, but again I said nothing. “Except maybe—” And he hesitated. “Except maybe a pack of misery. For you and the other nigger.” I remained silent. The day before, when they had brought me up by foot from Cross Keys, there had been two women—banshees in sunbonnets, egged on by the men—who had pricked my back deep with hatpins a dozen times, perhaps more; the tiny wounds along my shoulders had begun fiercely to itch and I yearned to scratch them, with a hopeless craving which brought tears to my eyes, but I was prevented from doing so by the manacles. I thought if I could get off those manacles and scratch I would be able to think clearly, I’d be relieved of a great affliction, and for an instant I was on the verge of capitulating to Gray if he’d allow me this concession—nonetheless, I kept my mouth shut, saying nothing. This immediately proved wise. “Know what I mean by a pack of misery?” he persisted deliberately, patiently, not unkindly, as if I were the most responsive of company, instead of a worn-out and beaten sack. Outside I could hear the thudding and clash of cavalry and a dull babble of hundreds of distant voices: it was the first day, the presence of my body in custody had been verified and hysteria hung over Jerusalem like thunder. “What I mean about a pack of misery is this, Nat. Two items. Now listen. Item in the first part: the *con-tin-u-ation* of the misery you already got. F

example, all that unnecessary junk the sheriff got wound around you there, those chains there around your neck and them quadruple leg irons, and that big ball of iron they hung onto your ankle there. Lord God Almighty, you'd think they'd figured you was old Samson himself, fixing to break down this place with one big mighty jerk. Plain foolishness, I call it. That kind of rig, a man'd die settin' in here on his own, uh, ordure long before they got around to stretching his neck." He leaned forward toward me, his face sweating like minute pale blisters against his brow; in spite of his easy manner I could not help but feel that he exhaled eagerness and ambition. "Such things as that, what I might call, as I have already stated, the *con-tin-u-ation* of the misery you already got. Now then ... Of two items, the item in the second part. Namely, the *pro-mul-gation* of *more* misery over and above and *in addition to* the misery you already got—"

"Excuse me." For the first time I spoke, and his voice abruptly ceased. He was of course working up to the idea that if I did not tell him everything, he would find a way of getting at me through some sort of villainous monkey business with Hark. But he had misjudged everything. He had at once misinterpreted my silence and unwittingly anticipated my most nagging, imminent need: to scratch my back. If I was to be hung come what may, what purpose could be served by withholding my "confession," especially when it might augment in some small way my final physical relief? Thus I felt I had gained a small, private initial victory. Had I opened up at the outset it would have been a confession who had to ask for indulgences, and I might not have gotten them. But by remaining quiet I had allowed him to feel that only by small favors could he get me to talk; now already he had expressed the nature of those favors, and we had each taken the first step toward getting me unwound from my cocoon of iron and brass. There is no doubt about it. White people often undo themselves by such running off at the mouth, and only God knows how many nigger triumphs have been won in total silence. "Excuse me," I said again. I told him there was no reason to go any further. And I watched his face flush and his eyes grow round and wide with sudden surprise, also with a glint of disappointment as if my quick surrender had scattered all the beautiful possibilities of threat and cajolery and intimidation he was spoiling for in his tiresome harangue. Then I told him quite simply that I was most willing to make a confession.

"You *are*?" he said. "You mean—"

"Hark's the last one left, except for myself. They tell me he is mighty bad hurt. Hark and I growed up together. I wouldn't want anybody to hurt a hair on his head. No sir, not old Hark. But that ain't a ___"

"Well sir," Gray broke in, "that's a right intelligent decision, Nat. I thought you'd come round to that decision."

"Also, there's something else, Mr. Gray," I said, speaking very slowly. "Last night, after they carried me up here from Cross Keys and I sat here in the dark in these chains, I tried to sleep. And as I tried to sleep, the Lord seemed to appear to me in a vision. For a while I didn't feel it was the Lord because long ago I thought the Lord had failed me, had deserted me. But as I sat here in these chains with this neck iron and these leg irons and these here manacles eating at my wrists, as I sat here in the hopeless agony of the knowledge of what was going to befall me, why, Mr. Gray, I'll swear that the Lord came to me in a vision. And the Lord said this to me. The Lord said: *Confess, that all the nations may know. Confess, that thy acts may be known to all men.*" I paused, gazing at Gray in the swarming, dusty fall light. For a brief instant I thought the falsity of these words would reveal itself, but Gray was lapping it up, intent now, even as I spoke scrabbling at his waistcoat for paper, groping for the walnut writing box at his knee, all fussy anxiety now, as if he risked being left in the lurch. "When th

Lord said that to me,” I continued, “Mr. Gray, I knowed there was no other course. Now sir, I’m a tired man, but I’m ready to confess, because the Lord has given this nigger a sign.”

And already the quill pen was out, the paper laid flat on the lid of the writing box, and the sound of scratching as Gray hastened to get down to business. “What’d the Lord say to you again, Nat? ‘Confess your sins, that’—what?”

“Not confess your sins, sir,” I replied. “He said confess. Just that. Confess. That is important to relate. There was no *your sins* at all. *Confess, that all nations may know...*”

“*Confess, that all nations may know,*” he repeated beneath his breath, the pen scratching away. “And what else?” he said, looking up.

“Then the Lord told me: *Confess, that thy acts may be known to all men.*”

Gray paused, the quill in midair; still sweating, his face wore a look of such pleasure that it verged on exaltation, and for an instant I almost expected to see his eyes water. He let the pen fall slowly into the writing box. “I can’t tell you, Nat,” he said in a voice full of emotion, “I honestly can’t tell you what a splendid—what a really splendid decision you’ve made. It’s what I call an honorable choice.”

“What you mean by honorable?” I said.

“To make a confession, that is.”

“The Lord commanded me,” I replied. “Besides, I ain’t got anything to conceal any more. What have I got to lose by telling all I know?” I hesitated for a moment; the desire to scratch my back had driven me to the edge of a kind of tiny, separate madness. “I’d feel like I could say a whole lot more to you though, Mr. Gray, if you’d get them to take off these here manacles. I itch up along my neck for somethin’ powerful.”

“I think that can be arranged without too much trouble,” he said in an amicable voice. “As I have already intimated at some length, I have been authorized by the court to, within reason, ameliorate any such continuation of present misery that might obtain, providin’ you cooperate to a degree as would make such amelioration, uh, mutually advantageous. And I am happy—indeed, I might say I am *overpowered* with delight—to see that you feel that cooperation is desirable.” He leaned forward toward me, surrounding the two of us with the smell of spring and blossoms. “So the Lord told you *Confess, that all nations may know*? Reverend, I don’t think you realize what divine justice lies in that phrase. For near about onto ten weeks now there’s been a mighty clamor to *know*, not only in the Virginia region but all over America. For ten weeks, while you were a-hidin’ out and a-scramperin’ around Southampton like a fox, the American people have been in a sweat to know how come you started a calamity like you done. All over America, the North as well as the South, the people have asked theirselves: How could the darkies get organized like that, how could they ever evolve and promulgate not to say coordinate and carry out such a *plan*? But the people didn’t know, the truth was not available to them. They were in the profoundest dark. Them other niggers didn’t know. Either they were too dumb. Dumb-assed! Dumb! *Dumb!* They couldn’t talk, even that other one we ain’t hung yet. The one they call Hark.” He paused. “Say, I’ve been meanin’ to ask. How’d he ever get that name like that?”

“I believe he was born Hercules,” I said. “I think Hark is short for that. But I ain’t sure. Nobody’s sure. He’s always been called Hark.”

“Well, even him. Brighter than most of the others, I reckon. But stubborn. Craziest nigger I ever saw in my life.” Gray bent closer to me. “Even *he* wouldn’t say anything. Had a load of buckshot on his shoulder that would of felled an ox. We nursed him along—I’ll be frank with you, Nat, frank an

level. We thought he'd tell where you were hidin' out at. Anyway, we nursed him along. He wa tougher'n rawhide, I'll have to hand him that. But ask him a question and he'd set there right here this jail, he'd set there crackin' chicken bones with his teeth and just rare back and laugh like a ho owl. And them other niggers, they didn't know nothin'." Gray drew back for an instant, silent, wiping his brow, while I sat there listening to the humming and murmuration of people outside the jail—boy's call, a whistle, a sudden thudding of hooves, and beneath it all a rise and fall of many voices like the distant rushing of water. "No sir," he resumed, slower, softer now, "Nat and Nat alone had the key to all this ruction." He paused again, then said in a voice almost a whisper: "Don't you see how you' the key, Reverend?"

Through the window I watched the curled and golden sifting of sycamore leaves. The immobility which I had sat for so many hours had caused oblong shadowy images to flutter across the margin of my consciousness like the dim beginning of hallucinations. I began to get these mixed up with the leaves. I didn't reply to his question, finally saying only: "Did you say there was a trial for the others?"

"Trial?" he said. "Trials, you mean. Hell, we had a million trials. Had a trial pretty near every day in September and this past month, we had trials runnin' out our ears."

"But trials? Then you mean—" An image came to mind like an explosion of light: myself, the day before, hurried toward Jerusalem along the road from Cross Keys, the booted feet thudding into me from back and behind and spine and the fierce sting of the hatpins in my shoulders, the blurred infuriated faces and the dust in my eyes and the gobs of their spit stringing from my nose and cheek and neck (even now I could feel it on my face like an enormous scab, dried and encrusted), and, above all, one anonymous wild voice high and hysterical over the furious uproar: "Burn him! Burn him! Burn the black devil right here!" And through the six-hour stumbling march my own listless hope and wonder curiously commingled: I wish they would get it over with, but whatever it is they're going to do, burn me, hang me, put out my eyes, why don't they get it over with right now? But they had done nothing. Their spit seemed everlasting, its sourness a part of me. But save for this and the kicks and the hatpins, I had come out unharmed, wondrously so, thinking even as they chained me up and hurled me into this cell: The Lord is preparing for me a special salvation. Either that, or they are working up some exquisite retribution quite beyond my power of comprehension. But no. I was the key to the riddle, and was to be tried. As for the rest—the other Negroes, as for *their* trials—suddenly as I gazed back at Gray it became more or less clear. "Then it was to separate the wheat from the chaff," I said.

"Bien sure, as the Frenchies put it. You couldn't be more correct. Also you might say it was to protect the rights of property."

"Rights of property?" I said.

"Bien sure again," he replied. "You might say it was a combination of both." He reached into the pocket of his waistcoat and drew out a fresh plug of dark brown tobacco, examined it between the tips of his fingers, then gnawed off a cheekful. "Offer you a chew," he said after a moment, "except to imagine a man of the cloth like you don't indulge in Lady Nicotine. Very good idea too, rot the tongue right out of your head. No, I'll tell you somethin', Nat, and that somethin' is this. Speakin' as a lawyer—indeed, speakin' as *your* lawyer, which to some degree I am—it's my duty to point out a few jurisprudential details which it might be a good idea to tuck under your bonnet. Now, of two items the first item in the first part is this. Namely: rights of property."

I stared at him, saying nothing.

"Allow me to put it crudely. Take a dog, which is a kind of a chattel. No, first take a wagon—I wa

to evolve this analogy by logical degrees. Now let's take some farmer who's got a wagon—a common ordinary dray wagon—and he's got it out in the fields somewhere. Now, this farmer has loaded up the wagon with corn shucks or hay or firewood or somethin' and he's got it restin' on a kind of slope. Well, this here is a rickety old wagon and all of a sudden without him knowin' it the brake gives way. Pretty soon that old wagon is careerin' off down the road and across hill and dale and before you can say John Henry—*kerblam!*—it fetches up against the porch of a house, and there's a little girl peaceably settin' on the porch—and *kerblam!* the wagon plows right on across the porch and the poor little girl is mashed to death beneath the wagon wheels right before her stricken mother's eyes. Matter of fact, I heard of this very thing happenin' not long ago, somewhere up in Dinwiddie. Well, there's a lot of boo-hooin' around, and a funeral, and so on, but pretty soon thoughts inevitably turn back to that old wagon. How come it happened? How come little Clarinda got mashed to death by that old wagon? Who's responsible for such a horrible dereliction? Well, who do you think's responsible?"

This last question was addressed to me, but I didn't choose to answer. Perhaps it was boredom or exasperation or exhaustion, or all three. At any rate, I didn't reply, watching him shift the quid in his jaws, then send a coppery jet of tobacco juice to the floor between our feet.

"I'll tell you what," he went on. "I'll tell you where responsibility lies. Responsibility lies clean and square with the farmer. Because a wagon is an *in-an-i-mate* chattel. A wagon can't be held culpable for its acts. You can't punish that old wagon, you can't take it and rip it apart and throw it on a fire and say: 'There, that'll teach you, you miserable misbegotten wagon!' No, responsibility lies with the unfortunate *owner* of the wagon. It's *him* that's got to pay the piper, it's *him* that's got to stand for whatever damages the court adjudicates against him—for the demolished porch and the deceased little girl's funeral expenses, plus possibly whatever punitive compensation the court sees fit to award. Then, poor bugger, if he's got any money left, he fixes the brake on the wagon and goes back and minds his land—a sadder but a wiser man. Do you follow me?"

"Yes," I said. "That's clear."

"Well then, now we come to the heart of the matter—which is to say, *an-i-mate* chattel. Now animate chattel poses a particularly tricky and subtle jurisprudential problem when it comes to adjudicating damages for loss of life and destruction of property. I need not say that the problem becomes *surpassin'* tricky and subtle in a case like that of you and your cohorts, whose crimes are unprecedented in the annals of this nation—and tried in an atmosphere, I might add, where the public passions are somewhat, uh, inflamed to say the least. What're you fidgetin' for?"

"It's my shoulders," I said. "I'd be mighty grateful if you could get them to ease off these chains. My shoulders pain something fierce."

"I told you I'd have them take care of that." His voice was impatient. "I'm a man of my word, Reverend. But to get back to chattel, there are both similarities and differences between animate chattel and a wagon. The major and manifest *similarity* is, of course, that animate chattel *is* proper like a wagon and is regarded as such in the eyes of the law. By the same token—am I speakin' too complex for you?"

"No sir," I said.

"By the same token, the major and manifest *difference* is that animate chattel, unlike inanimate chattel such as a wagon, *can* commit and may be tried for a felony, the owner being absolved of responsibility in the eyes of the law. I don't know if this seems a contradiction to you. Does it?"

"A what?" I said.

“Contradiction.” He paused. “I guess you don’t comprehend.”

“Oh yes.” Actually, I simply hadn’t heard the word.

“Contradiction. That means two things that mean one and the same thing at the same time. I reckon I shouldn’t be quite so complex.”

I didn’t reply again. There was something about the tone of his voice alone—the wad of tobacco he had thickened it, making it sound moist and blubbery—that had begun to grate on my nerves.

“Well, nem’mine that,” he went on, “I ain’t even goin’ to explain it. You’ll hear all about it in court. The point is that *you* are *animate* chattel and animate chattel is capable of craft and connivance and wily stealth. You ain’t a wagon, Reverend, but chattel that possesses moral choice and spiritual volition. Remember that well. Because that’s how come the law provides that animate chattel like you can be tried for a felony, and that’s how come you’re goin’ to be tried next Sattidy.”

He paused, then said softly without emotion: “And hung by the neck until dead.”

For a moment, as if temporarily spent, Gray took a deep breath and eased himself back away from me against the wall. I could hear his heavy breathing and the juicy sound his chewing made as he regarded me through amiable, heavy-lidded eyes. For the first time I was aware of the discolored blotches on his flushed face—faint reddish-brown patches the same as I had seen once on a brandy-drinking white man in Cross Keys who had rapidly fallen dead with his liver swollen to the size of a middling watermelon. I wondered if this strange lawyer of mine suffered from the same affliction. Sluggish autumnal flies filled the cell, stitching the air with soft erratic buzzings as they zigzagged across the golden light, mooned sedulously over the slop bucket, crept in nervous pairs across Gray’s stained pink gloves, his waistcoat, and his pudgy hands now motionless on his knees. I watched the leaves merging with the shadow shapes swooping and fluttering at the edge of my mind. The desire to scratch, to move my shoulders had become a kind of hopeless, carnal obsession, like a species of lust, and the last of Gray’s words seemed now to have made only the most dim, grotesque impression on my brain, the quintessence of white folks’ talk I had heard incessantly all my life and which I could only compare to talk in one of my nightmares, totally implausible yet somehow wholly and fearfully real, where owls in the woods are quoting price lists like a storekeeper, or a wild hog comes prancing on its hind legs out of a summer cornfield, intoning verses from Deuteronomy. I looked steadily at Gray, thinking that he was no better, no worse—like most white men he had a lively runaway mouth—and Scripture leaped to my mind like a banner: *He multiplieth words without knowledge, whose keepeth his tongue keepeth his soul*. But finally I said again only: “It was to separate the wheat from the chaff.”

“Or, to switch around the parable,” he replied, “to separate the chaff from the wheat. But in principle you’re dead right, Nat. Point is this: some of the niggers, like yourself, were up to their eyes in this mess, guilty as sin itself with nothin’ to mitigate their guilt whatsoever. Pack of the other niggers, however—and I guess I don’t have to *drive home* this melancholic fact to you—was either youngly and innocently dragooned or mere tagalongs or they out-and-out *balked* at this crazy scheme of your’n. It was the owners of *them* niggers these assizes were designed to protect ...”

He was still talking now, and as he talked he removed a sheet of paper from his pocket, but I was no longer listening, attending rather to a sudden miserable, corrosive bitterness in my heart which had nothing at all to do with this jail or the chains or my aching discomfort or that mystifying, lonesome apartness from God which was still a bitterness almost impossible to bear. Right now I had this other bitterness to contend with, the knowledge which for ten weeks I had so sedulously shunned, buried in the innermost recesses of my mind, and which Gray had casually fetched up ugly and wriggling right

before my eyes: *them other niggers, dragooned, balked*. I think I must have made a quick choke noise of distress in the back of my throat, or perhaps he only sensed this new anguish, for he looked up at me, his eyes narrowing again, and said: "It was them other niggers that cooked your goose, Reverend. That's where you made your fatal error. Them others. You could not dream of what went on in their philosophy—" And for a moment I thought he was going to continue, to elaborate and embellish this idea, but instead now he had flattened the paper against the plank and was bending down above it, flattening and smoothing the document as he went on in his bland, offhand garrulous way: "So like I say, you can get a good idea from this list how little chaff there was amongst all the wheat. Now listen—Jack, property of Nathaniel Simmons. Acquitted." He slanted an eye up at me—questioning eye—but I didn't respond.

"Stephen," he went on, "property of James Bell, acquitted. Shadrach, property of Nathaniel Simmons, acquitted. Jim, property of William Vaughan, acquitted. Daniel, property of Solomon I. Parker, discharged without trial. Ferry and Archer, property of J. W. Parker, ditto. Arnold and Artist free niggers, ditto. Matt, property of Thomas Ridley, acquitted. Jim, property of Richard Porter, ditto. Nelson, property of Benjamin Blunt's estate, ditto. Sam, property of J. W. Parker, ditto. Hubbard property of Catherine Whitehead, discharged without trial ... Hell, I could go on and on, but I won't. He peered up at me again, with a knowing, significant glance. "If that don't prove that these trials were fair and square right down the line, I'd like to know what does."

I hesitated, then spoke. "All it proves to me is that—a certain observance. The rights of property like you done already pointed out."

"Now wait a minute, Reverend," he retorted. "*Wait* a minute! I want to advise you not to go *impudent* with me. I still say it proves we run a fair series of trials, and I don't need none of your lip to show me the contrary. You set here givin' me a line of your black lip like that and you'll wind up draggin' more iron ruther than less." The idea of even more restraint being unsettling to me, I immediately regretted my words. It was the first time Gray had shown any hostility, and it didn't register too well on his face, causing his lower lip to sag and a trickle of brown juice to leak from one corner of his jaws. Almost instantly, though, he had composed himself, wiped his mouth, and his manner again became conversational, casual, even friendly. Somewhere outside the cell, somewhere distant beneath the sparse November trees, I could hear a prolonged shrill woman's cry, uttering jubilant words of which only one I could understand: my own name, *N-a-a-t*, the single syllable stretched out endlessly like the braying of a mule across the tumult and the hubbub and the liquid rushing of many voices. "Sixty-odd culprits in all," Gray was saying. "Out of sixty, a couple dozen acquitted or discharged, another fifteen or so convicted but transported. Only fifteen hung—plus you and that other nigger, Hark, *to be hung*—seventeen hung in all. In other words, out of this whole catastrophic ruction only round one-fourth gets the rope. Dad-burned mealy-mouthed abolitionists say we don't show justice. Well, we do. Justice! That's how come nigger slavery's going to last a thousand years."

Gray fussed with his lists and his papers. Then I said: "Mr. Gray, sir, I know I ain't in much of a position to ask favors. But I fears I'm goin' to need a little time to collect my thoughts afore I make that confession. I wonder if you'd be so kind as to let me alone here for a short time. I needs that time, sir, to collect my thoughts. To reconcile some things with the Lord."

"Why sure, Nat," he replied, "we got all the time in the world. Matter of fact, I could use that time too. Tell you what, I'll take this opportunity to go see Mr. Trezevant, he's the Commonwealth attorney, about all those shackles and irons they got on you. Then I'll be back and we'll get down to work. Half an hour, three-quarters do?"

“I’m most grateful to you. Also, I hope I don’t pressure too much, but, Mr. Gray, I’ve done go powerful hungry since last night. I wonder if you could get them to fetch me a little bite to eat. I’ll be in a better fix for that confession if I had a little somethin’ on my stomach.”

Rising, he rattled the bars, calling for the jailor, then turned back to me and said: “Reverend, you just say the word and it’s your’n. Sure, we’ll get you somethin’ to eat. Man can’t make a proper confession ’thout some pone and bacon in his guts.”

When he had gone and the door had closed me in again, I sat there motionless in my web of chains. The midafternoon sun was sinking past the window, flooding the cell with light. Flies lit on my brow, my cheeks and lips, and buzzed in haphazard elastic loopings from wall to wall. Through this light motes of dust rose and fell in a swarmy myriad crowd and I began to wonder if these specks, so large and visible to my eye, offered any hindrance to a fly in its flight. Perhaps, I thought, these grains of dust were the autumn leaves of flies, no more bothersome than an episode of leaves is to a man who is walking through the October woods, and a sudden gust of wind shakes down around him from a poplar or a sycamore a whole harmless, dazzling, pelting flurry of brown and golden flakes. For a long moment I pondered the condition of a fly, only half listening to the uproar outside the jail which roared and fell like summer thunder, hovering near yet remote. In many ways, I thought, a fly must be one of the most fortunate of God’s creatures. Brainless born, brainlessly seeking its sustenance from anything wet and warm, it found its brainless mate, reproduced, and died brainless, unacquainted with misery or grief. But then I asked myself: How could I be sure? Who could say that flies were not instead God’s supreme outcasts, buzzing eternally between heaven and oblivion in a pure agony of mindless twitching, forced by instinct to dine off sweat and slime and offal, their very brainlessness an everlasting torment? So that even if someone, well-meaning but mistaken, wished himself out of human misery and into a fly’s estate, he would only find himself in a more monstrous hell than he had even imagined—an existence in which there was no act of will, no choice, but a blind and automatic obedience to instinct which caused him to feast endlessly and gluttonously and revoltingly upon the guts of a rotting fox or a bucket of prisoner’s slops. Surely then, that would be the ultimate damnation to exist in the world of a fly, eating thus, without will or choice and against all desire.

I recall one of my former owners, Mr. Thomas Moore, once saying that Negroes never committed suicide. I recollect the exact situation—hog-killing time one freezing autumn (maybe it was the juxtaposition of death against death’s cold season that made such an impression), and Moore’s puckered, pockmarked face purple with cold as he labored at the bloody carcass, and the exact words spoken to two neighbors while I stood by listening: “Every hear of a nigger killin’ hisself? No, I figger a darky he might want to kill hisself, but he gets to thinkin’ about it, and he keeps thinkin’ about it thinkin’ and thinkin’, and pretty soon he’s gone off to sleep. Right, Nat?” The neighbors’ laughter, and my own, anticipated, expected, and the question repeated—“*Right, Nat?*”—more insistent now, and my reply, with customary chuckling: “Yes sir, Marse Tom, that’s right, sure enough.” And indeed I had to admit to myself, as I thought more deeply about it, that I had never known of a Negro who had killed himself; and in trying to explain this fact I tended to believe (especially the more I examined the Bible and the teachings of the great Prophets) that in the face of such adversity it must be the Negro’s Christian faith, his understanding of a kind of righteousness at the heart of suffering, and the will toward patience and forbearance in the knowledge of life everlasting, which swerved him away from the idea of self-destruction. *And the afflicted people thou wilt save, for thou art my lamp, O Lord; and the Lord will lighten my darkness.* But now as I sat there amid the sunlight and the flickering shadows of falling leaves and the incessant murmur and buzz of the flies, I could no longer

say that I felt this to be true. It seemed rather that my black shit-eating people were surely like flies
God's mindless outcasts, lacking even that will to destroy by their own hand their unending anguish.

...

For a long while I sat motionless in the light, waiting for Gray to return. I wondered if he would get
them to bring me some food, after they took off the manacles and chains. I also wondered if I could
persuade him to bring me a Bible, which I had begun to hunger for far down inside me with a hunger
that made me ache. I shut out the clamor of the crowd from my mind, and in the stillness the flies
buzzed round me with an industrious, solemn noise, like the noise of eternity. Soon I tried to pray, but
again as always it was no use. All I could feel was despair, despair so sickening that I thought it might
drive me mad, except that it somehow lay deeper than madness.

When dawn broke on that first morning, and cool white light began to fill the cell, Gray blew the
lantern out. "Mercy, it's gotten cold," he said, shivering, buttoning his greatcoat. "Anyway—" And he
paused, gazing at me. "You know, first thing today after the trial's over I'm going to try to requisition
you some winter clothes. 'Tain't right for a body to set in a cell like this and freeze half to death.
I didn't pay it any nem'mine before, them clothes of your'n, it being so warm until now. But what
you've got on there—what's left of it—that's plain old summer issue, ain't it? Cotton? Osnaburgh
cloth? Pity, rags like that in this kind of weather. Now, about the confession, Nat, I got everything
down that's important; worked durn near all night on it too. Well, like I already hinted, this confession
will, I'm afraid, comprise the evidence for the prosecution and there won't be any other issue or issue
at stake. I expect that I or Mr. W. C. Parker—that's your defense attorney—will get up and make
some kind of formal statement, but under the circumstances it can't be much more than a plea that the
judges carefully consider the evidence placed before them—in this case your full, free, and voluntary
confession. Now, as I've already told you, before you sign it this mornin' I wanted to read it out to you
—"

"You mean, this Mr. Parker—" I put in. "You mean *you're* not my lawyer?"

"Why sure. He's my what you might call associate."

"And I ain't even seen him? And you tell me today?" I paused. "And you're taking this all down for
the *prosecution*?"

Impatience flashed across his face, curtailing a yawn. "Eyaw! The prosecutor's my associate too.
What difference does it make, Reverend? Prosecution, defense—it don't make a hair's difference one
way or the other. I thought I made that perfectly clear to you—that I am a, uh, delegate of the court
empowered to take down the confession. Which I've gone and done. But your goose is cooked
already." He looked at me intently, then spoke in a cajoling, hearty voice: "Come on now, Reverend.
Let's be realistic about this matter! I mean—well, to call a spade a spade—" He halted. "I mean—
Hell, you know what I mean."

"Yes," I said. "I know I'm going to be hung."

"Well, since this is a priori and foregone there's not too much use standing on the legal niceties of
the matter, is there?"

"No sir," I said, "I reckon not." And there wasn't. I even felt a kind of relief that logic, at last, had
flown completely out of the window.

"Well then, let's get down to business, because I want to have this written out as sensible as I can
before *ten* o'clock. Now, as I said, I'm going to read the whole thing out to you here. You'll sign it

and then it'll be read out again in court as evidence for the prosecution. But while I recite the entire thing out, there are a few items that I haven't gotten entirely straight in my own mind and I want you to clarify them for me if you can. So while I read I'll probably have to stop every now and then and make one or two minor amendments. Ready?"

I nodded, convulsed with a shivering cold.

"Sir—you have asked me to give a history of the motives which induced me to undertake the late insurrection, as you call it. To do so I must go back to the days of my infancy, and even before I was born ...” Gray had begun to read slowly and with deliberation, as if relishing the sound of each word, and already he interrupted himself, glancing up at me to say: “Of course, Nat, this ain't supposed to represent your exact words as you said them to me. Naturally, in a court confession there's got to be a certain kind of, uh, dignity of style, so this here's more or less a reconstitution and *recomposition* of the relative crudity of manner in which all of our various discourses since last Tuesday went. The essence—the that is, all the quiddities of detail are the same—or at least I hope they are the same.” He turned back to the document and resumed: “‘To do so,’ et cetera, 'before I was born.' Hem. ‘I was thirty-one years of age the second of October last, and born the property of Benjamin Turner of this county. In my childhood a circumstance occurred which made an indelible impression on my mind, and laid the groundwork of that enthusiasm which has terminated so fatally to many, both white and black, and for which I am about to atone at the gallows. It is here necessary to relate—” And he broke off again saying: “Do you follow me so far?”

I was cold, and my body felt drained of all energy. I could only look back at him and murmur “Yes.”

“Well then, to go on: It is here necessary to relate this circumstance; trifling as it may seem, it was the commencement of that belief which has grown with time and even now, sir, in this dungeon helpless and forsaken as I am, I cannot divest myself of. Being at play with other children, when three or four years old, I was telling them something, which my mother, overhearing, said had happened before I was born. I stuck to my story, however, and related some things which went, in her opinion, to confirm it. Others, being called on, were greatly astonished, knowing that these things had happened and caused them to say in my hearing: I surely would be a prophet, as the Lord had shown me things that had happened before my birth. And my mother strengthened me in this my first impression saying in my presence that I was intended for some great purpose ...” He halted again. “Fair enough so far?”

“Yes,” I said. And this was true; at least the essence, as he put it, of what I had told him seemed to be no wrench of the truth. “Yes,” I repeated. “That's fair.”

“All right, to continue—I'm glad you feel I've done justice to your own narrative, Nat: 'My mother to whom I was much attached, my master—who belonged to the church, and other religious persons who visited the house, and whom I often saw at prayers, noticing the singularity of my manners, my supposes, and my uncommon intelligence for a child—remarked that I had too much sense to be raised as a slave, and if I was, I would never be of any service to anyone, as a slave ...’” As he continued to read, I heard a muffled clatter of rattling chains and shackles on the other side of the wall, and then a voice also muffled, bubbling with phlegm—Hark's: “Cold in here! Watch-man! I'se cold! Cold! He'p a poor nigger, watchman! He'p a poor freezin' nigger! Watch-man, fetch a poor freezin' nigger somep'n to kiver up his bones!” Gray, unperturbed by the racket, continued to read. Hark kept up his hollerin' and at that moment I slowly rose from the plank, stamping my feet to keep warm. “I'm listenin',” I said to Gray, “don' mind me, I'm listenin'.” I moved my shackled feet toward the window, paying less

attention to Gray now than to Hark's howls and moans beyond the wall; I knew he had been hurt, and it was cold, but I also knew Hark: this was bogus suffering, Hark at his rarest. The voice of the one Negro in Virginia whose wise flattery could gull a white man out of his very britches. I stood at the window, not listening to Gray but to Hark. The voice grew faint, weak, aquiver with the most wretched suffering: he seemed ready to expire, his voice would have melted a heart of brass. "Oh, somebody come he'p this pore sick freezin' nigger! Oh, massah watchman, jes' one little rag to kiver up his bones!" Presently, behind me, I heard Gray get up and go to the door, calling out to Kitchen. "Get some kind of a blanket for that other nigger," he ordered. Then I heard him sit down again, resuming reading, while beyond the wall I was certain I heard Hark's voice trail off in something like a stifled laugh, a gurgle of satisfaction.

"I was not addicted to stealing in my youth, nor have ever been. Yet such was the confidence of the Negroes in the neighborhood, even at this early period of my life, in my superior judgment, that they would often carry me with them when they were going on any roguery, to plan for them. Growing up among them, with this confidence in my superior judgment, and when this, in their opinions, was perfected by divine inspiration, from the circumstances already alluded to in my infancy, and which belief was ever afterward inculcated by the austerity of my life and manners, which became the subject of remark by white and black. Having soon discovered to be great, I must appear so, and therefore studiously avoided mixing in society, and wrapped myself in mystery, devoting my time to fasting and prayer ...'"

The voice droned on. For a long while I ceased listening. It had begun to snow. The tiniest, most fragile flakes flew past like springtime seed, dissolving instantaneously as they struck the earth. A cold wind was blowing up. Above the river and the swamp beyond, a white rack of cloud hovered, covering the heavens, impermeable, its surface crawling with blackish streaks of mist like tattered shawls. Jerusalem had burst awake. Four more cavalymen came at a canter over the cypress bridge, filling the air with a noisy cobbling of hooves. Singly, in pairs, in clusters, men and women bundled against the cold had commenced to hurry up the road toward the courthouse. The road was rutted and brittle with frost, and as they picked their way along they murmured together and their feet made a crunched and crusty sound. It seemed early for such a procession, but then I realized what it was thinking: They are going to make sure of getting seats, they don't want to miss anything this day. I gazed across the narrow sluggish river to the forest wall: a long mile of swamp, then the flat fields and woods of the county. It would be the time of year now to lay up firewood: my thoughts moved, as in a daydream, out across cold space to some coarse thicket of beech or chestnut where already in the clear morning light a pair of slaves would be out with ax and wedge; and I could hear the *chuck, chuck* of the ax and the musical *chink* of the wedge and see the Negroes' breaths steaming on the frosty air, and hear their voices ahowl as they labored against the timber, blabbery voices forever innocently pitched to be heard by someone a mile away: "Ole mistis, she say she kain't find a sartin' fat turkey pullet!" And the other: "Don' look at me, brother!" And the first: "Who I goin' look at, den? Ole mistis, she say she fine out, she break ev'y bone in yo' black head!" And then their big-mouthed laughter, childishly loud and heedless in the morning, echoing from the dark woods, from bog and marsh and hollow, and then a final silence save for the *chuck, chuck* of the ax and the *chink* of the wedge and, far off, a squalling of crows in wheeling descent over cornfields blurred with specks of flying snow. For a moment, despite myself, something wrenched painfully at my heart, and I had a brief blinding flash of recollection and longing. But only for an instant, for now I heard Gray say: "That's the first item I'm curious about right there, Reverend. I wonder if you might not clarify that a bit."

“Which one is that?” I said, turning back to him.

“It’s that part right there in the passage I just read. See, now we’re windin’ up out of the groundwork material and into the insurrection proper and I want to get this part straight especially. I repeat: ‘It was intended by us to have begun the work of death on the fourth of July last. Many were the plans formed by us,’ et cetera, et cetera. Les’see: ‘And the time passed without our coming to an determination how to commence. Still forming new schemes and rejecting them, when the signal appeared again, which determined me not to wait longer,’ et cetera, et cetera. Now then: ‘Since the commencement of 1830, I had been living with Mr. Joseph Travis, who was to me a kind master, and placed the greatest confidence in me; in fact, I had no cause to complain of his treatment to me ...’” I saw Gray stir uncomfortably, then raise one haunch up off a fart, trying to slide it out gracefully, but it emerged in multiple soft reports like the popping of remote firecrackers. Suddenly he seemed flustered, discomfited, and this amused me: Why should he feel embarrassed before a nigger preacher whose death warrant he was reading? He began to speak in a kind of roar, compounding his fluster and stew: “‘*I had been living with Mr. Joseph Travis, who was to me a kind master, and placed the greatest confidence in me; in fact, I had no cause to complain of his treatment to me!*’ That’s the item. That’s the item, Reverend!” I found him staring at me. “How do you explain that? That’s what I want to know, and so does everyone else. A man who you admit is kind and gentle to you and you butcher in cold blood!”

For a moment I was so surprised that I couldn’t speak. I sat down slowly. Then the surprise became perplexity, and I was silent for a long time, saying finally even then: “That—That I can’t give no reply to, Mr. Gray.” And I couldn’t—not because there was no reply to the question, but because there were matters which had to be withheld even from a confession, and certainly from Gray.

“For see here, Reverend, that’s another item the people can’t understand. If this was out and out tyranny, yes. If you was maltreated, beaten, ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-housed—yes. If any of these things prevailed, yes. Even if you existed under the conditions presently extant in the British Isles or Ireland where the average agricultural peasantry is on an economic level with a dog, or less—even if you existed under these conditions, the people could understand. Yes. But this ain’t even Mississippi or Arkansas. This is *Virginia* in the year anno Domini 1831 and you have labored under civilized and virtuous masters. And Joseph Travis, among others, you butcher in cold blood! That—” He passed his hand across his brow, a gesture of real lament. “*That* the people can’t understand.”

Again I had the impression, dim and fleeting, of hallucination, of talk buried deep in dreams. I stared long and hard at Gray. Little different from any of the others, nonetheless it was a matter of wonder to me where this my last white man (save one with the rope) had come from. Now, as many times before, I had the feeling I had made him up. It was impossible to talk to an invention, therefore I remained all the more determinedly silent.

Gray looked at me narrowly. “All right, if you won’t open up about that, I’ll skip ahead to this other item. Then I’ll come back and read the whole thing.” He thumbed through the papers. Watching him, I again felt dizzy from hunger. Off in the town, the courthouse clock dropped eight jangling chimes of the morning and the stir and bustle, the sound of hoofbeats and voices, became louder and louder. Somewhere I heard a Negro’s voice, a woman’s, shrill with mock fury: “I gwine knock you to your knees directly!” And then a little black girl’s young laughter, ashiver with equally mock panic and fright. Then a second’s stillness, then the hoofbeats and voices again. I began to nurse and coddle the pain of my hunger, folding my arms over my belly, standing guard over its emptiness like a sentry. “Here we are,” said Gray. “Now listen to this, Reverend. It’s right after you’ve left the Bryants’ place

—remember, you yourself haven't killed anybody yet—and gone to Mrs. Whitehead's. I quote: returned to commence the work of death, but they whom I left had not been idle: all the family were already murdered but Mrs. Whitehead and her daughter Margaret. As I came round to the door I saw Will pulling Mrs. Whitehead out of the house, and at the step he nearly severed her head from her body with his broadax. Miss Margaret, when I discovered her, had concealed herself in the corner formed by the projection of the cellar cap from the house; on my approach she fled but was soon overtaken, and after repeated blows with a sword I killed her by a blow on the head with a fence rail. Unquote. Right so far?"

I said nothing. I felt a prickling at my scalp.

"Very well, we now skip down, oh, maybe ten, fifteen sentences, and what I have written here is this. Now listen careful, because this is more or less the sequence you told me it. I quote: 'I took my station in the rear, and as it was my object to carry terror and devastation wherever we went, I placed fifteen or twenty of the best armed and most to be relied on, in front, who generally approach the houses as fast as their horses could run; this was for two purposes, to prevent their escape and strike terror to the inhabitants.' Now listen careful: '*On this account I never got to the houses, after leaving Mrs. Whitehead's, until the murders were committed.* I sometimes got in sight in time to see the work of death completed, viewed the mangled bodies as they lay, in silent satisfaction, and immediately started in quest of other victims. Having murdered Mrs. Waller and ten children, we started for Mr. William Williams's; having killed him and two little boys that were there,' et cetera, et cetera. Now of course, Nat, this here like all the rest is a rough paraphrase of your actual words, and subject to your own correction. But the main point is this, which you didn't tell me in so many words, but which I'm going to bring out now by deductive reasoning, as it were. The main point is that in this whole hellish ruction involving dozens upon dozens of the slain, you, Nat Turner, were personally responsible for *only one death*. Am I right? Right? Because if I'm right it seems passin' strange indeed." He halted then said: "How come you only slew one? How come, of all them people, this here particular your girl? Reverend, you've cooperated with me right down the line, but this here line of goods is hard to buy. I just can't believe you only killed one ..."

Foot-thuds and a rattling at the bars and Kitchen entered, carrying cold cornmeal mush on a plate along with a tin cup of water. With jittery hands he put plate and cup down on the plank beside me, but for some reason now I was no longer very hungry. My heart had begun to pound, and I felt sweat rivulets beneath my arms.

"Because it ain't as if you had been *disinvolved* in these proceedings—a field general runnin' the whole show from way behind the lines, like the Little Corporal standin' aloof and pompous on the heights above Austerlitz." Gray halted, slanting an eye at Kitchen. "Ain't you got any bacon for the Reverend?" he said.

"The niggers over to Mrs. Blunt's place fix it," the boy replied. "The one that fetched it over here said they done run out of bacon."

"Pretty pissy kewzine for a distinguished prisoner, I'll vow, cold mush like that." The boy hurried from the cell, and Gray turned back to me. "But you *wasn't* disinvolved from the very beginning. You—You have to look at—this reluctance. Videlicet ... Les'see ..."

There was a shuffling of pages. I sat motionless, sweating, aware of the pounding of my heart. His words (mine? ours?) came back in my brain like a somber and doleful verse from Scripture itself: *As I came round to the door I saw Will pulling Mrs. Whitehead out of the house, and at the step he nearly severed her head from her body with his broadax.* So easy in the telling, why now, uttered by Gray, did

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