

THIS VERY EARTH

BOOKS BY
ERSKINE CALDWELL

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ERSKINE CALDWELL

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CHAPTER ONE

THE SUN WAS GOING DOWN and there was a late October chill-ness in the air. Liz, Rocky, and Margie, the three brown-and-white spotted hounds, were sprawled in the corner of the porch. Margie, her long silky ears drooping over her jaws, was the first to raise her head and sniff curiously. At the same time Rocky's lean tail began to thump against the wooden floor. Chism Crockett tossed a handful of cold biscuits into the back yard and there was a headlong scramble as the three spotted possum hounds leaped over the railing to the ground. He sat down on the steps and watched the hungry dogs thoughtfully while they were devouring the bread. After the last crumb had been lapped from the sandy yard, the hounds sat back on their haunches and indulged in an orgy of scratching. When they were fully satisfied, they got up, shook themselves, and wandered leisurely around the yard, yawning and stretching their hind legs and sniffing expectantly at familiar odours.

"If I don't get busy and run them dogs more," Chism said aloud to himself, "they'll end up being the best biscuit eaters and the worst no-account possum hounds in the country." He sat gazing for a long time at the low-roof dwellings spread out over the south-west section of town, and then gradually he became aware of the one particular odour he had missed all summer. He tilted back his head, his nostrils flaring, and breathed deeply of the October air. The pleasant tingling smell of autumn woodsmoke, whiffs of green pine mingling with seasoned red oak, was the sign he had been waiting for since spring. Now that the heat of summer had passed and it was chilly enough for evening

fires on the hearth, he could at last go hunting again.

He bent over industriously, untied the loops in his shoelaces, and re-tied them in hard knots as he always did when he was getting ready to tramp through the woods and fields at night. "Them hounds ought to run mighty fine on an autumn night like this," he told himself with a nodding of his head. He sat up erectly and glanced at the darkening sky. There were no clouds overhead and the air was crisp and cool. "Them cussed possums ought to be running good tonight, too."

As soon as he had finished making a cigarette, he lit it and walked around the house to the front yard. It was almost dark by that time, but Jarvis was still out in the street playing catch with some of the neighbours' children. Chism leaned over the gate and yelled at Jarvis.

Jarvis, as usual, waited as long as he dared before he answered his father. "I don't want to come in yet, Papa," he finally called out in a thin whining voice. "I want to play catch some more. Don't make me come in yet, Papa. It's too early to have to go in the house."

"You heard me," was all that Chism said in reply.

While he waited at the gate for Jarvis, the spotted hounds, as though they had sensed what he was planning to do, came trotting briskly around the corner of the house and grouped themselves expectantly in front of him, each one attentively watching Chism's face and listening for the sound of a familiar command. When Jarvis walked protestingly through the gate, scuffing his feet on the ground and mumbling to himself, Chism shoved him forward and then followed him up the front steps and into the house. Liz, Rocky, and Margie, their long stiff tails wagging eagerly, trotted at his heels.

As soon as they were inside the house, Chism turned on the light. Grandpa Crockett, his long snowy-white beard

gleaming with a startling brightness in the suddenly lighted room, was huddled over the brick hearth staring at the bare soot-blackened andirons in the fireplace. Grandpa, who was eighty-five, was a large broad-shouldered man with round pale-blue eyes that always made him look sad and melancholy. He glanced up hopefully when his son walked into the room.

"Chism, I've been sitting here hoping you'd come in the house before long," Grandpa said, hunching his shoulders and moving his chair forward over the hearth. "I'd sure appreciate a little fire in the fireplace tonight, Chism." He held the palms of his hands towards the blackened fireplace as though expecting to extract some warmth from it. His pale-blue eyes blinked slowly and the habitual sadness of his expression sank deeper into the aged lines of his face. "This damp fall weather chills me clear through to my bones, son," he complained. "Every year at this time it looks like I begin to feel the cold and the dampness worse than ever. Just as soon as the sun goes down these October nights I can feel the chill creeping down into me. Once it gets wrapped around my bones, I can't seem to get shed of it till the warm days of spring come back. A little fire in the fireplace tonight will be mighty welcome, son. I'd sure appreciate it."

"Pa, you know good and well there's not a stick of wood around here. Where would I get money to buy wood? If you'd get away from that fireplace and stop thinking about it, you wouldn't notice the chilly air."

Grandpa moved closer to the fireplace. "I don't want to come down sick right at the beginning of winter, son. When an old man like me takes sick, it puts a burden on everybody in the house. It always makes me think I ought to go off somewhere and die."

"Go wrap yourself up in my old coat then," Chism told

him. "That'll help you stay warm till I can look around and find some firewood somewhere."

"It was never like this out at the home-place, before you went and traded it away," Grandpa spoke out bitterly. He clutched his long beard close to his chest while Chism glared at him. When he spoke again, his voice was quavering with disappointment. "Before we had to leave the home-place and move to town, we always had plenty of firewood cut and seasoned at this time of year, and everything else we needed, too, including plenty to eat when anybody was hungry. I always prided myself on that. I saw to it that there was always a plentiful supply of everything a human needed. And I raised it all on the farm, too. That was one of the finest tracts of farm land in the whole valley. I never saw anything on this side of the big mountains that could compare with it. I cleared the whole two hundred acres myself sixty-some years ago when I was a young man, digging out the stumps and roots by day and staying up at night to pile them up and burn them. I worked my heart out on that land, and I was proud of it, like any man would've been who'd done what I'd done. The cotton land was sloping and well drained, and the bottom land along the creek grew the best yield of corn year after year that anybody on this earth will ever lay eyes on again. Money couldn't 've bought a tract of land like that farm of mine—nobody's money would've been good enough to take it from me. But you went and tricked me out of it and traded it away for this shack of a house in town, just because you got too lazy to stoop over and pick up what grew on it. It's a pity Alice had to pass away when she did. You didn't move an inch off the home-place as long as she was alive, because she wouldn't have stood for it."

"Hell-fire! Why do you always have to go and rake that up!" Chism said, angered. "I've heard all that so many

times I'm sick of it. I got good and tired staying on that cussed farm and working my blame head off. Just because you took up farming is no reason why I ought to. I want to live my own way, just like everybody else who moves to town. You can talk all you want to about it, but nobody's going to get me back out there in the country again and put me to work being a cussed farmer. Ever since I can remember, my one big ambition has been to live in town and be city folks. You don't see none of them sweating their insides out like a cussed farmer. They take life easy, same as I want to do. When they don't feel like working, they just set and rest, and if they don't have enough to eat, the city comes along and hands out some money to buy groceries with. You never saw nobody going around handing farmers something to eat, now did you?"

"Chism, a man just can't ignore his responsibilities and live in this world for himself alone without running headlong into trouble. If a man persists in doing it, he always ends up hurting a lot of people. In this case it's the children who'll be hurt. You ought to be doing everything you can to see to it that they're raised the way their mother wanted them to be raised. It doesn't matter much what happens to me from now on, because I've lived my life, but it does matter what happens to the girls. That's something you ought to think about before it's too late. Terrible things can happen to them. You don't want to see that come about, do you? And then there's Jarvis. You know he stays out of school most of the time, but you don't do a thing about it. You're going to drag every one of the children down if you don't wake up to your responsibilities before it's too late. You can change it now if you want to, or you can ruin every one of their lives. Now, which do you think is the right thing to do?"

"I'm plenty satisfied with the way I'm living, and I'm

going to keep on being satisfied, too. I like it fine. Living here in town is my idea of having all the good things a man wants in life, and I'm plenty pleased. After this you can shut up about the way I do and save your breath for something else to find fault with."

He turned his back and walked into the hall. Jarvis, who had been standing in the doorway, backed away from him.

"Where's everybody at this time of night?" he said to Jarvis. "Why hasn't Jane come home from school yet? Where's Dorisse? Has Vickie already left to go to work? How in the world do they expect me to eat when there's never none of them here when night comes?" He walked to the end of the hall and back. "You'll have to go get your own self a bite to eat, Jarvis," he said, shoving the boy towards the kitchen. "There's some biscuits out there, and you can find some cooked sausage or some molasses. I'm in a hurry to get started. Now, hurry up, and don't piddle away time."

"Where're you going, Papa?"

"Where'm I going?" he said, raising his voice. "Possum hunting, of course. Where else in the whole wide world would anybody in his right mind want to be going on the first possum-hunting night of the fall? Didn't you get a good whiff of that smell in the air? Don't you know what that means? It's a sure sign that possum-hunting time is here."

"Can I go with you? Can I, Papa?" Jarvis pulled at his father's jacket and began jumping up and down excitedly. "You said you'd let me go with you the next time you went! Can I go, Papa? Can I?"

"I mean to take you along—if you're ready in time."

"Right away—tonight?"

"As soon as you go get yourself a bite to eat."

The three spotted hounds were already prancing around Chism's knees, leaping off the floor, and yelping excitedly when Jarvis dashed off to the kitchen. Stooping over, Chism pulled at the hounds' long ears and rubbed his hands affectionately over their coats. Grandpa Crockett had come to the door and was once more asking for a small fire in the fireplace, but Chism paid no attention to him.

"We'll be going in a minute or two, Liz," he told the hound, holding her jaw in his hand and nodding to her. "Now, don't go and wear yourself out so you can't make a good chase tonight. Quiet down, Rocky, you and Margie." The hounds were panting with excitement. All three leaped at him, their paws pounding against his chest and their huge wet tongues licking the skin of his face and neck. "There's going to be plenty of time to get all the running you want," he told Margie, pulling her ears. "Just take it easy, now, Liz, you and Rocky. I wouldn't lie to you about going on a chase tonight. I never lie to you, now do I?"

He straightened up and held his right hand in front of him. "Hold!" he commanded in a loud tone. The three hounds immediately became rigid. Their red dripping tongues disappeared and their black twitching noses were pointed directly at his face. After they had held their position for several moments, he spoke to them again in the same tone of voice. "Break!" he said, and in an instant they were again leaping and jumping around him. "We'll be going directly, Liz. Now, you hounds be quiet for just a little while longer. We've got plenty of time yet to tree them cussed possums. Now, you behave like I told you, Margie."

"Chism, if you'd get a few sticks and lay them in the fireplace, it'd be a big help," Grandpa spoke up.

Jarvis came running from the kitchen with his mouth

stuffed with biscuit-and-molasses. He was carrying a biscuit and cold sausage-cake sandwich in each hand.

"I'm all ready to go, Papa," he said, mumbling the words indistinctly through the mouthful of food.

"Go get yourself a jacket," Chism told him. "It'll be chilly out there before morning."

Jarvis got his jacket and followed his father out of the house and across the back yard. Grandpa came as far as the porch and called Chism several times. Chism did not stop. The hounds ran ahead towards the car standing beside the shed at the alley and pawed and scratched at the doors until Chism got there and let them into the back seat. Yelping and jostling each other, they all tried to get in at the same time when he opened the door.

After getting the old car started, they drove out of town with the dogs yelping and barking on the back seat. Most of the farmhouses on both sides of the paved road were lighted and open-hearth fires could be seen through the windows of some of them. Hovering close to the earth, a dark blue cloud of home-fire woodsmoke, the first Chism had seen since the cool nights of spring, lay over the countryside.

At the top of the hill, about two miles from town, Chism turned off the highway and drove down a rough, bumpy, dirt road that was winding and narrow. By then the three hounds were so excited that they were standing with their forepaws on the back of Chism's seat and licking his ears. He had to pull his hat down tightly around his head to keep it from being knocked off.

"Where're we going now, Papa?" Jarvis asked him, sitting tensely on the edge of the seat and holding to the wind-screen. "Where's this road go to, Papa?"

"We're going over yonder about a mile or more, towards the ridge," Chism told him presently. "There's a good

starting-place over there to pick up a scent. Possums like dry ridges, if there's plenty of thickets and some woods for them to hide away in. The only time they head for the creeks and the bottom lands is when they're trying to shake off trailing hounds. If you ever expect to be a first-rate possum hunter, you've got to learn their habits. Possums are pretty smart creatures. A cussed possum'll outsmart you every time, unless you're careful. When you've got hounds like these, though, there's not too much you have to worry about. That Rocky's the smartest possum dog I ever saw on the topside of the world. Rocky's out-foxed more possums in his time than any other half-dozen hounds in the country put together. Ordinary possum hounds are just as apt as not to go off cold-trailing and end up with the trail all petered out, because they back-tracked the cussed possum, while all the time he was getting farther away in the opposite direction. But not that Rocky. He's never failed yet to pick up a live trail and, what's more, he knows how to box in a cussed possum that's heading for a creek and make him tree-up. I've seen possums so mad because Rocky tricked them and made them tree-up, that they'd just sit up there on a limb and grind their teeth and spit and carry on like an old woman. A lot of ordinary hounds will run one measly old possum half the night through two counties before they can tree him. But not that Rocky. He knows there's too many possums on the topside of the world for him to waste all that time on just one of them. Some of the best possum hounds in the country sometimes get a silly streak in them and go busting off after a blame cottontail, but Rocky ignores a rabbit trail like it never was laid down. I've seen him jump a rabbit in a thicket and pay no more mind than he would to a bump on a log. I'd a lot rather lose my right hand than have something happen to that Rocky. I'm afraid I'd grieve myself to my grave if

I lost Rocky. I just couldn't stand it, that's all."

The road became rougher as they went farther towards the ridge. Chism was jerking the steering-wheel from side to side in an effort to keep the car from running off the slanting gully-washed road. The hounds were yelping and barking louder than ever on the back seat. After a while the road suddenly came to an end in a small grove of red oaks. Chism immediately shut off the engine and switched off the lights.

Liz, Rocky, and Margie had leaped to the ground before the car had come to a complete stop and they were already running in circles around the car and trying to pick up a scent. There was no light to be seen anywhere, and only a few dim stars were shining overhead. Trembling partly with fear and partly with excitement, Jarvis clung close to his father. He could hear the panting hounds running through the dry underbrush, but there was no other sound to be heard.

They stood there for several minutes, and then Chism quietly called the hounds. They came right away, panting eagerly, and stood in front of him. Jarvis could see his father reach down and pat each of the dogs on the head. They no longer leaped and jumped, but waited patiently and expectantly for a word from him.

"Now, you dogs take care tonight," he told them in a serious manner. "I want you to be careful of that cussed barb-wire. People haven't got no better sense than to string it every which way all over the topside of the world. I don't want to see none of you dogs coming back with your legs and bellies all slashed up. There's a lot of that blame barb-wire around here, and you've got to be careful. You hear me, Rocky, you and Liz and Margie? Now, you pay mind to what I told you."

He gave each of them a final affectionate pat on the head

and took a step backwards. The hounds, panting and dripping, waited nervously, each of them standing tensely with a forepaw poised off the ground.

"Go get 'em!" he shouted.

The three spotted hounds leaped into the air and plunged into the underbrush, yelping and howling with delight. During the next few minutes they could be heard circling the ground they had started from as they began searching for the scent of a possum. A moment later they had gone, silently and swiftly and no longer barking. Chism and Jarvis stood where they were for a while, and then Chism walked away and sat down with his back against a tree. When Jarvis got there, his father had taken out his tobacco and was rolling a cigarette. Still trembling a little, Jarvis sat down beside him.

"How'll we know when they've found a possum, Papa?" he asked worriedly.

"That's when they'll start yelping about it in dead earnest," Chism told him. "You won't fail to hear that, no matter how far away they get from here. As soon as they start working on a live trail, they'll howl their heads off. In the meantime they won't be letting on to the cussed possum that they're after his scent." He lit the cigarette and puffed on it several times. "Give them a good half-hour, maybe less, and they'll be live-trailing. I'll bet it's that Rocky who strikes it first this time, just like he always does. Nine times out of ten he's the one who does it every time, just like fancy clockwork. I wouldn't swap that old hound dog for nothing I've had a sample of on the topside of the world."

They sat in silence for the next quarter-hour listening for the first sound of a live trail. Then like a bugle blast in the night came Rocky's faraway yelping bark of unmistakable meaning. Chism jumped to his feet, jerking off his hat

and slamming it to the ground, and held his outspread hands beside his ears.

"Listen to him, will you!" he said excitedly. "Just listen to him! That's Rocky! Rocky's done it! That flop-eared old rascal's already got a live trail! Just listen to him yowl! I told you he'd be the first to make the scent!"

While they were listening, Liz and Margie joined in, and then all three dogs went yelping off towards the north. "That foxy old possum's heading straight for the creek," Chism said. He cupped his hands around his mouth and called to the hounds. "*Whoo-way-ooo! Whoo-way-ooo!*"

The sound echoed in the woods and over the fields. "*Whoo-way-ooo! Whoo-way-ooo!*" he called again. A moment later he was jabbing his fist against Jarvis's chest. "They heard me!" he yelled at Jarvis, dancing around with excitement. "They're boxing him in and turning him around. Only top-notch first-rate smart dogs can do that, I'm here to tell you! They're circling that cussed possum and heading him back towards the ridge. Them are positively the smartest hound dogs a man ever owned on the topside of the world. I'd heap rather drop dead than lose them dogs. They're smarter than most people, I tell you. They turned that blame possum right plumb round in his tracks when they heard me talking to them. I'll bet that old possum's so mad about being tricked that he could start cussing if he only knew the words to use. *Whoo-way-ooo! Whoo-way-ooo!* Just listen to them head back for the ridge right on the heels of that cussed possum! They'll have him treed quicker than hell-fire can scorch the seat of your pants!"

He was too excited to stand still after that, and he began walking up and down restlessly while they waited for Liz and Rocky and Margie to tree the possum somewhere along the crown of the oak ridge.

CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS MIDNIGHT but Dorisse was wide-awake when Nobby stumbled noisily through the dark hallway and turned on the light. She sat up in bed, blinking her eyes, as Nobby flipped his hat across the room in the direction of the walnut-stained chiffonier. He laughed to himself when his hat sailed against the wall and fell out of sight behind a chair.

"What're you so bright-eyed about at this time of night?" he said, turning with an irritated look. "What do you think it's going to get you? A slice of cake or something?"

Nobby Hair was a blond heavily built young man of twenty-five, four years older than Dorisse, with even white teeth and, when he wanted to make a good impression, an ingratiating smile. He had been selected all-state football centre during his last year at high school and had received a college scholarship. However, he had been dropped from the college football squad at the end of the first week of practice when he got drunk and broke training. He gave up college and came back home and began playing snooker pool for side bets. His parents moved away shortly after that, and he had no close relatives in town. Nobby was handsome and rugged in appearance and somewhat beligerently proud of his former high-school football fame. He sometimes boasted of having received an offer to play professional football, but secretly nobody believed him. Whenever he went downtown, somebody usually commented on his football career and he had come to believe he could have been a famous star if he had tried. Nearly everybody in town, except Dorisse, called him by his nickname.

"I'm so glad you're home, Noble," Dorisse said, smiling affectionately at him. She never knew what kind of mood he would be in when he came home at night, but she was always hopeful that he would be kind and gentle with her. She pulled back the covers invitingly and brushed a strand of hair from her face.

Dorisse was slender and graceful, with long dark eyelashes and a wide tempting mouth that was accentuated by full sensuous lips. They had been married for two years, but for the past year Nobby had been staying out late at night and she usually did not see him until midnight or later. "I'm always worried about you when you're out so late, Noble," she said appealingly. "When I don't know where you are, I imagine all kinds of terrible things have happened to you. I can't help it, Noble. It's just the way I feel. I guess it's because I love you so much. Please try to understand. I miss you awfully when you're not here, Noble."

Nobby was fumbling clumsily with the buttons on his shirt. Dorisse got out of bed and went to him.

"Let me unbutton it for you, Noble," she said, putting her hands on his chest.

"Leave me alone," he said, hitting at her with his elbow. "Go on about your business and leave me alone. I don't want to be bothered."

She waited patiently while he pulled at the opening of his shirt and then she again tried to help him undress. The odour of whisky was so strong that she knew he had spilled some on his clothes.

"I told you once to leave me alone!" he yelled at her. "How many times do I have to tell you!"

Nobby shoved her away with a sweep of his elbow. She went back to the bed and sat down, at the same time averting her eyes in an effort to hide her feelings. Nobby finally got his shirt off and flung it aside. Then he

walked unsteadily around the foot of the bed and stopped in front of her. Dorisse, still hopeful, smiled up at him anxiously.

"I want a smoke," he stated as he looked down at her. "Get me a cigarette."

She caught her breath, momentarily biting her lips.

"You heard me," he said sullenly.

"But I haven't any cigarettes, Noble," she told him uneasily. "There aren't any here." She stood up, trembling. "Haven't you got some in your pockets? Let me look and see, Noble."

Nobby shoved her backwards to the bed before she could get close to him.

"I asked you for a cigarette," he said roughly. "I didn't ask myself, did I? Now, get me a smoke, and hurry up about it."

"But, Noble, I don't have a cigarette," she said as she tried to hold back the tears. "You know I don't smoke. I just don't have a cigarette!"

She thought for a moment that he was going to strike her and she instinctively drew back from him.

"Well, what're you going to do about it—sit there and bawl?"

He turned his back and went to the foot of the bed.

"I don't know what you mean, Noble."

"Quit playing dumb and go get some," he said impatiently. "And quit that bawling and hurry up about it before I cuff you. You hear me?"

She got up quickly.

"But where, Noble?" she begged, unable to hold back the tears any longer. "Where'll I get them at this time of night?"

"I don't care where you get them, as long as you hurry up about it." He watched her with an unrelenting scowl.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Do you want to stand there till you get cuffed?"

"You mean you want me to go downtown somewhere, Noble?"

"Do you happen to know any other place you can get cigarettes?"

"No."

"Then go get them where everybody else gets them."

"But, Noble, I'd be afraid to go downtown all by myself at this time of night. It's after midnight. I'd be frightened to death!" She looked at him desperately. "Please, don't make me do that, Noble!"

"You'd better get yourself out of here before you make me mad. I'm going to teach you a lesson. Next time I come home maybe you'll have a smoke when I ask for it. Now, get going like I told you."

"All right, Noble," she said. "I'll go."

Trembling, Dorisse hurriedly took off her night-gown and slipped her dress over her head. Then she put on her shoes and brushed her hair. Nobby flung a quarter at her. The coin fell on the floor at her feet and she hastily reached down and picked it up. Her hands were shaking so much that she was afraid she would drop the money and not be able to find it so she clutched it desperately in the palm of her hand. She knew it was useless to try to appeal to Nobby again and she ran across the room. When she reached the door, she stopped and looked back at him.

"Noble, please tell me where I can find cigarettes at this time of night. I don't know where to go. Please, Noble."

"There're plenty of places open around town," he told her casually. "Just keep on looking till you find one all lighted up. Why don't you try the Rainbow Café?" He laughed to himself. "Vickie will be surprised to see you, won't she?"

Dorisse waited while tears streamed down her cheeks, still hoping that Nobby would relent at the last minute and not make her go, but when he turned around and saw that she was still standing there, he moved as though he were coming to the door, and she ran blindly through the hallway and down the front steps to the dark street.

After she had left the house, Nobby opened the window and watched her run out of sight towards Main Street. After that he got undressed and sat down on the side of the bed. He sat there for several minutes. The house was quiet and the only sound he could hear anywhere was the puffing of a locomotive in the freight yards several blocks away. Dorisse had left the door to the hall open, but, as usual, the door to the adjoining room was closed. He knew it was not locked, because there had been no key for it as long as he had lived there. He listened again for sounds in the house, and then got up and tiptoed across the room.

He listened for some sound in the next room and then turned the knob noiselessly and opened the door. Dorisse's younger sister, Jane, was asleep in her bed beside the window. Jane shared the room with Vickie, but Vickie was a night waitress at the Rainbow Café and slept during the day while Jane was at school. Jane was a senior at high school that year, and only a few weeks before she had won first prize in a bread-baking contest at the county fair. She was slender and graceful like Dorisse, but her hair was much darker, almost black. She made all of her own clothes and was majoring at school in home economics.

"Hello, Nobby," Jane said in a frightened whisper when she woke up and saw him standing beside her.

Nobby did not say anything, but he came closer. Jane drew the covers closely around her.

"What do you want, Nobby?" she asked quickly. Then

she sat up and looked at him fearfully in the dim light
“What are you doing here, Nobby?”

Nobby sat down on the bed beside her.

“I started out looking for a cigarette,” he told her. “You never know where you’ll end up when you start out looking for a cigarette, do you, Jane?”

“But, Nobby——”

“I’ve been thinking about coming in here to look for a smoke. I’ve had it on my mind for a long time.”

“But you know I don’t smoke, Nobby. I don’t have any cigarettes.”

“That’s too bad, Jane,” he said, laughing at her. “You ought to have some. You ought to always keep some handy in case I run out in the middle of the night. That’s a good thing for you to remember. Always remember that when I ask you for something, be sure to have it for me. That’s the best way in the world to make friends, Jane.”

“Nobby, where’s Dorisse?”

Nobby laughed at her. “I wouldn’t know, Jane. Forget it, will you?”

“But, Nobby——”

His reply was curt and commanding. “I said forget it, didn’t I?”

She hoped he would go away then, but, instead, he moved closer to her. Jane tried to move to the other side of the bed, but he leaned over and drew her back beside him.

“It’s always a good idea for a girl to have friends, Jane,” he said. “Didn’t you know that?”

She shook her head quickly.

Nobby leaned closer and began talking in a low voice.

“You’re getting to be better-looking all the time,” he said. “It’s no wonder they gave you a prize at the county fair instead of to some fat-bellied pumpkin. That proves

they had smart people handing out the prizes. As soon as I heard about it I got to thinking that I must have been missing something pretty special around here. I got to thinking about it on my way home tonight and decided I ought to do something about it. I've always heard you're apt to overlook something worth while close at hand. I guess that's what happened to me. I'm glad I woke up in time."

"Nobby, where's Dorisse? Why isn't she here?"

"Forget it, will you?" he said gruffly.

"But I want to know where Dorisse is, Nobby."

He laughed at her instead of answering. Once more she tried to get away from him, but Nobby pinned her down with the weight of his body.

"What are you doing, Nobby?" she said, trembling.

"What do you think?" he said, grinning at her.

Holding her breath, she shook her head.

"The hell you don't," he told her roughly. "You're no dumb cookie, with all your good looks. You know what it's all about, and then some. I'll bet you could show me a few things I might've missed."

Jane tried to pull her arms free, but Nobby gripped her more tightly than ever. She realised how helpless she was when she tried to struggle against him.

"You know what Dorisse would do if she were here now, Nobby," she said, thoroughly frightened.

"If I did know, it'd be useless information," he told her. "I don't give a damn what she'd do. She doesn't worry me. I can always handle her. I've got her eating out of my hand. She does what I tell her to do."

"But Dorisse——"

"Shut up about her!" he said angrily. "I told you I can handle her! I'm not scared of anything she can do!"

Jane felt helplessly weak when Nobby drew her arms backwards over her head and she knew she was not strong

enough to stop him. She began to cry, but after a while she became quiet when she realised that her tears had no effect on him. She began to struggle desperately.

"I like it when they put up a little bit of a scrap in the beginning," he said as he laughed at her. "But you'd better know when to stop and don't go too far. I don't have any use for a hell-cat. I cuff hell out of hell-cats."

"Please, Nobby——" she began.

"You can cut out the begging, too," he told her.

Jane lay tense and motionless for several moments, and then she suddenly screamed with all her might. Nobby had to release one of her arms in order to cover her mouth with his hand, and she managed to scream a second time before he could stop her.

"Shut up, you fool!" he yelled at her.

She began to kick and fight with all her strength. Nobby hit her on the face with his open hand just as she had once seen him strike Dorisse when her sister did something that had displeased him, and she knew then how Dorisse must have felt.

"Looks like you learned an act for yourself," Nobby said, breathing hard. He twisted her arm behind her head. "That act might take a prize in some parts of the country, but it won't around here. You're just trying to play hard to get. That doesn't fool me at all. I'm wise to all those tricks."

While he was talking, the hall door was suddenly thrown open, the light was switched on, and Grandpa Crockett came towards the bed as fast as he could. He was wearing his flannel night-gown and holding his heavy oak cane high over his head. His left hand gripped his long white beard. Just as Nobby looked around to see who had turned on the light, Grandpa's cane came down upon his back with a resounding blow. Nobby yelled with pain.

"You good-for-nothing rascal!" Grandpa said, drawing back his cane and jabbing the point of it at Nobby.

Nobby yelled again and leaped to the floor. He reached out and tried to grab Grandpa's long beard, but, before he could get close enough to grasp it, Grandpa jabbed the point of the cane into his unprotected stomach. Nobby, doubling up with pain and hugging his stomach with both arms, dropped to his knees. He knelt there yelling and cursing Grandpa with the same breath. Jane ran across the room and got behind Grandpa.

"You no-account scamp!" Grandpa said, fearlessly jabbing his cane at Nobby's head and body. "You ought to be run clear out of the country for this. I never did trust any man who wouldn't go to work and earn his own living. You're a low-down scoundrel. You're as worthless and no-account as they come."

"Shut up, you wrinkled old fool!" Nobby yelled at him. "It's none of your business what I do. I'll get even with you for this. You just wait and see, you bearded old bastard, you!"

"I knew nothing good would ever come of you the first time I laid eyes on you," Grandpa told him. "Your kind is a troublemaker and all you ever do in the world is cause misery for others. If I had my way about it, I'd put you out out of this house once and for all."

"If I ever get my hands on that bale of whiskers, I'll yank you from one end of the town to the other," Nobby said threateningly. "What I do is none of your business."

Grandpa thrust the point of the cane at him again and Nobby hastily crawled away from the prodding cane and got behind a chair for protection. He crouched there, glaring, while he cursed the old man. Grandpa, taking no chances, was careful to keep at a safe distance, but he continued to make jabbing motions at Nobby with the cane.

Jane was clinging to Grandpa when Dorisse ran into the room. She knew at a glance what had happened.

"Get him out of this house, Dorisse," Grandpa said, pointing his cane at Nobby behind the chair. "Get the good-for-nothing scoundrel out of this house before something else dreadful happens. He's not fit to live in the house another day."

"He's a nosy old fool, that's what he is," Nobby yelled out. "He had no business busting in here like he did."

With a sob, Dorisse ran past Grandpa and Jane and went to Nobby behind the chair. She helped him to his feet and walked protectingly between Nobby and Grandpa while she was taking him to the door. After they had gone to their own room, Grandpa, still gripping his long white beard with his left hand, sank into a chair. His heavy cane clattered to the floor.

Nobby sat down on the bed, holding his head in his hands. Dorisse knelt in front of him and nervously tore open the packet of cigarettes she had brought him. She was beginning to cry a little, but she managed to light one of the cigarettes and place it between his lips before tears blinded her. Sobbing, she threw her arms around him. Nobby puffed on the cigarette and looked out of the window.

"Why did you do that, Noble!" she said in an anguished voice. "Oh, why did you, Noble?"

Nobby continued to sit on the bed in silence while he stared through the open window and drew jerkily on the cigarette. A layer of tobacco smoke began to float over their heads.

"Why do you do that way, Noble?" she asked beseechingly. "Don't you know how much it hurts me? I'll do anything if you'll only stop treating me this way."

"Shut up and stop preaching at me!" Nobby said. "You make me tired."

Dorisse was silent for a long time before she spoke again. She looked up into Nobby's face.

"We've just got to have a home of our own, Noble," she pleaded. "We've just got to move away from this house and have a home of our own. I can't bear this any longer, Noble. I just can't. Don't you see how awful it is for me? I don't care what kind of a place we have to live in, just so it's all our own and there's nobody else there. If you'll do that, Noble——" She began to sob and it was several minutes before she could say anything else. Nobby tried to pull her arms away, but she held to him desperately. "Noble, please get some kind of a job and rent a house for us. Can't you understand how much it would mean if we had our own home? I'll do anything in the world you tell me if you'll only let us have a home of our own. I don't care what it's like, inside or outside. I'd rather live in a tent or under a tree than have to stay here another day. Won't you go to work, Noble, for my sake? Please say you will. That's all I'll ever ask for as long as I live."

Nobby shook her off and got up. He picked up the packet of cigarettes and lit a fresh one from the butt pinched between his fingers.

"You're crazy," he said, not looking at her. "Everything's free here. It doesn't cost a thin dime to stay here. Why should I break my back at a job just so I can pay house rent and buy groceries? I'm staying right here. I know when I'm well off."

"But this's not our home, Noble. We'll never be completely happy until we have a home of our own."

"Shut up!" he said. "I'm tired of all this nagging. One of these nights I'm coming home with a big wad of money and then you'll be sorry you nagged at me. You'll be crawling on your knees begging me to go out and get some more. I know all about you women. You don't care how a guy gets

money as long as he hands most of it over to you. Well, just wait and see how much of my wad you get."

Dorisse fell across the bed. "Dear God!" she cried. "Please help me! I can't stand it any longer! Please help me before it's too late!"

Nobby's face flushed with anger. He came to the bed and reached down and grabbed her by the arm, jerking her over on her side. While she sobbed, blinded with tears, he hit her on the face with his open hand as hard as he could.

CHAPTER THREE

IT WAS TWO O'CLOCK in the morning and a heavy dew had settled upon the ground when the hounds caught their third possum. A new moon was rising over the oak ridge. Chism was feeling in fine spirits after such a good night's hunting, and he scraped together some dry oak leaves and brush and built a fire at the edge of the grove. He was already thinking of all the nights he would be going possum hunting that winter with the three hounds and he disliked the thought of summer ever coming again. He broke up an armful of dry limbs and soon had a fire burning briskly with yellow flames leaping as high as his head. He and Jarvis stood back and watched the fire for several minutes and then they squatted beside it and warmed themselves thoroughly. Chism had fed one of the possums to the hounds, and they lay in a circle around the crackling fire, stretching their leg muscles comfortably from time to time and occasionally groaning and twitching with satisfaction over the meal they had eaten.

Chism poked a stick into the fire. Sparks went spinning upward through the smoke and then disappeared abruptly from sight.

"I swear, I don't know a single thing on the topside of the world I'd rather do," he said with a sigh, "than go possum hunting in the fall of the year and sit around a good fire in the early hours of the morning. I'd rather drop dead than miss such as this. It sort of makes a man feel like just plain living is the only worthwhile thing in life, after all. I might be apt to change my mind about some things, but possum hunting won't be one of them. You hear a lot of

talk about the good things of life, but for my part possum hunting is the best of them all. The one thing in life I live for is to follow the hounds and everything else is a blame nuisance. The bottom can drop out of the world and everything can go plumb to hell, and I'll still be a possum-hunting man till the day I die. I want you to remember that all your life, Jarvis, and when you hear people blessing me out for not doing what they want me to do, you'll know I can't help it no more than a rooster can keep from growing a comb."

They squatted in silence around the fire after that for the next half-hour while they watched the leaping flames and glowing embers and listened to the baying hounds of other possum hunters far over the hills. Almost every dry night during the remainder of the winter season, hunters would be tramping over the country and following their hounds. Jarvis had become sleepy earlier in the evening, but now he was wide awake and he hoped his father would not want to go home any time soon. It was the first time his father had taken him possum hunting and he did not want the night ever to end. It made him feel close to his father for the first time in his life and he wanted to grow up to be like him and have lots of possum dogs like Liz, Rocky, and Margie. He felt a tingling sensation run through him each time he thought of being there alone with his father and the three hounds so far from home and having a campfire they had made themselves. The rest of the world beyond the circle of campfire light seemed like a strange faraway land. He swallowed a lump in his throat and moved closer to his father. Chism lit another cigarette on the glowing end of a stick of firewood.

"Papa," Jarvis said, moving closer and pulling at his father's arm, "Papa, why don't we move back to the country and live like we used to?" He looked up into his father's face, fascinated by the flickering firelight on his

weather-tanned skin and bushy black eyebrows.

The realisation of what Jarvis had said awoke Chism from his drowsiness. He leaned forward and spat noisily into the fire.

"Why don't we, Papa?" Jarvis asked persistently. "I liked living on the farm a lot better than living in town. Everything's so dried up and there's nothing much to do, like driving home the cows and going fishing after school and things like that. That's what I like. Me and you could go possum hunting just about every night in the whole year, if we lived in the country like we used to, couldn't we, Papa?"

Chism threw another handful of sticks on the fire. He watched the flames leap upward, making no effort to say anything right away.

"What's the matter, Papa?" he asked, pulling at his father's sleeve.

Chism shook his head.

"Don't you want to move back to the country, too, Papa?" Jarvis said. "You liked living in the country better than in town, didn't you?"

Chism took out paper and tobacco and made another cigarette before he said anything. His hand was trembling a little when he lit the tobacco.

"Where'd you ever get a fool notion like that in your head?" Chism said, scowling at the fire.

"I don't know, exactly," Jarvis said, frightened by his father's gruffness. "I only said I liked living in the country best. I can't help liking it."

"Have you been listening to your grandpa?"

"I've heard him talk about it, but all he said was that he liked the country, too."

"Why'd you think I moved away from there in the first place?" Chism said angrily.

Watching his father's face, Jarvis shook his head and said he did not know.

"Because I don't like the cussed country, that's why. I like living in town."

"You mean you're never going to move back to the farm?" A feeling of disappointment came over him as he watched his father's stern face. "Never, Papa?"

"No! Hell-fire, no! You've been paying too much attention to your grandpa. Quit listening to what he says. He's getting so old he don't know what he's talking about half the time. Now, you get that fool notion clear out of your head and forget all about moving back out there. I've heard all of that I want to hear. We're going to be city folks from now on." He kicked at a piece of firewood with the toe of his shoe. "When you grow up, you can open a little store in town. That's what I've always wanted to do."

"I don't want to, Papa. When I grow up, I want to move back to the farm. I want to have me a lot of horses and a tractor and things like that. I could raise cows and hogs, too, just like we used to do before we moved to town. And I want a lot of possum dogs, too. That's what I want when I grow up."

Chism did not say anything after that. He spat into the fire after a while and got up and went to the car. When he came back to the fire, he took a flat pint bottle from his pocket. Jarvis had seen his father drink from a whisky bottle many times before and he thought his father would take a quick drink and put the bottle back into his pocket. Instead, however, Chism opened the bottle, carefully wiped the mouth of it with the palm of his hand, and thrust it at Jarvis. Jarvis had smelled the sickening fumes before and he had often wondered what the beady white liquid tasted like. He looked at the bottle in his father's hand fearfully.

"What're you going to do with that, Papa?" he asked, moving away from it.

"It's time for you to be a man enough to take a drink," Chism said, pushing the bottle into his hand. "How old are you, Jarvis?"

"Eleven-going-on-twelve," he replied with a catch in his throat. "Why, Papa?"

"That's what I thought," Chism remarked, nodding. "That's plenty old nough. You'll never be a man till you can take a drink from a bottle. Go ahead now and swallow it down. It'll do you good, and it's time for you to know about it. There're some other things it's time for you to know about, too. Anybody who grows up in the city ought to know about all there is to know. That's one of the good things about living in a town. You can do a lot of things you never get a chance to do in the country. Now, go on and drink some of it like I tell you."

"What—what is it?" Jarvis asked, trembling.

"It's only corn liquor. It won't bite you."

"I'm scared, Papa," he whimpered.

"You're fussing around like an old woman," Chism said chidingly. "Do you want to be a sissy all your life?"

Jarvis quickly shook his head.

"Then go on, like I tell you."

Jarvis lifted the bottle slowly while rising fumes filled his nostrils and burned the inside of his head so painfully that his eyes watered. In another moment he felt sick in his stomach and he quickly shut his eyes and turned his head away in order to escape the odour. He was afraid to drink the whisky, but he wanted to prove to his father that he was enough of a man to swallow it.

"What makes you jerk your head around like that?" Chism said, nudging him in the ribs. "Quit that squirming around and holding your head away and go on like I told

you. You can hold your nose the first time if you want to. That'll help. Go on now and do like I say. I don't want no boy of mine growing up and acting like an old woman. Hold your nose, now, and drink down a good swallow of it like I told you."

Holding his breath and pinching his nose as tightly as he could, Jarvis raised the bottle and filled his mouth with the liquor. As soon as he could shove the bottle away, he thrust it at his father. Then, with both eyes squeezed shut, he tilted back his head slightly and allowed some of the burning liquid to trickle down his throat. Chism watched him to make certain that he did not try to spit it out on the ground.

"Go on and swallow it," he urged Jarvis. "Swallow it down and quit that fussing around like an old woman." Chism clutched his shoulder and shook him violently. Jarvis gulped, and to his surprise the whisky went down his throat. He felt as if he had swallowed a cupful of boiling water. "That's the way to do it," he heard his father say with satisfaction. "The first time's always the hardest."

Jarvis opened his eyes momentarily. He caught a glimpse of his father holding the bottle to his own mouth and drinking the whisky while his Adam's apple bobbed up and down. As soon as he closed his eyes he felt a rising sensation deep down in his stomach. He tried to make the sick feeling go away by holding his breath, but he soon realised there was nothing he could do to stop it. He lurched forward and whisky spewed from his mouth. A moment later he felt his head hit the ground with a thud.

The next thing he knew after that he was stretched out on the ground beside the fire and his father was squatting beside him with the bottle in his hand. He whimpered a little when he saw his father's stern face in the flickering firelight. He tried to crawl away, but Chism caught him by the arm and made him sit up.

"What are you doing, Papa?" he asked weakly.

"The only way to cure a gun-shy dog is to keep on shooting off a gun till he gets used to it."

"I don't want any more of that stuff," he said, making a face. "Please, Papa, don't make me!"

Chism held the bottle directly before his eyes. Suddenly and desperately he tried to knock the bottle from his father's hand. Chism immediately slapped his face so hard it made his ears ring. He could not keep from crying after that.

"Please don't make me drink any more of that stuff, Papa," he begged. Tears were running down his face and he could not make them stop. He tried to wipe them away with the back of his hands. "I don't want to taste that stuff, Papa! I hate it! Please don't make me, Papa!"

"Shut up!" he heard his father yell at him. "I've heard enough of your fussing. You're going to do what I say. If the first drink makes you sick, the only cure for it is taking another one. I know what I'm talking about. Now, sit up here like a man and take a good stiff drink like I tell you. I don't want to hear no more of this bawling about it, neither. You're acting worse than an old woman."

Jarvis tried not to cry after that, but he could not make himself stop. He felt miserable and he hated his father. He had never before felt so sick, either. He wanted to run away and never see his father again. Suddenly he rolled over on his side and tried to get away. Chism caught him by the arm and pulled him back. Once more he shut his eyes as tightly as he could and tried to keep from smelling the nauseating odour. Chism was shaking him until his whole body ached.

"Please, Papa, don't make me do that," he begged weakly. "I don't want to. I don't like it. It makes me sick. I hate it, I tell you! I hate the stuff!"

"You're going to drink it if it takes me all night to get it down you. I ain't fooling one bit about it, neither. I've heard enough of all this whimpering and bawling over it. Now, go on like I tell you and drink it down before I get mad."

"Papa, I won't never say another thing about moving back to the farm if you don't make me drink it. Honest, Papa, I'll never say it again as long as I live."

Chism locked his arm around Jarvis's neck and thrust the mouth of the bottle between his teeth. He held the bottle in the boy's mouth while Jarvis squirmed and kicked in a frantic effort to knock the bottle away. When his father tried to pry his teeth open with the mouth of the bottle, the pain was so great that tears again filled his eyes. Most of the whisky was spilled on his jacket and trousers, but a portion of it went down his throat. When the bottle was almost empty, his father released him. He could see his father turn up the bottle and drink the remaining whisky. After that he tosed the empty bottle over his shoulder into the darkness.

Jarvis lay on the ground beside the fire while the flickering flames died down to glowing red coals. Every once in a while he opened his eyes to see where he was. His head was beginning to feel dizzy and his father's stern face gradually receded farther and farther into the blank darkness beyond the camp fire. He was no longer crying and he wondered how long he had been on the ground.

After a while Chism stamped out the fire with his feet and called the hounds to the car. Jarvis was hoping his father would go away and leave him there alone, when he heard his name being called from somewhere off in the distance. It sounded so far away that he felt it was useless to try to answer. He closed his eyes happily and imagined he was back on the farm where they had once lived and he was

helping his mother feed the chickens. There were some turkeys and ducks running with the chickens and he had to keep the gobblers from getting all the cracked corn. He tried to get up and shoo them away, but his legs had no feeling in them and he could not stand up. He yelled at the gobblers as loudly as he could, but they paid no attention to him. He thought he heard somebody calling him, but he was so busy feeding the chickens and trying to keep the turkeys away that he did not have time to answer. All at once he felt somebody shaking him roughly, and he opened his eyes and saw his father standing over him. He called frantically for his mother, but she had left and was no longer there to make his father stop hurting him. He began to cry.

"Get up from there and quit that bawling," Chism told him roughly. "We're going home now."

He did not want to go home, and he closed his eyes again to keep from seeing his father's face.

He had barely closed his eyes when he felt himself being jerked upright. He was shoved forward, and he went stumbling blindly into the darkness. After that he was lifted into the front seat of the car. Presently cool breezes were blowing against his hot face and he opened his eyes and saw his father beside him. They drove over the rough road until they reached the highway, and after that the old car rolled smoothly over the pavement. Once he wanted to jump from the car but he felt too tired to move. Nothing was said during the ride home, but Chism watched him from the corners of his eyes. The three spotted hounds were curled up on the back seat, tired and sleepy after the night's hunting.

When they drove up the alley and stopped beside the shed, Jarvis was asleep. Chism tried to wake him, but he lay stretched out on the seat and would not wake up. Chism finally carried him to the porch and put him down on his feet. Jarvis fell against the wall while his father was turn-

ing on the light and he did not try to open his eyes again until he was shaken roughly.

"We're back home now, son," his father said, still shaking him. "You can go to bed now if you want to. It's pretty late already. It's about five o'clock."

Chism led him through the hall to the bedroom. Grandpa Crockett turned over when the light was switched on and lifted his head from the pillow. He gazed at them sleepily while Chism was undressing. Jarvis was wandering aimlessly around the room and making no attempt to take off his clothes. Presently Grandpa, clutching his long white beard close against his chest, sat up in bed.

"What's the matter with Jarvis, Chism?" he asked with concern. "He's acting peculiar."

Chism continued undressing. "Go to sleep, Pa," he said.

Jarvis suddenly fell against the table. He tried to get to his feet after that, but he could not raise himself from the floor. Grandpa put his feet into his slippers and sat on the side of the bed looking first at Jarvis and then at Chism.

"I smell corn liquor," Grandpa stated accusingly. He sniffed the air suspiciously several times. "I'm sure of it. Chism, if that's what's wrong with Jarvis——"

"He's all right," Chism said, yawning. "Just let him alone and it'll wear off. Go on back to sleep, Pa."

Jarvis, still struggling to get to his feet, suddenly laughed in a high-pitched voice. Grandpa hurried to him and lifted him from the floor.

"The boy's drunk, Chism," Grandpa said excitedly. He carried Jarvis to the bed in the corner. "You're responsible for it. You had something to do with it."

"Leave me alone," Chism said, falling into bed. He pulled the covers over his head.

Grandpa, hurrying as fast as he could without his cane, crossed the room and jerked the covers from him.

"You went and gave the boy whisky, Chism," he said angrily. "That's what you did. Anybody can see what's the matter with him. He's drunk. And at his age, too. I never thought I'd live to see the day when my own son would do a damnable thing like that. There's nothing wrong with possum hunting itself, but you've gone and made it an evil thing. You ought to be whipped for this, and if I had the strength, I'd do it. You deserve it. Any man deserves that and worse who'd give his child whisky."

Holding his long white beard against his chest, he raised his right hand and shook his fist at Chism. There were tears in his pale-blue eyes as he turned and looked at Jarvis sprawled on the bed in the corner. "I can't stand seeing things like this much longer," he said weakly to Chism. "I'd rather be dead so I wouldn't know about it."

"Hell-fire, I know what I was doing," Chism said, sitting up in bed. "I've heard enough from you. It's none of your business what I do. This's my house. If you want to stay in it, you'd better keep your mouth shut about what's none of your business. I don't have to take that kind of talk from nobody."

Jarvis got out of bed and was moving unsteadily towards the door. Grandpa hurried across the room.

"Jarvis, come on back to bed," Grandpa said to him kindly. He put his arm around him and took him to the corner.

After putting Jarvis to bed, Grandpa lay down beside him. The light was still burning. Chism, grumbling, got up and turned it off. Dawn was beginning to brighten the room when he got back into his bed.

"I wish you hadn't done it, Chism," Grandpa said from the other side of the room. "I'd give anything if it hadn't happened at his age."

“Maybe I wouldn’t have done it if he hadn’t started talking about that cussed farm,” Chism said. “I made up my mind to shut him up about it before another day came around.”

CHAPTER FOUR

JANE AND DORISSE were the first to get up and they were in the kitchen cooking sausage and hot-cakes and making coffee when Grandpa came in and sat down with a weary sigh at his accustomed place at the table. The mornings in October were always chilly and he had put on his old grey cotton sweater for the first time that autumn. Grandpa looked older and more frail than they had ever seen him look before and his pale-blue eyes blinked with unconcealable sadness. He sat in silence, not even saying good morning as he usually did when he first walked in, and gazed sorrowfully out of the window at the early morning dew sparkling in the sunlight while he held his long white beard close to his chest.

Dorisse ran to him and put her arms around him and hugged him until he turned away from the window and looked up at her. Then for a moment he smiled.

"What's the matter, Grandpa?" she asked tenderly as she pressed her cheek against his face. "Is it about what happened last night? I've asked Noble to——"

"Yes, Dorisse, about that," he spoke up quickly, at the same time patting her arm, "and about Jarvis, too."

"Jarvis?" she said, stepping back and looking at him in surprise. "What about Jarvis, Grandpa?"

He took a firmer grip on his beard. "Your father took Jarvis possum hunting last night and gave him some corn whisky."

"What, Grandpa!" She shook her head. "Papa did that!"

Grandpa nodded sorrowfully.

"You mean Jarvis was—was drunk?"

He nodded his head briefly and then turned and gazed out of the window once more. Dorisse sat down in a chair and covered her face with her hands. Jane, who had been listening to everything that was said, left the stove and sat down on the other side of the table.

Dorisse took her hands from her face. "Do other people have awful things happen to them—like we do—or are we the only ones, Grandpa? Is life like this for everybody else?"

Grandpa stroked his beard several times. "I hated to upset you like this, Dorisse," he told her as kindly as he could, "but you and Jane have to know about such things."

"Of course, Grandpa. I understand. You had to tell us. It's just that so many awful things have happened to us since Mamma died. It was never like this as long as she lived."

"It does seem that way," he said, shaking his head slowly from side to side. "There's nobody to take her place." He shook his head again. "Chism——"

Jane looked across the table at her sister. "Do you remember the last thing Mamma said before she died, Dorisse?" she asked. "I think about it every day. I'll never forget it as long as I live. A lot of times it's the first thing I think of when I wake up in the morning and at night I lie awake remembering exactly how Mamma looked when she said it. It's so real it hurts." She turned her face away and looked out of the window for several moments. When she turned around again, her eyes were damp with tears. "Mamma said, 'I want all you children to have the good things of life,' and then that was all. She didn't say another word after that."

Jane stopped and closed her eyes. Presently Grandpa reached across the table and patted her hand.

"What did Mamma really mean by that, Grandpa?" she asked him, looking straight into his eyes. "What are the good things of life? How does anybody know what they are? It's not living like we do, is it? Isn't it a lot different than living like this? Then Nobby treating Dorisse the way he does and Papa getting Jarvis drunk and Vickie being what she is and all the awful things like that—Mamma meant she didn't want such things happening to us, didn't she? She must have, because she meant the really good things, and all those things are bad."

"It's not easy to name the good things, Jane, because there's no name for some of them. It's something you feel deep down in your heart most of the time, and you know it's there even though you can't find a name for it. Some people would call it God, I suppose, but I think it's much more than that. It's like being kind and thoughtful, and striving to be honest and truthful. For some people it might be having a lot of money and living in splendour and not knowing what want is. For others it might be having the ability to make life better for the rest of the world. Some people would say it was having a fine education, while others might say it meant nothing more than kindness and consideration. No, it's not easy to name such things. Every person has to find his own meaning of the good things of life. Some day you'll know what they are."

"I know Vickie's doing one of the bad things," Jane said. "It's disgraceful the way she lives."

"Don't criticise your sister too harshly, Jane," he begged her. "Vickie's a good girl. She'll grow up to be a fine woman some day."

"Well, Mamma wouldn't let her live like she does, if she were here."

"And you'll grow up to be a fine woman, too, Jane, if you'll always remember to do what you think she'd want

you to do. Having a mother like Alice is one of the good things you'll always have. She left an everlasting impression on you, and that will always help you decide between the good and the bad. Your mother loved each of her children so much that she worked herself to death to keep you well dressed and to give you a good education and to train you for the good things of life. She'd be with us now if she'd had half the help she deserved. She earned the money to send Ross through law school by sitting up and sewing at night after everybody else had gone to sleep. I know all about that, and a lot of other things she did for you children. Your father could have helped a lot, but he didn't."

Jane got up and put her arms around Grandpa. "When you talk like that, Grandpa, you make life sound so beautiful that it's hard to believe all these awful things could happen to us."

Grandpa stroked her hair with his rough hands.

"You'll be late if you don't hurry, Jane," Dorisse told her anxiously. "It takes ten minutes to get to school, and you haven't been late this year. Please hurry."

Jane tightened her arms around Grandpa. "I don't ever want to go to school again."

"Yes, you do, too, Jane," he told her firmly as he lifted her to her feet. "Going to school and getting an education is one of the things your mother had in mind. You know that. She'd want you to go, Jane."

She hugged her grandfather once more. Then, gathering up her books from the table, she left the kitchen and ran through the house to the street. Dorisse refilled Grandpa's cup with hot coffee from the stove and sat down beside him. They sat together in silence for a long time.

"I'm going downtown to talk to Ross," Dorisse said at last. "I'm going to tell him about Jarvis. I hope he can do something to keep Papa from doing a thing like that again."

It's dreadful to think what he might do next. Ross ought to know about it right away. He's been worried about us ever since we moved to town." She stood up. "I'm going right away, Grandpa."

She cleared the dishes from the table before Grandpa said anything.

"What are you going to do about your husband, Dorisse?" he asked solemnly. "That's important, too. He shouldn't stay in this house after what happened last night. That's a harsh thing to say about your husband, Dorisse, but it must be said. We can't let anything happen to Jane."

"I'm going to try to talk to Noble, Grandpa," she told him earnestly. "Things like that would never happen if we had a home of our own." She paused and looked out of the window for a moment. "I mean, I hope things like that wouldn't happen. Sometimes I'm not so sure any more." She closed her eyes tightly and then turned away. "But I'm going to make my marriage last, at any cost."

"A happy marriage can be one of the good things of life, Dorisse," he told her.

She left the kitchen before he would have an opportunity to say anything more about Nobby and went to her room to get ready to go downtown. Nobby was still asleep and she was careful not to make a sound while she changed her dress. It was almost nine o'clock when she left the house, and Jarvis and her father still had not got up.

Ross was not surprised to see her walk into his office and carefully close the door behind her, but he was surprised to see her at that time of morning. Ross was a junior partner in the law firm and his name had not been incorporated in the firm's name on the front of the building. However, his name was on his office door in small neat letters, and the senior partners had told him that he would be taken into the

firm in a few more years. Ross was twenty-seven and unmarried and lived alone in a two-room apartment in the northern section of town. He was the elder of the five Crockett children. He was tall like his father but otherwise resembled his mother in appearance.

"What's Nobby Hair gone and done now?" he asked his sister in a joking manner when she had seated herself in one of the leather chairs in front of his desk. "I'll bet I know what you want this time, Dorisse." He frowned with pretended professional astuteness. "You want to tell me how you can get along with Nobby. Why can't you and Nobby get along together? There're millions of couples in the world engaged in domestic cohabitation, and the great majority of them manage to get along somehow from year to year without murdering each other. Why can't you and Nobby? He's just a big overgrown boy who continually reminds himself that he was once a small-time football star. He'll never amount to anything as long as he holds on to that childish attitude. The thing for you to do is to jar him out of his little world and make him realise that high-school football teams have a crop of new and better heroes every fall. I used to think I was pretty good myself when I played on the high-school team, but I had my conceit jolted out of me when I failed to make the scrub team at college."

"I didn't come to talk about Noble this time, Ross," she said uneasily. "I'm going to try to get Noble to get a job and find a place for us to live so we won't have to stay at home any longer." She leaned forward in the chair. "This's something else, Ross, and it's very important."

Ross's manner changed completely. "What's wrong, Dorisse?" he asked with concern.

She took a deep breath before she told him.

"Papa took Jarvis possum hunting last night," she began tensely. "When they came home sometime early this morn-

ing, Jarvis was drunk, Ross. Grandpa saw him. He said Papa gave Jarvis corn whisky to drink."

Ross was stunned. "Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "Are you sure, Dorisse? Are you positive?"

"I believe Grandpa. Wouldn't you, Ross?"

"I've never doubted his word yet," he agreed.

"I didn't see Jarvis myself, and I'm glad I didn't. Grandpa said it was almost daylight when they came home."

"Jarvis is only eleven years old," Ross said as he looked at his sister. "That's bad. It's real bad."

"What can we do, Ross? Isn't there some way you can persuade Papa to leave town and go back to the country to live? Things like this never happened when we lived on the farm." She stopped and looked down at her hands in her lap. "But Mamma was alive then. That made all the difference in the world."

"The last time I tried to talk to Papa about moving back to the country he got angry and walked out. I don't know how to talk to him now. Sometimes I think he's covering up the real reason for moving to town. Anyway, something's going on that we don't know anything about. I wish I knew what it was."

"I just know that the next time he takes Jarvis off with him at night that it'll be something even worse."

"Papa's never been the same since Mamma died," Ross said thoughtfully. "I can't figure it out. I don't know whether it's because he went all to pieces over losing her, or whether the unaccustomed freedom went to his head. But, as I said, it may be some entirely different reason. He's always been at odds with Grandpa. It's strange how quickly he talked Grandpa into deeding the home-place to him as soon as Mamma died, and then turned around and traded it for that poor excuse of a house here in town. It all took place so quickly that I didn't know about it until it was too

late. I could've found a flaw in the title to the farm or something, and held up the transaction indefinitely if I'd known what Papa was up to. He was so anxious to leave the farm and move to town that he closed the deal without letting me know what he had in mind. He knew I'd have stopped it."

The door opened and Chism walked in. He stood there for several moments scowling suspiciously at Ross and Dorisse before he picked up a chair and carried it across the office to the window. Then he sat down, tipping the chair backwards on two legs, and smiled through tight lips.

"What do you want, Papa?" Ross asked him.

"I know what you two're talking about," he stated with a confident nod of his head. "When I got up a little while ago, I found out from your grandpa what was going on. I made him tell me. That's why I hustled down here like I did."

He turned his head, chuckling to himself, and smiled at Dorisse as if to say he would never be outsmarted by her.

"And I ain't going to do it," he stated emphatically.

"Do what?" Ross asked him.

"Move back to the cussed country like you two've been trying to find a way to make me, that's what. I'm here to stay, and I'm going to hold on like beggar-lice to wool pants. A man's got a right to make up his own mind what he wants to do, how he wants to do it, and when he wants to do it. I don't need me no forty-dollar lawyer to tell me that. I was born with that much common sense, and I ain't lost a squirt of it in forty-eight years, neither. I'm just a common ordinary everyday man, with a little streak of good in me and a little streak of bad, like anybody you'd meet walking along the street. There's lots of people like that in the world and I just happen to be one of them. You wouldn't walk up to a stranger and bless him out for being

what he is, and I want to be treated like everybody else. If any of you want what you haven't got, then get out and get it, but don't bless me out for not wanting the same thing you want. I do a little possum hunting now and then, and some day I'll have me a little store. What more does any ordinary man need than being satisfied with his lot in life?"

He crossed his legs and made himself comfortable in the chair. "Now, about Jarvis. Just because I took the boy off possum hunting and gave him a little nip out of a bottle ain't nothing to fly off the handle about. Possum hunting wouldn't be nowhere near what it is if a man couldn't go off in the woods at night away from the womenfolks and take himself a drink or two. That's all part and parcel of it, and everybody knows it. The boy's got to grow up to be a man. I ain't going to have no boy of mine bossed around by the womenfolks and teeter-tottering old men."

"But, Papa, Jarvis is only eleven," Dorisse said. "He's a baby yet. You know that."

"I took some of the baby out of him last night, and I aim to take a heap more out of him the next time."

Ross and Dorisse looked at each other helplessly. Chism smiled when he saw their concern.

"That's the trouble with the world," he said. "Everybody and his brother thinks he knows what's good for the other fellow to do, but he don't do much about improving his own self. Now, Dorisse, if I was you I'd get busy on Nobby Hair and do all your improving on him. Nobby Hair can stand a heap of it. I'm getting pretty blame tired of the way he lives off me. Make him go out and get a paying job, and if you can't do that, up and leave him for somebody who'll support you. I don't know a sorrier sight than a good-looking woman who can't get a man to support her. You deserve a better man than Nobby Hair, anyhow. He

ain't so much for a girl with your looks to cry over. You can set yourself up in life a heap better than that. Get yourself a hard-working man who brings in some money every Saturday night. A man can be as ugly as sin itself, but if he provides for you, you've got what every woman needs."

"Papa, we're going to move to a house of our own," she said hurriedly. "Noble's going to work."

"Yeah?" Chism said sceptically. He took out paper and tobacco and began making a cigarette. "If you say that many more times, you'll begin to believe it your own self, won't you? I wish I had a week's rent out of Nobby Hair for every time I've heard you say those very same words. I'd drop dead if I saw Nobby Hair doing anything harder than moving a goose feather from one hand to the other. I swear I would."

Dorisse got up and went to the door. "I'd better go now, Ross," she said hurriedly. "You talk to Papa."

After she had left, Chism avoided looking directly at his son as long as he could. They sat there in silence, each waiting for the other to speak first. Chism finally got up and dropped his cigarette butt into an ash-tray.

"Why do you want to stay in town, Papa?" Ross asked him earnestly. "It'll be better for everybody if you'd move back to the country. You know that."

"I'll tell you a good reason why," he said promptly. "I'm proud of you, son, and I want to stay around and see you get to be a big man in life. I wouldn't be at all surprised to see you get to be governor or somebody big like that some day. I know you've got it in you. It's just a matter of time, and keeping company with the right people who'll do you the most good. Don't be ashamed to take a little political job in the beginning, because the bigger you are the better you'll look in a little job, and first thing you know the people'll be saying they want to see you doing something

more important and they'll send you right to the top of the heap before you know it. That's human nature, son. The worst political flops in the country have been politicians who tried too hard, and showed it. Just act like you're willing, and keep company with the right politicians, and the people will take care of the rest for you."

Ross smiled self-consciously. "My ambition is to become a good lawyer, Papa. I'd rather make good at law before I begin getting political aspirations."

"There's been durn few lawyers on the topside of the world who've turned up their noses at a good political job. There'd be a mighty poor future in practising law if there wasn't politics to look ahead to. Practising law provides the bread and coffee, but it's politics that furnishes the butter and cream for them every morning."

Ross opened a drawer and took out a large envelope. He opened it and spread several papers on the desk before him. He did not say anything until he saw his father's curiosity was aroused.

"While I think about it, Papa," he began casually, "I want to tell you about a matter that I'm handling for a client. This client's been engaged in lumbering in a small way, and he wants to dispose of his interest for reasons of ill health. I think I could arrange for you to buy him out at a reasonable figure. He has a large tract of land about ten miles from town and there's a small sawmill on the place. It's got all the earmarks of a good investment."

"How much ploughland is there around this sawmill you're talking about?" he asked suspiciously.

"I don't know exactly," Ross replied, bending over the papers. "There's some, of course. Anyway, you wouldn't want to farm all of it. Just enough to——"

"If I had to plough one measly furrow between now and the time I die, it'd be more cussed farming than I'd do in

my right mind. Now, if you'd been talking about a little store somewhere in town——"

"But the important thing is the sawmill itself, Papa. There's a lot of money to be made in lumbering these days. I wouldn't be surprised if——"

"I wouldn't be surprised if you ain't trying your damndest to trick me into moving back to the cussed country where I'd have to farm some crops."

"Well, you'd probably want to live near the sawmill where you could keep your eye on it, but as for actual farming——"

Chism got up and stretched. After that, he walked without haste to the door.

"Will you think about the sawmill, Papa?" Ross asked as he followed his father across the office.

"If I do think about it, I'll be mighty much surprised if I think any different than I do right now. I wouldn't even want to think too long about a gold mine if it had ploughland around it."

CHAPTER FIVE

IT WAS SHORTLY BEFORE MIDNIGHT when Representative Daniel Boone Blalock and two government engineers, who were making a watershed survey for a congressional appropriations committee, came into the Rainbow Café and ordered porterhouse steaks and French fries. Vickie was leaning on the counter talking to Ben Humphrey when she recognised the congressman. Ben had been trying for half an hour to make a date with her, but she was no longer interested in what Ben had to say when she saw Daniel Boone Blalock. After a few minutes Ben got up and walked disappointedly from the restaurant.

Pauline, the other night waitress, was getting out a clean tablecloth and napkins but, before she could take them to the table where Dan and the two government engineers had sat down, Vickie snatched them from her and began arranging the table. Pauline, who was ten years older than Vickie, was plain-looking and overweight, and the moment Vickie took the linen out of her hands, she ran crying to the washroom and locked the door. Nick Dopolous, the owner of the Rainbow Café, hurried to the washroom door and begged her to come out and wait on two customers who had just come in and were sitting at the counter. Pauline cried louder than ever and refused to open the door, and Nick had to wait on the customers himself.

"It's awfully good to see you again, Mr. Blalock," Vickie said brightly. It was the first time she had ever spoken to Dan Blalock in her life and she tried to conceal her nervousness by bending close to him and casually pressing her hip against his arm. "I didn't know you were in town, Mr.

Blalock. Have you just arrived? Will you be here long?"

Dan leaned back in his chair and looked up at her with aroused interest. A pleased smile spread over his ruddy, round face.

"This is indeed a pleasant welcome," he said affably as his eyes followed the movement of her body in the tight-fitting yellow and white uniform. Dan was a large fleshy man in his early fifties and he was imposing in appearance. His features, especially his nose, were small and feminine, and his hands likewise, but his face was full and florid. He had been representative from the congressional district for five terms and had been re-elected for his sixth term the previous autumn without serious opposition. During his many years in office no loyal supporter of his had ever been denied a reasonable request and it was generally said that Daniel Boone Blalock would create a position in the government for a loyal voter if the appeal were sufficiently urgent. When Congress was not in session, Dan travelled through his district day after day and week after week shaking hands with the people, making himself known to the children, and sampling opinion on matters most likely to come up for a vote in Congress so that he would be in a position to vote intelligently on the issues.

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Mr. Blalock?" Vickie asked him with an enticing smile. She had a way of boldly meeting a man's glance and then slowly averting her eyes as though she were afraid of the consequences of allowing herself to look at him for too long a time.

"I wish you'd ask me that," one of the other men spoke up, shaking his head with a forlorn expression.

Dan beckoned for Vickie to come closer, and when she bent over and allowed her ear to brush against his lips, he whispered to her, "You're too good-looking to waste your time on them," he told her in a confidential tone. "There

are a lot bigger fish in the ocean than either of those two mackerel."

"Why, Mr. Blalock!" she said demurely as she hastily backed away from him. "I'm surprised that you'd say such a thing to a girl like me!"

The two engineers from Washington, whooping with laughter, pounded on the table with their fists while Dan Blalock, chuckling until his whole body shook, smiled and winked knowingly at Vickie.

She left the men while they continued to laugh and went to the washroom to re-touch her lips and powder her face. When she came out several minutes later, Pauline, scowling darkly, met her at the end of the counter.

"Vickie Crockett, you're nothing but a cheap flirt," Pauline said meanly. "No decent girl would ever think of doing the things you do."

"You mind your own business," Vickie told her, pushing past her. "I don't need advice from you."

Pauline reached forward and tried to get a grip on Vickie's hair, but Nick, who knew by past experience that he had to watch the two girls closely at a time like that, hurriedly got between them and sent Vickie to the far end of the counter to wait on a customer. Just then Dan Blalock, waving his hand over his head, called Nick.

"Marvellous steaks tonight, Nick," Dan told him with an expansive gesture. "Don't know when I've tasted better."

"That's fine, Congressman," Nick said, bowing and smiling. "I always try to have the best for you, Congressman."

Dan flipped his napkin at some crumbs on his vest. "I'm always delighted when I have the opportunity to come to town and eat a bite at the Rainbow Café," he continued, as though he were ignoring an interruption during a debate on the floor of the House. "You always take the best care of

me and my friends, and I appreciate it deeply, Nick. It's a genuine pleasure to dine on one of your excellent porter-house steaks at the Rainbow Café." Dan accepted a cigar from one of the engineers. "Moreover," he said as he inspected the wrapper on the cigar, you're to be congratulated for having such a charming young lady serve us. Her presence here tonight has made this meal a memorable experience."

Nick, with hands clasped over his stomach, bowed his head up and down several times. Dan, meanwhile, had pushed his chair away from the table and turned his back to the men from Washington. Then, motioning for Nick to come closer, he whispered into his ear.

"My friends and I are going to have a little night-cap in my room at the hotel," he said confidentially, carefully lowering his voice in order not to be overheard. "I'd like to have you and the charming lady join us, Nick."

"I'd sure like to come, Congressman," Nick replied in a nervous voice, "but I can't leave the café. There'd be nobody here to cashier for me. I couldn't afford to go off and leave the business untended. You know how it is, Congressman."

"Of course not, Nick," Dan said sympathetically. "I wouldn't think of urging you to desert your business under those circumstances. However, it is a keen disappointment just the same, especially since I've been thinking of some way whereby I could show my appreciation for such an excellent dinner." He reached up and caught Nick by his coat lapel. Then he continued in a whisper. "I'd feel deeply honoured if the young lady—you know the one I mean, of course—would consent to join me. I'm staying around the corner at the Southland. Room 505. Tell her to use the side entrance."

"Sure, Congressman," Nick whispered with a quick nod-

ding of his head. "Vickie can go, I'll tell her about it. The other waitress can take care of the customers till Vickie gets back."

"Now, wait a minute, Nick," Dan said, tugging at his lapel. "I don't want you to put her on a time limit. This is a social visit, you know. Tell—er, Vickie, tell her I'll be expecting her in about fifteen minutes. Room 505. And don't forget to tell her about using the side entrance, Nick."

One of the engineers paid the check, placing a fifty-cent tip on the table for Vickie, and carefully made a notation in a small red book. Dan, noisily clearing his throat, shoved the coin back at the engineer and took a dollar from his own pocket and placed it beside his plate. Then all three of them got up and shook hands with Nick. Dan turned and waved to Nick as they went out of the door.

Nick did not say anything to Vickie until she had cleared the table. Then, while Pauline was waiting on a customer, he called Vickie to where he was sitting on the high stool behind the cash register.

"The Congressman's having a little party around the corner in the Southland," he told her casually. "He's in 505. He said to tell you he'll be expecting you in a few minutes."

"How much are you going to take out of my wages if I go, Nick?" she asked pointedly.

"Well, I don't know exactly. It all depends. He's a good customer. But if you stay too long, we might have to get together and talk about making it up some way."

"How long is too long, Nick?"

"Well, I don't like to be pinned down."

"Neither do I, Nick, so why don't you expect me when you see me?"

"Well, that's your business, Vickie," he told her expressionlessly. "But if you don't come back tonight, we'll have

to do something about making up all that lost time, or else take it out of your pay."

"You'd better go ahead and take it out then, Nick, because I've got a feeling I won't be back tonight."

"You're not thinking about quitting work entirely, are you, Vickie?" he asked worriedly. "I don't know where I'd get another night waitress if you quit."

"What made you think I was going to quit?"

"Well, he's a big man, Vickie. He's important. He can do a lot for you, if he wants to."

"Then that's another reason why I won't be back tonight," she said, laughing as she walked towards the wash-room.

After carefully brushing her hair and taking off her uniform and putting on her street dress, she left the wash-room and walked towards the front door. Pauline, who had suspected that Vickie was leaving to meet Dan Blalock, was standing behind the counter.

"What some women will do for a pair of second-rate nylon stockings!" Pauline commented in a loud voice. "I hope you get a run in them the first time you put them on!"

Vickie heard her plainly, but she walked straight to the door without giving Pauline the satisfaction of seeing her turn and look back over her shoulder. Nick, with a newspaper spread over the cash register, continued reading and did not look up until Vickie walked past him and was starting through the door.

"Vickie," he called, looking up momentarily from the newspaper, "the Congressman said for you to use the side door at the Southland."

"I've been to the Southland before, Nick," she said without a change of expression.

Nick went back to his reading as she walked out into

the street. After that she hurried around the corner to the Southland.

It was a fairly new and modern six-storey brick hotel with chintz draperies over the lobby windows and running ice water and a stall shower in every room. Walking rapidly past the front entrance, she entered the side door and went across the hall to the elevator. The negro boy who operated the elevator at night was asleep, and she had to shake him until he woke up. When they reached the fifth floor, the boy stood in front of the elevator and watched sleepily while she searched the hall for 505.

After tapping lightly on the door, she quickly patted her hair and smoothed her skirt. Dan Blalock, as though he had been waiting with hand on knob, opened the door immediately. She was surprised to see him wearing bright-green silk pyjamas, thinking for a moment that she had knocked on the wrong door, but she was even more surprised when she stepped into the room and did not see the other two men there. Dan quickly locked the door and put his arm around her.

"Why, Mr. Blalock!" she said, pulling away from him a little and looking innocently into his round florid face. "I thought there was going to be a party—I mean, with other people. Where are your two friends, Mr. Blalock? Why aren't they here?"

"As a matter of fact, I had hoped to be able to persuade them to join us, Vickie." He put his hand on her shoulder and stroked her soothingly. "But do you know what happened? They got sleepy. They're not accustomed to being up much after sundown, I guess." He laughed at what he had said. "But let's not worry about that," he said, giving her a tight hug as he took her across the room. "We'll have our own little party, won't we, Vickie—just you and I and nobody else. It's a lot more cosy this way, now isn't it?"

Vickie laid her bag on the table and took the glass that Dan offered her. It was a short medium-sized water-glass about a quarter full of amber-coloured bourbon whisky. Dan's glass was almost half full. He watched her but made no comment when she closed her eyes tightly and drank some of the bourbon. After that she sat down on the bed, fascinated by the sight of his well-tailored bright-green pyjamas.

Dan pulled the table with the bottles and glasses to the side of the bed and sat down beside her. After taking another drink he leaned back on his elbows and appraised her leisurely.

"You are an exceptionally good-looking girl, Vickie," he said, nodding with satisfaction. His voice had a way of gradually sinking deep down into his chest as he spoke, causing the end of his sentences to sound like a hoarse whisper, flat but emphatic and impressive. "I noticed that as soon as I saw you in the Rainbow Café. Your beauty overwhelmed me, as it undoubtedly would any normal red-blooded man, I am reluctant to say. It's not often that I have the good fortune to meet such a charming young woman. You don't know how much it pleases me that you came here tonight. I was feeling very lonesome this evening. A man in my position leads a discouragingly lonely existence. It's a difficult life—you might say a form of existence forced upon me in defiance of all the laws of nature. Here I am all alone in my congressional district while my wife, who is somewhat elderly and of a retiring nature, anyway, is in Washington. It's my duty to return to my district periodically and talk to the people about their problems, but living as I do is an inhumanly lonely existence, devoid of true friendship and congenial companions."

Vickie pushed herself backwards across the bed until she could lean against the head-board, and then she made her-

self comfortable and crossed her legs under her skirt.

"Why don't your friends sit up with you, Mr. Blalock? I mean, the men at the Rainbow Café tonight?" She put her hand on his and squeezed him comfortingly while she smiled engagingly. "I feel sorry for you, if you're really so lonesome, Mr. Blalock. I really do."

"Call me Dan, Vickie. Just plain Dan."

"I still think your friends ought to sit up with you and keep you company, instead of going off to bed like they did."

"Friends?" he said with a weary toss of his head as he moved closer to her. "I have no friends, Vickie. A man in my position doesn't have what an ordinary mortal would call friends in the true meaning of the term."

She watched him, spellbound by the sound of his voice as it sank hoarsely into his chest each time he reached the end of a sentence.

"No, Vickie. I have political alliances, obligations, and existing and potential enemies. But not a true friend in the whole wide world, because that's the price a man in my position pays for public service to his country. A congressman's life is a thankless thing. You can't have friends and be able to further the welfare of your country at the same time. That's why politics is an unappreciated profession, past, present, and future."

Dan moved closer and laid his head on her lap. Vickie stroked his bald head with a slow lingering movement of her fingers. Dan murmured appreciatively.

"The only time in my life when I can relax and give myself up to ordinary human wants and desires," he said hoarsely, "is when I can lock myself in a hotel room with a bottle of whisky and a congenial female companion whose beauty dazzles the eye and whose temperament warms the heart. I can't go out in public, like normal men do, and play

a game of golf, or go duck shooting, or merely sit in the lobby of a hotel, without being constantly on guard against political connivance and chicanery. If I forget myself for a single instant and make the most innocent-sounding comment without first weighing both its immediate and ultimate consequences, both at home and abroad, I would sooner or later utter some remark that would bring down upon my head the entire structure of my political career and, perhaps, bring about the downfall of the party itself. Yes, I carry upon my shoulders a grave responsibility that extends far beyond my own personal political career. That's why I say the only peaceful, relaxing, and humanly happy moments of my life are granted me when I'm behind locked doors and drawn shades in a hotel room like this with a few quarts of good bourbon and a congenial female companion who inspires me as you have done. You may not realise it, Vickie, but you have made it possible for me to face the problems of the world tomorrow with greater confidence."

"But, Mr. Blalock, you're such an important man, and I thought all important men——"

"Please call me Dan, Vickie. Just plain Dan."

"Well, anyway, Dan, I thought you were having a wonderful time tonight with the other men at the Rainbow. You laughed a lot, like you were having a good time."

"Front, Vickie, pure falsified unadulterated front. Beneath the surface was a gnawing hunger for congenial female companionship, such as you have so graciously come to offer me. All the time I was sitting there I was thinking to myself how relaxed and happy you'd make me up here in my hotel room. Maybe you don't realise it, Vickie, but your presence here is a godsend. I was a weary, lonely man before you crossed the threshold of that door a few minutes ago, and now——"

He put his arms around her and drew her close. "What

can I do for you, Vickie?" he asked, his voice dropping hoarsely into his chest. She fingered the fringe of hair on the back of his head. "What would you like as a token of my esteem, Vickie?"

"This's so sudden, Mr. Blalock—Dan, I mean. I hadn't even given it a thought. Just knowing you and making your acquaintance is all any girl should want. I've never known an important man like you before, and it's so thrilling just to know that you like me. I'd feel awfully embarrassed about asking you for even the littlest thing."

"You mustn't feel that way about me, Vickie. I expect to be asked for something. It's customary. Is there some member of your family—your immediate family, of course—that I could do a favour for? A brother, or a sister, or——"

"There's Ross," Vickie said promptly. "Ross might like——"

"Ross?" Dan said. "Who's Ross?"

"Ross Crockett, my brother. He's a lawyer, and he——"

"Crockett. Lawyer. Ross Crockett." Dan shook his head. "I don't believe I've had the pleasure of meeting him. Or hearing of him, either. Is he a newcomer to the profession?"

"His office is on Courthouse Square and he works awfully hard and he's only been out of law school two or three years. I'm sure Ross would appreciate anything you did for him, Dan."

"I'll certainly make it a point to look him up," Dan said. "What about your father? Is there anything I could do for him, Vickie?"

"Papa?" She stopped and thought for a moment. "It would be a big help if you could do something for him. Then I wouldn't have to give him ten dollars every week out of my pay."

"What is your father's business or occupation?"

"He doesn't have any. But he used to be a farmer."

"I'll certainly look into the matter, Vickie," Dan promised. "Now, what about yourself? A lovely girl like you——"

"Would it be too much to ask for a ring, Dan?"

"What kind of a ring?" he asked hoarsely.

"Well, just something with a diamond in it," she whispered, pressing herself into his arms. "I've always wanted a diamond ring, Dan."

Dan took a deep breath and, after holding it as long as he could, expelled it with the sound of a prolonged groan. After that he got up and poured bourbon into their empty glasses.

CHAPTER SIX

WHEN HE HAD finished eating dinner, Chism slammed on his hat, pulling it down over his head with a jerk at the brim, and strode ill-humouredly to the back porch. Dorisse, Jane, and the others were still at the dinner table, and he stood in the darkness listening glumly to the sound of their voices and watching the lights in the neighbours' houses. Grandpa Crockett had talked for what seemed like half an hour about the difference in flavour and texture between a country-cured and a store-bought ham, and both Dorisse and Jane had watched their father across the table with accusing glances. The meal that night was field peas boiled with side-meat. Chism had not said a word during the whole time he was at the table, and he was still angry. He made up his mind there and then to go somewhere that night so he would not have to sit in the house and give them an opportunity to make more pointed remarks about how well they had lived on the home-place.

Chism was still mumbling to himself when he heard Jarvis leave the table and come through the hall, and he promptly went down the steps and started across the yard in the direction of the shed at the alley. Jarvis, slamming the screen-door loudly, ran across the porch and caught up with him before he could get out of sight.

"Papa, are you going possum hunting again tonight?" Jarvis called out breathlessly. When he felt Jarvis tugging at the bottom of his jacket, he slapped at the boy's hand and tried to make him go away. "Can I go with you, Papa?" Jarvis asked persistently. "Can I, Papa?"

"I wasn't studying about going possum hunting tonight,"

he said crossly, trying to make Jarvis go away with an impatient motion of his hand. "Go on back in the house and stop bothering me now."

Dorisse came to the back porch and called Jarvis several times. He was about to answer her when he looked up at his father. Chism, watching Dorisse on the porch, shook his head.

"I know you're out there, Jarvis," Dorisse said indignantly as she tried to see him in the darkness. "Don't you dare go off anywhere tonight." She stood there peering helplessly towards the alley. "You tell Papa I said I don't want you to go off anywhere. Don't you dare leave the yard. Do you hear me, Jarvis?"

Jarvis watched his father standing silently above him. Presently Chism shook his head and walked away.

While Dorisse was calling again, Chism went on towards the shed, walking faster and with greater determination. Jarvis hesitated for a moment, and then he ran and caught up with his father. They did not stop until they reached the alley.

"Where're you going tonight, Papa?" Jarvis asked him in a low voice. "I want to go with you, Papa. Can I, Papa? I don't have to stay at home like Dorisse said, do I?"

"You know the big fuss they made the last time I took you off with me," he said, watching Dorisse on the porch. "Every last one of them raised hell-fire about it." He spat on the ground. "They act like they've got the right to run the whole world. I've got as much right to say what you can do as they have."

He leaned against the corner of the shed and looked at the lights shining through the windows of the houses across the alley. Jarvis moved closer to his father, holding tightly to the bottom of his jacket, and waited for his father to say whether he could go off with him. He had already made up

his mind that he would drink a little of the whisky without protest this time if his father told him to.

"Jarvis!" Dorisse suddenly called in a loud voice. "I know you're hiding somewhere out there in the dark. Come on back in the house this very minute like I tell you. Do you hear me, Jarvis! I don't want you going off with Papa, no matter what he says. Don't you dare go off somewhere with him. Do you understand, Jarvis? Don't you dare go off with Papa!"

Chism could feel Jarvis tugging at his jacket.

"Do I have to do what she says, Papa?" he asked in a whisper. "I don't have to go back in the house, do I?" He began pulling at Chism's jacket harder than ever. "I want to go where you're going. I don't have to obey her, do I?"

"No," Chism said firmly. "You don't have to obey her. I'm your pa. You stay here. I don't like the way they're always fussing and trying to have their way about everything. It's time to put a stop to it."

Dorisse called Jarvis several times more. Finally, she gave up and went back into the house. Jarvis looked up at his father as soon as she was out of sight.

"I want to be like you, Papa," he said. "I want to do everything you do. I'm not going to fight about it the next time you tell me to drink some whisky."

Chism looked down at Jarvis. "They've got so they treat everybody around here like a scoop of cussed dirt, and I'm getting plenty tired of it." He kicked resentfully at the ground. "It gets worse all the time, too. It looks like they'd let me alone and stop nagging about that cussed farm. Hell-fire! To hear them talk, you'd think farming was God's own glory. I know a lot better than anybody else what I want in this world."

The spotted hounds in the shed began whining to get out. Chism had fed them just before dinner and locked

them up for the night. All three of them were scratching on the door.

"I want you to grow up and be a real man, son," he said, looking across the yard at the light coming from the kitchen window. "You listen to me. Maybe I ain't so smart about some things, but I'm smart enough to know what I'm talking about now. I don't want no boy of mine growing up and not being able to take care of himself in the world. I've made up my mind about that. If I was to die right now or something, they'd take you in hand and make a sissy out of you in no time. That's why I want you to listen to me and learn to take care of your own self in this world. You pay attention to me after this, Jarvis. Your grandpa and the rest of them don't know how to rear you like I want you to be. I'm your pa. You do what I say from now on."

When he finished, he walked out to the middle of the alley. Jarvis stayed close at his side.

"I've got a notion," he said. "Come on."

"Where're we going, Papa?"

"Never mind," Chism told him. "You come on with me."

Chism began walking rapidly down the alley towards the street just as Dorisse came to the back porch again and called Jarvis. With a firm grip on his father's jacket, Jarvis ran along beside him, hoping his father would not change his mind and make him go back to the house. In a few minutes they could no longer hear Dorisse, and they crossed the first street and went down another alley until they were at the railroad tracks. Chism stopped and looked around for some familiar landmark until he saw the tall brick stack of the leather tannery. Then they turned away from town and went several blocks along the railroad right-of-way, passing several oil storage tanks and a lumber yard. A block beyond the lumber yard a spur track branched off the main line and ended at a low one-storey warehouse a short

distance away. After looking around carefully in order to be sure that he knew where he was, Chism started walking down the spur on the cross-ties until they were about a hundred feet from the warehouse. Chism stopped, looked around again, and then sat down on the end of one of the ties. Jarvis huddled close to him, trembling with excitement, and wondered why they had come to that section. A yard locomotive chugged slowly up the main line towards town.

Chism took out his tobacco and made a cigarette. When it was finished, he lit it quickly, carefully shielding the flare of the match with both hands. He puffed on it several times before flicking away the ash with his finger. Then he looked down at Jarvis.

"You don't have to tell anybody about coming down here tonight," he told Jarvis. "Men do a lot of things they don't tell the womenfolks at home about. If you want to go around with me, you'd better remember that. The next time I go off, I might not let you go along."

"Why're we sitting here, Papa?" he asked, trembling.

"You just wait and find out. There's always plenty going on, if you know where to look for it. That's what we came down here for, and you just be patient. Now, tomorrow morning I don't want to wake up and hear the whole house making a fuss about it. I'll whale the daylights out of you, if you don't keep your mouth shut about some things. Nobody'd ever known about you taking a nip the other night, if your grandpa hadn't woke up and made a big fuss about it. You remember that from now on."

They sat there for the next half-hour, during which time Chism turned and looked up the spur every few minutes. He had rolled several cigarettes while they were sitting there in the dark, puffing nervously on each one until it had been smoked down to a small butt pinched between

his thumb and forefinger. Jarvis became more curious as time went on, and he wanted to ask his father again what they were going to do, but he was afraid to ask a second time.

Presently he saw Chism stamp out the cigarette and get up from the cross-tie. Somewhere in the darkness he distinctly heard the crunching sound of footsteps on the cinders.

"You stay here till I come back," his father whispered to him.

He was too frightened to make any reply, and when he saw his father walking rapidly away, he began crying. It was at that moment that he saw the figures of two negro girls in the dim glow from the street lights a block away. The girls stopped when they saw Chism coming towards them, and then they turned and started running back towards town. Chism overtook them before they could get away. Jarvis stopped crying and tried to hear what his father was saying to them. Occasionally one of the girls said something, but they spoke in such a low tone of voice that nothing was understandable. After a while Chism and the two negro girls came walking down the spur track. The girls were in front of Chism, saying nothing, but turning and looking back at Chism every few steps. They stared wonderingly at Jarvis as they passed. He jumped up and ran and caught up with his father, fearful that he would be left there alone in the dark. The girls walked faster and faster, treading lightly on the cinders and cross-ties, and Jarvis had to run faster in order to keep up. When they reached the warehouse, the girls stopped and looked back at Chism, and Jarvis saw the frightened expression on their faces for the first time. A single electric-light bulb was burning over the warehouse doorway and it cast a dim light upon a freight car, partly loaded with cottonseed, which

stood directly in front of the door. Chism motioned for the girls to go to the car. Still not saying anything, he indicated with a motion of his hand that they were to climb into the open door. Frightened and nervous, the girls hastily pulled up their dresses and climbed inside. Jarvis could not reach up that high, and Chism lifted him into the car. After all of them were inside, Chism sat down on a mound of cottonseed and made a cigarette in the light shining from the warehouse doorway. Jarvis sat down beside his father and watched the two frightened girls.

"What do you want us for, mister?" the taller of the girls asked in a quavering voice.

They were about eighteen or nineteen years old with straightened hair and light-brown skin. They stood close together in the middle of the car where the light fell upon them. Chism had heard the girl, but he said nothing. He finished rolling the cigarette and carefully shaped it with his fingers.

"You act like you've never been in a freight car at night before," he said, laughing at her.

"We sure ain't!" the girl told him emphatically. She was shaking her head. "You've got us all mixed up with somebody else, mister. We don't fool around with white men in no kind of place. That's the gospel truth, mister."

"Now I know you're telling a big lie. You know yourself nobody ever heard of a good-looking high-yellow who didn't like white men."

The smaller of the two girls began to tremble.

"What makes you girls act so scared?" Chism said, laughing at them. "What's there to be scared of?"

"We want to go home, mister, please," the tall negress said pleadingly. They moved closer to the door. "Please don't make us stay here, mister. We want to go on home where we belong."

"Get away from that door!" Chism yelled. He waited until they moved back to the middle of the car. "What's your name?" he asked the tall girl.

"Ruby."

"What's the other girl's name?"

"Ethelmae."

"Haven't I seen you both somewhere before?"

"I don't know about that," Ruby said. "You look like a strange white man to me."

"Where've you both been?"

"We work. We was just on our way home, minding our own business like we always do when you came along and made us climb in this old freight car."

"What kind of work?"

"Maid work."

"You work for white folks?"

"Yes, sir, we both work for white folks."

"Don't white folks always treat you good?"

"Yes, sir, the white folks always treat us fine."

"Then what makes you act so scary for now?"

"It's the white men, mister. They're the ones who make all the trouble for us coloured girls. You know yourself that's the truth, mister. It's the gospel truth."

"You won't get your elbows skinned if you act right around me."

"We'd rather go on home where we belong."

"There's no hurry about going home at this time of night," he said, laughing at her. "It's early yet. If you went home now, there wouldn't be nothing to do but sit around and twiddle your thumbs to pass away the time."

The two girls looked at each other with frightened glances. Ethelmae, the younger of the two, was slender and of medium height. Ruby was tall and fully developed.

"What'd you make us get in this old freight car for, Mister?" Ruby asked desperately.

"Why do you reckon?"

"I sure don't know what you're talking about, mister."

"The hell you don't. All you high-yellows know what white men want."

"You oughtn't talk like that to us, mister. We're good girls—both of us."

"Don't you try to tell me how I ought to talk!" he yelled at her. "I talk as I damn well please to high-yellow wenches. Now, strip off to your skin and quit answering me back."

"We ain't that kind of girls, mister," she protested. "We're good girls, both of us, and we want to go straight-way home."

"If I was to accidentally run across a goody-goody high-yellow, I'd drop dead, I'd be that taken aback," Chism said, tossing a handful of cottonseed at her. "I know all about you high-yellows. I haven't lived on the topside of the world this long without finding out all about them."

"You don't know about us, then, mister," Ruby said with a determined shake of her head. "We're good girls, both of us. We don't fool around with white men. Maybe some coloured girls do, but we don't. That's the gospel truth, mister."

"You keep on talking like that, and I'm going to get mad as hell about it," he warned her. "Now, take off your clothes. Both of you. Get naked in a hurry."

"What's that little boy doing here?" Ruby asked, looking down at Jarvis.

"Why do you reckon? He's here just like anybody else would be. Now, quit that quibbling and get naked like I told you."

"We don't want to get in no trouble, mister," she said

uneasily. "That little boy's too little to be fooling around. I'm scared, mister. Please let us go on home."

"If I have to go to the trouble of getting me a stick to whale the daylights out of you with, you'll wish you'd kept your mouth shut when you had the chance."

"I didn't mean to answer you back, mister, but I just ain't never seen a little white boy as little as him fooling around. It'd make real trouble for us if he went home and told his mamma."

Chism stood up. "He hasn't got a mother living. Now, quit this quibbling and get your clothes off like I told you."

Ethelmae was moving towards the open door, but Chism saw her in time to catch her before she could jump to the ground. He threw her on the cottonseed.

"I don't mind much about myself, mister," Ruby said, "but I wish you wouldn't make Ethelmae do what you say."

"Why not?"

"Because Ethelmae's only been married about a month and her husband wouldn't like it one bit. Why don't you please let her go on home, mister? I swear the gospel truth I'll stay and won't try to run off if you'll do that, please, mister."

"What difference do you think that makes? Her husband won't know nothing about it, unless she tells him. You go over there and tell her I said she'd better act right, or I'll get me a big stick and wham her till her husband or nobody else knows her by sight. Tell her I said if she don't act right, I can be as mean as hell about it. One more piece of back-talk out of either one of you, and I'll tell the Kluxers on you. They'll put you both in your place so fast you won't know straight up from crosswise."

"Is you a Kluxer, mister?"

"Am I!" he said, laughing at her.

Ruby went into the darkness of the car. It was several minutes before she came back.

"Is she doing like I told her?" he asked.

"She don't want to, but she is," Ruby replied in a sad tone. "I sure am sorry you went and made her. White men oughtn't fool around with coloured girls like they do. It ain't right, mister."

Chism rolled another cigarette and lit it. Then he leaned back on the mound of cottonseed and blew smoke towards the open door.

"Do you and Ethelmae come home this way every night?" he asked her.

"We've been doing it, but we sure won't no more," Ruby told him defiantly. "After this we'll sure go the long way around through town. I ain't never coming down that old side track again as long as I live."

Chism crushed the cigarette on the sole of his shoe and tossed the butt through the freight-car door.

"Hell-fire, that won't help you none after this," he told her with a chuckle, "not if I get the notion to find you again. I'll get you, somehow or other, no matter which way you go." He made himself comfortable on the cottonseed. "Next time I might be taking a fancy to Ethelmae. I'd be willing to put myself to a lot of trouble for a high-yellow like her."

CHAPTER SEVEN

A CROWD OF MEN had gathered in front of the post office and at first Chism thought somebody had started a fight, but when he got closer he saw Dan Blalock standing in the centre of the group and talking in his usual loud voice for the benefit of all who could hear him. There were a dozen or more men surrounding Dan, and Chism moved as far into the crowd as he could get. Dan was telling a long involved story about a farmer whose wife ran away with the hired man, gesturing and pausing to chuckle from time to time, but just when he finally got to the climax of the story, he lowered his voice to a hoarse whisper. Chism tried to shoulder his way closer, but he was still too far away to hear what Dan said. All the other men whooped with laughter, several of them slapping Dan on the back, and Dan, chuckling to himself, relit his cigar. Not wanting to be the only man in the crowd who failed to laugh at Dan's joke, Chism quickly joined in.

Just then somebody nudged Chism with his elbow.

"There's no man alive who can tell a story the way Dan Blalock can, now is there?" he said as he vigorously rubbed his hands together. "Have you ever heard him tell that one about the fellow who woke up in the middle of the night and asked his wife what day of the week it was? That's one of the world's best, the way Dan tells it. I could listen to Dan Blalock tell his stories from the end of one year to the next. He can pick up just any little old story, dress it up here and there, strip it down in a place or two, and end up making it sound like the doggonest one you ever heard in all your born days. I tell you, it takes a genius to do that."

"What was the story he was telling just now?" Chism asked him.

"Oh, you know that one about the fellow's wife who took all the quilts and ran away with the hired man early one morning and what she said when her husband asked her why she'd come hurrying back home before dark the same night. Everybody knows that one, but it sure takes Dan Blalock to tell it to a fare-you-well."

Dan's booming voice suddenly rose above the noisy hum of conversation in the crowd. Everybody stopped talking at once and pushed and jostled in order not to miss a word of the next story he was telling.

"Now that reminds me of a little incident that took place a few years ago down in the lower end of the county," Dan began. He turned slowly from one side to the other and grinned knowingly at the men in the crowd while his round florid face gleamed like a mirror in the bright sun.

All the men nudged one another and pushed closer in anticipation. Everyone had heard Dan tell the same story before, but their recollection of it, together with the prospect of hearing any slight variation of the tale, made them eager to hear Dan tell it again.

"Well, it seems that there was a young fellow by the name of Jeff Ransom who married a young widow of nineteen years who'd just buried her late husband only two weeks before. Being a simple country boy, Jeff didn't know much about——"

Dan stopped. The men waited silently for him to go on with the story. Raising himself on his toes he looked over the heads of the men a second time. Then, as though he had lost interest in the story, he hurriedly finished it. Chism could think of no reason why Dan Blalock would be staring at him like that, and he looked behind him to see who Dan could be looking at so intently. There was nobody behind

him. Apologising for having to leave to keep an appointment Dan pushed through the crowd to where Chism was standing. Chism hastily backed out of Dan's way.

He was startled when Dan grabbed his hand and shook it enthusiastically.

"You're Chism Crockett, aren't you?" Dan said as he linked his arm in Chism's and led him away from the crowd without giving Chism a chance to answer him.

They walked rapidly away from the post office. Chism was too surprised to say anything because it was the first time in his life that Dan Blalock had ever spoken to him and he wondered how Dan knew him by sight, or for that matter by name.

"This is indeed a fortunate turn of events, Chism," Dan was saying to him in a confidential manner. "Of all the people in the wide world, you're just the man I want to see. I asked about you this morning when I went to the post office, and I was afraid I'd have to spend the whole day looking you up. How have you been, Chism? Huh? How is your family these days? Everybody's up and about, I hope."

Chism swallowed hard. "The folks are fine," he said, glancing up at Dan's round florid face with a darted look. He ran a few steps in order to keep stride with Dan. "Are you sure I'm the right man you want to see, Mr. Blalock?"

"Am I sure!" Dan said in his booming voice, chuckling to himself, "Why, man, I'd count this trip back to my district a total loss of time and energy if I'd failed to have a talk with you."

"What do you want to see me about, Mr. Blalock?" Chism wondered what he could have done wrong that would bring Dan Blalock all that distance from Washington. He glanced up at Dan again. "To tell the truth, I've

been minding my own business pretty regularly, Mr. Blalock."

They walked across Main Street arm in arm while Dan nodded and waved his free hand to the men who spoke to him. Chism felt ill at ease in the company of a man as important as Daniel Boone Blalock and he wished he had put on a clean shirt that morning. He was wondering why Dan wanted to talk to him, when they reached the corner. Dan withdrew his arm from Chism's and relit his cigar. Chism took a step backward.

"I know you're wondering what I want to discuss with you, Chism, but first let's go where we can have some privacy. I don't like to talk over personal matters in public." He placed his hand on Chism's shoulder. "I'm sure glad I happened to look around and recognise you over there in front of the post office."

"What—what are we going to talk about, Mr. Blalock?"

Dan nodded his head significantly and started walking towards the Southland Hotel. Chism ran and caught up with him.

Nothing was said after that until they were entering the hotel. "Let's go up to my room where we won't be disturbed," Dan said, taking Chism by the arm and guiding him through the door.

They walked through the lobby while Dan nodded and waved to several men who spoke to him. Chism was shaking with nervousness by the time they reached the room on the fifth floor.

"Now," Dan said with an expansive gesture of his arms after they had gone into the room and closed the door, "now, let's have a little drink before we settle down to talking things over. There's nothing like having a friendly bottle to put everybody at ease. Here, try some of this, Chism."

Chism took the bourbon Dan poured into a water-glass for him and drank it down in a single gulp. He felt a lot better after that and he looked around for a chair. Dan carried his whisky across the room and sat down on the side of the bed. He raised his glass to Chism.

"Here's to more hair on your chest," he said as he drank the whisky. He then put the empty glass aside and lit a fresh cigar. "Chism," he said with a slow nodding movement of his head, "Chism, I want to extend my belated thanks for your loyal support over the years. I feel a sense of guilt for neglecting to give evidence of my heartfelt gratitude. I am well aware of the fact that I have no supporter in my district more loyal than you, and I don't want to let any more time go by without demonstrating my appreciation. It's men like you who have elevated me to a position of high trust and responsibility, not to mention honour as well, and I want you to know that I'm eternally grateful for your confidence in me."

"Why, that's all right, Mr. Blalock," Chism said. "I did vote for you a time or two, if I recall correctly, but somehow or other I just never got around to casting my ballot the last couple of elections. I'll sure vote for you the next time you run, though. You can count on that."

"It's good to hear you pledge your vote, Chism. I know I can rest assured of your support henceforth." He got up and poured more bourbon into their glasses. Chism promptly gulped his whisky down. "Pledges like yours are a great asset to a man like me," he continued. "It leaves me free to devote more time to the lawmaking of the country. If all congressmen could be assured of continued support back home from voters like you, we could devote a much greater proportion of our time to the pressing affairs of state. It's this continual necessity to run back and forth between Washington and the home district that throws a

monkey wrench into the smooth functioning of the government."

Dan finished his drink and placed the empty glass on the table. Chism began rolling a cigarette.

"Now, let's get down to the important matter at hand, Chism," Dan said with an earnest expression. "I believe I mentioned the fact that I wanted to do something to repay you in a measure for your support at the ballot box over the years, and I meant that with the utmost honesty. I propose to act promptly and decisively on the matter." He leaned back and puffed on the cigar while he watched Chism shape the cigarette he was making. He waited until Chism struck a match and lit it. "I am of the firm conviction that a man like you ought to be working for the government in some capacity, Chism. There's always been ample room in the government for a man with superior ability, and I'd like to see the government acquire your services and place you in a responsible position. Due to my own position, I'm fortunate in that I can arrange for just such as that. You've been a taxpayer all your life, you are a loyal supporter of the party, and—well, you are a defender of our way of life."

"I'd sure like to go to work for the government, Mr. Blalock, but right off-hand I can't seem to think of a single thing I'd be good at doing."

"Well, now, let's see," Dan said in a solemn manner. "You've had considerable farming experience, I assume."

"That's right. I farmed two hundred acres just about all my life, till I got hold of it and sold it and moved to town a year or so ago. Pa said I tricked him out of it, but all I did was get him to sign some papers one day, and then I went ahead and sold it. The reason I quit farming was that I got sick and tired of it and I vowed I'd never go back out there in the country no matter what——"

"But you do have a well-founded, practical knowledge of agricultural operations. Isn't that correct?"

"I reckon you'd say so."

"And you are familiar with local crop conditions. Isn't that correct?"

"I reckon so."

"And you recognise plant lice when you see them. Isn't that correct?"

"I'd be pretty apt to."

"That's all, Chism," Dan nodded with a beaming smile. "I was sure you'd have the necessary qualifications."

"I'm good at hunting possums, too," Chism spoke up. "I've been following the hounds the best part of my life, and I can——"

"Never mind," Dan said with a stern look. "I'm satisfied with your disclosures. Now, I happen to know that the Department of Agriculture has been granted an appropriation to expand its activities in the field of plant inspection and quarantine. Good men for this work are sorely needed. Would you consent to serve your country in this way, Chism? Of course, the salary is good, too."

"Would I?" Chism replied excitedly. "I can't think of anything better on the topside of the world than working for the government, and getting paid for it, to boot! I never thought anybody would let me do it, though. I always thought a common ordinary man had to have all the pull in the world to get himself a good government job that paid real money."

"Well, you know, Chism, we here in our part of the world like to do little favours for one another. It really makes life worth living. And it's all part of our way of life, you might say. It's a real pleasant existence peculiar to us folks here. I dare say that in other parts of the world—yes, even in distant and remote parts of our own country—such a

friendly attitude is totally unknown. But here it's different. A man helps out his neighbour in time of distress, and he in turn is not at all surprised when his neighbour turns around and gives him a helping hand when he most needs it. That's why I say we are all brothers down here. Yes, we like to do little favours for one another. It's truly our own peculiar way of life, God bless us, and it's a good one."

"You're right about that, Mr. Blalock. Everybody likes to do little favours for his friends and neighbours."

"Well, it's with the same neighbourly feeling that I want to do you this favour, Chism. I'll feel amply rewarded in knowing that I have your full support and confidence, as well as the co-operation of the members of your family of voting age, too. I don't feel it's right for a family to divide its political support. It's just not like us folks down here to divide a family's support of an office-holder any more than one of us would split the party ticket."

"Just wait till the folks at home hear about this," Chism said gleefully. "This'll make them sit up and take notice, when they hear I'm working for the government, and getting paid for it, to boot. They'll sure be surprised when they hear the big news. Pa and the rest of them ought to shut up about that cussed farm after this."

Dan got up and poured them both generous portions of whisky. After drinking his, Chism sat down in the chair again. He was beginning to feel unsteady on his feet, and when he attempted to roll another cigarette, all the tobacco spilled on the floor. Dan handed him a cigar.

"Now that we've settled that matter," Dan said, lowering his voice, "I'd like to ask a small favour of you, Chism."

"Mr. Blalock, I'd turn my pockets inside out for you now, after what you've done for me."

"I'd personally appreciate it, Chism," Dan said in a hoarse whisper as he leaned closer, "if you'd help me stamp out any

gossip that gets around about your daughter Vickie. You see, I invited a small group of friends here to my room the other night, and some busybody with no respect for my position or career has let it be known that Vickie was one of my guests. As a matter of fact, it was said that she was seen leaving my room at an early hour in the morning. A word from you, dropped here and there, would scotch a lot of gossip around town. I'd appreciate that. We ought to do all we can to defend womanhood."

Chism nodded. "I don't mind backing right up against you on that."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," Dan told him. "And I hope you will take pains to discredit any unfavourable gossip you might hear. You can understand why I can't afford to have my name linked with someone of the female sex. A politician has to be careful, you know. Vickie's a very fine young woman, and we folks in our part of the world must always be on the alert to defend womanhood. My statements to that effect are a matter of public record, and I always make it a point to clearly define my position on such an important question each time I have occasion to deliver a public address. We must never allow an opportunity to pass without defending the good name of womanhood to the utmost limit."

"When do you think I could start working for the government, Mr. Blalock?" Chism said. "You might as well know that I spent all the money I got from the farm and I'm flat broke. If Ross and Vickie didn't help out, we just wouldn't eat."

"I'll start the wheels turning without delay, Chism. It'll take a few days for me to get the necessary action taken, but you can rest assured in the meantime that I am diligently at work in your behalf."

Dan got up, swaying precariously on his feet, and flung

open the door. He had difficulty in maintaining his balance until he reached out and caught hold of the back of a chair for support. He stood there for a long time waiting for Chism to leave. Finally he went to Chism and shook him violently.

"Why don't you get up and go?" he asked, trying to focus his eyes on Chism.

Chism shook his head. "I'd rather stay right here and listen to you talk some more about the government job I'm going to get." He stood up and moved cautiously across the room to the table and helped himself to another drink. "It's been a long time since I've had all the bourbon I wanted. Let's just stay here, Mr. Blalock, and talk about one thing and another."

He poured himself another drink and handed the bottle to Dan. Dan poured the remaining whisky into his glass. There was barely enough left to cover the bottom of it, and Dan flung the empty bottle out of the window. He waited for the sound of the bottle crashing against the pavement below to reach him before he picked up one of the unopened bottles and began struggling with the stopper. While he was absorbed in opening the bottle, Chism flung his arm around Dan's neck.

"How's that story go you was telling over there in front of the post office? The one about Jeff Newsome and the young widow. What happened to old Jeff, Mr. Blalock?"

Before Dan could say anything, Chism stepped back and kicked him as hard as he could. Dan slammed the bottle on the table so violently that some of the glasses were knocked to the floor.

"I'll have you know I resent that, Crockett!" he shouted indignantly.

"Mr. Blalock, I was only trying to be friendly," Chism said with a meek expression.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE GAME BEHIND THE PARTITION in the rear of the pool-room had been running as usual since mid-afternoon. The place was unfurnished except for a high wooden stool, which was about five feet tall, and a long felt-covered table. There were several brilliantly coloured calendars on the wall, on all of which were pictures of nude girls in enticing poses. The only other objects in the room were half a dozen spittoons scattered around the unswept trash-littered floor. The window panes had been smeared with white paint to prevent anybody, walking down the alley, from looking inside, and, as always, there was a sickening stench of stale tobacco smoke in the unventilated room. Most of the regular players were usually at the table by four o'clock, and, during the late afternoon and evening, other men came in and played half an hour or longer at a time. The door to the partition was kept closed and locked, as only those who were known were permitted to enter.

Nobby had tried unsuccessfully for the past hour to borrow money from everybody at the crap table, and Vince Wood, the house-watcher who was perched up on the five-foot stool, had already nodded to him with unmistakable meaning several times. It was a hard-and-fast rule that when a man went broke, either he had to leave or else borrow money from a willing lender. Nobby realised that he would be forcibly thrown out any minute if he did not hurry and leave of his own accord. Vince Wood might also bar him from coming back again even if he had the money to play with, and Nobby did not want to run that risk. He

had lost forty dollars of his own money, which was all the money he had in the world and which included the lucky five dollars he kept in his watch pocket for a stake, and also the twenty dollars he had borrowed earlier that evening from Ben Humphrey in a desperate attempt to break his losing streak. Ben had refused to lend him any more, after losing fifteen dollars himself, and had gone back to resume his night-watch at the undertaking establishment. There was nobody else at the table who would listen to his plea for a loan and Nobby had become angry and glum. He spat resentfully on the floor, at the same time eyeing Vince Wood with a sullen glare. Vince lost no time in climbing down from the high stool but Nobby turned and walked out of the crap room before Vince could put his hands on him. Nobby knew he was a better pool player than he was a crap shooter, but the game fascinated him because dice made money turn over faster and in larger denominations, and every time he was ten or fifteen dollars ahead, as a result of betting on pool, he invariably went back behind the partition with the conviction that this time he would be able to win all the money in the game. Every time Nobby was in a game, Vince watched him very carefully. Nobby had once been caught in the act of palming the dice and Vince had warned him that if he ever did it again, he would be barred for ever from the crap room.

After leaving the crap game he walked slowly up the street with his clenched hands feeling damp and sweaty in his pockets and at the same time swearing resentfully under his breath at Vince Wood for making him leave the game because he was broke and likewise swearing at everybody in the game who had refused to lend him money. There was no use in his going down the street to the undertaking parlour and trying to persuade Ben Humphrey to lend him some more money, because Ben had told him loudly, and in

no uncertain terms, that he was not going to lend him another dollar until he had been repaid.

Nobby stopped at the corner and, his lips moving jerkily while he cursed in a loud ill-humoured voice, looked across the street at the brightly lighted movie theatre. It was about nine o'clock and the night was becoming chilly. The movies would not be over until eleven o'clock or later and there were few persons on the street at that time of the evening. He stood at the corner a while, hoping to see somebody who would lend him money, but after a few minutes he swore to himself and started walking up Main Street again.

When he was in front of the Rainbow Café, he stopped and pressed his face against the cold glass window, shielding his eyes from the glare of light with both hands, and looked for Vickie. He saw Pauline, the other night waitress serving a customer at the counter, and he was still looking for Vickie when Nick Dopolous came to the door and stood there watching him but saying nothing. Nobby backed away from the window and cursed him. Nick still did not say anything to him, and presently Nobby spat conspicuously on the sidewalk and went on up the street.

He could think of nowhere else to go, even though it was still only a little after nine o'clock, and he left Main Street and walked towards home. As he passed the Presbyterian Church he was swearing resentfully at Vince Wood, Nick Dopolous, Ben Humphrey, and everybody else he could think of.

When he walked into the house, Jarvis and Grandpa Crockett, surprised to see him come home at such an early hour in the evening, watched him as though he were a stranger. Nobby stuck out his tongue and made a face at Jarvis. Then, ignoring them both, he went to his room and slammed the door as hard as he could.

Jarvis ran to the kitchen to tell Dorisse that Nobby had

come home. She and Jane had just finished washing the dishes and were standing at the sink talking. Jarvis pulled at her arm to attract her attention.

"Nobby made an ugly face at me, Sis," he said. "He stuck out his tongue at me, too."

"What are you talking about, Jarvis?" she said, looking at him in surprise.

"He came home just now," Jarvis told her, motioning his thumb in the direction of their bedroom. "He sure acted like he was mighty mad about something."

"Are you sure Noble's here, Jarvis?"

"Of course I'm sure. I saw him as plain as day. How else would I know he made an ugly face at me. And he's mad about something, too. I could tell."

Dorisse glanced at Jane as she carefully dried her hands on the towel, but neither of them said anything. Then she hurriedly left the kitchen and went to her room.

When she opened the door and stepped inside, she saw Nobby sitting on the bed. He was sitting with his back towards her, leaning forward a little and holding his head in his hands. His hat was on the floor where it had fallen when he tossed it across the room.

She wanted to run to him and throw her arms around him and tell him how glad she was to see him, but she did not know what kind of a mood he was in and she did not want to do anything at a time like that which might make him angry with her. She took several steps forward and stopped before she reached the foot of the bed.

"Hello, Noble," she called softly, trying to restrain her eagerness. She stood there and waited until he looked around, and then she went to the bed and sat down beside him. "I didn't expect you this early, Noble," she said, still being careful. During the next few moments she studied the expression on his face. "Have you had anything to eat,

Noble? Do you want me to fix you something? It'll only take a few minutes. I'd like to get you something if you'll eat it." She waited moment after moment, but he still did not say anything to her. "Is there anything wrong, Noble?" she asked fearfully. What is it, Noble?" she begged. "Please tell me!"

He took out a cigarette and lit it nervously. She waited patiently beside him with her hands clasped tightly in her lap. Nobby flipped the burnt match across the room.

"I need some money," he stated, speaking for the first time.

She wanted to tell him that if he would only go to work he would have money, but she knew she should not say such a thing at a time like that. Instead, she put her hand on his arm and tried to make him look at her. Nobby shoved her away.

"I've got to have some money," he told her. "I haven't got a dime in the world right now. I'm flat broke. I want money right away."

"Noble, you know I'd give you anything I had," she said tenderly. She bent forward and tried to look directly into his face. "You know that, Noble."

"Then give me some money."

"But I don't have any, Noble. I have no way of getting money, unless you give it to me."

Nobby jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

"Then go get some from them."

"Grandpa and Jane don't have any. And Papa's not here now, Noble."

Nobby laughed to himself. "Hell, it wouldn't make any difference if he was here. Your old man wouldn't even blow smoke in my face if he thought I wanted a cigarette. He's never had any use for me since I told him I wasn't going out and stagger around all night in the dark while those

damn dogs of his chased possums. He's had a grudge against me ever since." He got up and walked across the room and back. "This's nothing to get funny about," he said morosely. "I want some money, and I want it in a hurry. Now, get busy and do something about it."

Dorisse could feel herself trembling under his unrelenting gaze. She sat tensely on the side of the bed while his unblinking eyes bored into her with a cruel ruthlessness. She gripped her clasped hands more tightly.

"Go on and do something about it," he ordered. "Don't sit there like a bump on a log. Get busy."

Obediently she got to her feet. "What do you mean, Noble?" she asked weakly.

"You know what I mean. Quit stalling. I want some money, and you're going to get it. Is that plain enough to suit you?"

She shook her head pleadingly. "But, Noble, where——"

"Where, hell! That's for you to figure out. I'm not doing your thinking for you."

"But I haven't the slightest idea where to——" She stopped and caught her breath. She tried to think what Nobby expected her to do. "Noble—how——"

"How does anybody get money? Where do you think it comes from? How does Vickie get money when she wants it?"

"But, Noble, you don't mean that." She shook her head helplessly. "You couldn't, Noble. You're joking—you must be joking, Noble."

"I'm not joking about wanting some money."

She felt relieved momentarily. She tried to smile.

"You know I couldn't do that, Noble," she said. "I was almost sure you were joking."

"Maybe that's what you think, but I don't because I mean it." He looked at her harshly. "You're going to get

cuffed if you don't shut up and do what I told you."

"But, Noble, you don't want me to go out on the street and beg!"

"I don't care how you get it!" he shouted at her. "Can you understand that?" He caught her by the arm and shoved her across the room towards the door. "Are you going to do like I told you, or are you going to wait for me to cuff you first?"

"Noble, please——" she cried, frightened.

He took a step towards her. "Shut up!" he shouted angrily. "I've had enough of that stalling!"

Turning her head and not looking at him again, she opened the door and walked through the house. Grandpa looked at her questioningly as she walked down the hall, but she would not allow herself to look in his direction. All the way to the street she tried to keep from crying, but when she was out of sight of the house, she was surprised to find that she no longer wanted to cry. She walked along the tree-lined street towards town telling herself over and over again that Nobby would never have made her do what she was doing if he had not been desperate to get some money. She wondered what would happen if she should turn around and go back without it, but the thought of Nobby's anger frightened her so much she tried to stop thinking about it.

She passed the Presbyterian Church and went down Main Street. She met several men, none of whom she recognised, who turned and watched her interestedly as she hurried towards the Rainbow Café. She disliked having to ask Vickie to lend her money, but she knew she had to ask her sister.

Vickie saw her when she walked in and sat down at the counter. In a few minutes Vickie came and sat down beside her and asked why she had come downtown alone at that

time of night. Dorisse told her that she needed ten dollars right away. Vickie looked at her for a moment and then laughed.

"You're not fooling anybody, Dorisse," she said with a shake of her head.

"What do you mean?"

"Nobby sent you out for it, didn't he?"

Dorisse nodded reluctantly. "Yes," she admitted.

"What happened? Did he go broke in the crap game?"

"I don't know, Vickie. He didn't tell me."

"I know more about Nobby Hair than you do, Dorisse. Nick said he saw Nobby about half an hour ago looking through the window, but he went away when Nick went to the door to find out what he was doing."

"That hasn't anything to do with it," Dorisse protested. "I don't want anybody talking like that about Nobby."

"It's got plenty to do with it, Dorisse," Vickie said. "What's Nobby Hair ever done for you, except make life hell for you? Why don't you leave him, Dorisse? You ought to leave him before something awful happens. You could go away and forget him and marry somebody else some day. Everybody in town knows how good-for-nothing he is and he'll never be able to get a decent job, even if he honestly wanted to go to work. You couldn't change him now no matter how hard you tried or what you did for him. He's gone too far for anybody to be able to help him. Leave him. Dorisse, for your own sake. I know what I'm talking about. Nobby's absolutely no good, and he'll drag you down with him if you don't leave him while you can. Please do that before something awful happens, Dorisse. Don't wait till it's too late. Now's the time to leave him. If you wait, it'll be too late. Don't fool yourself any longer."

"But I still love him," she protested, looking straight into her sister's eyes. "Don't you see, Vickie? I couldn't let

myself do anything to hurt Noble as long as I love him, and I suppose I'll always love him, no matter what he does. He's my husband. I know Noble does some terrible things sometimes, but I love him just the same. He'll be a different person when we can have a home of our own. I just know he will."

"I believe you really do love him," Vickie said helplessly. "You'd have to love him to put up with the way he treats you. There's no other explanation."

They sat in silence until Nick got up from his stool behind the cash register and walked towards them.

"What makes you girls so glum?" he asked them.

"It's nothing you'd know about, Nick," Vickie told him, waving at him to go away.

He looked at them closely before turning around.

"Anyway, you can't get off from work again tonight, Vickie," he said, shaking a finger at her and going back to the cash register. "Pauline's complaining about having to do too much of your work for you when you're out visiting around town. Now, you remember that, Vickie."

Dorisse waited until Nick was far enough away so he could not hear what she wanted to say.

"I don't know what I'm going to do, Vickie," she said despondently. "I've just got to get ten dollars tonight—I've just got to!"

"I'd bet ten dollars on something," Vickie said, looking at her sister.

"What do you mean?"

"I'd bet Nobby Hair came home and made you come downtown to get ten dollars for him, and then when you asked him how you could get it, he told you to get it any way you could. That's his kind."

"But he needs the money, and he didn't mean any harm."

"He made you come downtown, didn't he?" She watched

Dorisse turn her head away. "You don't even believe that yourself, Dorisse—that he didn't mean any harm."

"Just the same, I want to help him, Vickie. He needs help at a time like this. If you were in love, you'd want to do everything you could."

"God help me, if that's the way it's going to be," Vickie said, shaking her head.

She got up after that and went up to the front of the restaurant where Nick was sitting behind the cash register. She talked to him earnestly for several minutes, during which time he continually shook his head without looking up from the newspaper he was reading. Finally, though, Vickie said something else to him and he opened the cash drawer, ringing up 'No Sale', and handed her ten dollars. She signed her name on a pad of paper before she came back to Dorisse. Pauline, who had been standing at the far end of the counter, was watching them with an amused smile.

"I didn't think I'd ever do this for Nobby Hair," Vickie said as she sat down beside Dorisse and handed her the money. "But you can tell him for me that I did it for you, and not for somebody who makes his wife go out on the street and get money for him."

"Thank you, Vickie," Dorisse said gratefully.

She got up and walked quickly out of the restaurant without looking at Nick as she passed him. She walked rapidly up Main Street, carefully avoiding the glances and stares of the men standing on the corner, and by the time she reached the Presbyterian Church she was running as fast as she could.

Nobby was propped up in bed smoking a cigarette when she opened the door and came into the room. She stood there for a moment while Nobby watched her inquiringly. Then she ran to the bed and sat down beside him. She could see him scowling at her until she opened her hand and gave

him the money. His face brightened immediately. He took the money in both hands and felt the texture of the paper while a pleased smile spread over his face. He looked at the money again before stuffing it into his watch pocket.

"I didn't think you'd get it," he said with a nervous laugh. "I didn't think you'd have the nerve."

Dorisse made no reply. She was thinking of what Vickie had said in the restaurant.

"How'd you get it, Dorisse?" he asked her after that.

She tried to avoid answering him by looking down at her hands in her lap.

"Did you borrow it from somebody, or what?"

She still did not answer him.

"What's the matter with you—are you trying to keep it a secret?"

Before she could think of what to say, Nobby impatiently got up and put on his hat. He looked at himself in the mirror and pulled the brim of the hat down over his forehead. When she saw him go towards the door, she wanted to run to him and beg him not to leave, but she could neither get to her feet nor call to him. When Nobby reached the door, he turned and looked at her momentarily.

"Thanks a lot, Dorisse," she heard him say. "This'll sure get me out of a tight jam."

He left the room and closed the door. She sat on the side of the bed, her hands gripping the tufted counterpane, until she could no longer hear him. After that she fell face downward across the bed.

CHAPTER NINE

JANE HAD STAYED AFTER SCHOOL to do some additional laboratory work and it was late when she finally got ready to leave. The janitor was anxious to close the building for the night and he had been standing significantly at the laboratory door for the past quarter-hour. The shortest way home for her was to walk diagonally across the campus and behind the small wooden stadium to the street. The football squad had been practising on the athletic field that afternoon, but no one was within sight when she started towards the stadium. A damp south-east wind was blowing across the campus and a low misty cloud had already settled down close to the earth for the night.

She was hurrying through the deep shadow cast by the high wooden stand when suddenly somebody stepped directly in front of her. She realised that he had been standing behind one of the columns and watching her come across the campus and she stopped instantly. She was about to turn and run in the opposite direction when she recognised Coach Russ Thornton. Russ reached out and caught her by the arm.

"Hello, Jane," he said in a friendly manner. "What are you doing here so late this afternoon? It's almost dark. Did the teacher keep you in after school?"

Before she could think of anything to say, Russ was taking her behind the column. She looked backwards over her shoulder but all she could see was his green coupé standing at the kerb. Russ was a pleasant, friendly man in his early forties who always wore either grey or brown tweed clothes. He had been high-school football coach for the

past five years and everybody in school liked him. He was short and stocky with an agile athletic movement in his stride. He had been a famous halfback during his university days, where he had been nicknamed Special Delivery. Thus far in his career he had coached three state-champion high-school football teams.

The friendly grip on her arm became firmer and more persuasive as she tried to pull away from Russ as unobtrusively as possible. She glanced over her shoulder again and Russ put his arm around her and drew her farther away from the street. She was more frightened than ever when she realised how dark it was behind the tall columns.

"What do you want, Coach?" she asked as calmly as she could.

"I'd like to show you my office, Jane," Russ told her as he pulled her gently but firmly into the blank darkness of the stadium. "It's right here. This's where I do all my paper work. I'll bet you didn't know a football coach had to do more home work than a high-school senior, did you, Jane?"

"No, I didn't know that, Coach," she said nervously while she tried to think of some excuse to keep from being taken into his office. She did not know if she were actually afraid of Russ or not, but she did not think she should be alone with him under the stadium after everyone else had gone home. "Coach, I'll come back to see your office some other time," she said, shaking her head and holding back. "I've really got to go home now. It's so awfully late, and——"

"But I want to show it you now, Jane," he said with a persuasive tightening of his arm around her waist.

She knew she should not let him take her any farther, but nevertheless she made no protest when she felt herself being led gently through the doorway. It was dark inside the small room and Russ did not turn on the light until he

had closed and locked the door. It was the first time she had ever experienced the sensation of knowing she was locked in a room alone with a man and she was both fearful and excited. She had read stories of girls who had foolishly let themselves be taken to such places by strange men, and she recalled with a shudder that almost invariably the man first had tried to make love to the girl and then had murdered her. She looked at Russ with a swift glance, but she could not imagine how such a friendly man could ever kill anybody.

"What do you think of my workroom, Jane?" he asked, startling her. He put his arm around her again and drew her to the centre of the room. Along one side there was a wide table, on which were stacked several piles of books and papers, and on the other side there was a couch. There were several chairs in the room and a small gas heater stood against the wall. It looked altogether too friendly and cosy to be the kind of place where anybody would be murdered. "It's rather plain-looking, isn't it, Jane?" he said as he smiled at her.

"But it's very nice, Coach," she replied in haste.

"I guess it'll do for a high-school football coach," he said, laughing a little. "Maybe if I can win a few more state championships I'll be entitled to more elaborate furnishings—maybe even a carpet on the floor and a new covering for the couch." He pointed at a large calendar on the wall. Heavy red circles had been drawn around several dates with a crayon. "We're going to have a ranking team before the season's over, and with the right amount of luck we've got a good chance of ending the season undefeated. If we can get through next week's game with Consolidated High, I'll feel pretty safe about the rest of the schedule."

"Do you really think we'll win next week, Coach?" she asked in an outburst of enthusiasm.

"I'm certainly counting on it, Jane," he told her with a confident nod of his head.

She felt relaxed for a moment, and then she glanced around the room again.

"I really think I ought to go home now, Coach," she said uneasily. "It's getting awfully late, and——"

"Don't go yet, Jane," he pleaded urgently. His arm tightened around her waist. "I want to talk to you about something."

"You want to talk to me about something, Coach?" she said in surprise, wondering what he could possibly want to talk to her about.

Russ took her to the couch and sat down beside her. He did not say anything right away and Jane, her curiosity aroused, turned and glanced at him inquiringly.

"I didn't think you'd mind if I asked you to come here and talk to me, Jane," he began nervously. She could see him push his finger in and out of one of the buttonholes in his coat several times. "I feel that I know you well enough to talk to you like this, Jane," he continued in an urgent tone. "I've seen you on the campus almost every day for the past several years, watching you grow up from a little girl, and as time went on I became more and more interested in you. Maybe you don't realise it, Jane, but I've waited a long time for this moment to come."

She noticed from the corners of her eyes that he was no longer smiling and that a troubled expression had come to his face. With a catch in her throat she wondered if that was the way a murderer looked just before he killed his victim.

"Couldn't you tell me some other time, Coach?" she asked pleadingly. A shiver passed through her. "I've really got to go home now!" She tried to jump up from the couch, but Russ pulled her back beside him. "But I must go,

Coach!" she cried with an uneasy glance at his face.

"For a long time I've been a very lonely man, Jane," he spoke as though he had not heard her at all. "My wife has grown away from me for some reason. She's more interested in her clubs and meetings than she is in me and she no longer has the time or the inclination to give me the kind of consideration I need. She's aged more rapidly than I have, for another thing, and that may explain why she seems to have no interest in me. I may be growing old myself, but I still feel young, and that's the important thing. A situation like that finally gets to be disheartening and unbearable. I've stood it now week after week for several years, and I've given up hope. I've reached the point in life where I can't exist alone. I've got to have companionship—your kind of companionship, Jane. If you only knew how I need you, Jane, you'd understand instantly."

The look in his eyes became penetrating and severe. She could not understand how any man so much in want of sympathy and understanding could ever murder a fellow human being, and she could no longer believe that Russ had brought her there to kill her. She felt a surge of compassion come over her. "There're some things in life any man's got to have at all costs, Jane. Companionship—your kind of companionship, Jane—is the most important of them all. You've just got to give me your companionship, Jane."

"I feel awfully sorry for you, Coach," she said, feeling a strong desire to do something for him. "I had no idea you were so lonely and unhappy. I'd like to do something to help you get over such a terrible feeling."

"You can, Jane," he said at once.

"How?" she asked.

"By being kind and sympathetic and understanding," he told her earnestly. "A girl with your temperament couldn't

keep from being sympathetic and understanding. It's your nature to be like that, and that's why I want your companionship. I noticed that you didn't go home when classes were over this afternoon and I saw you working in the laboratory. That's why I waited here after practice. I remembered that sometimes you came by the stadium when you were in a hurry, and that's how I came to be waiting for you a little while ago."

"You were really waiting for me?" she asked in surprise.

"Very much so, Jane."

"But I still don't understand why, Coach."

"Because you interest me more than any other woman in the world, Jane."

"And you weren't going to—to try—to murder me?"

"What?" he exclaimed. "What in the world are you talking about?"

"Nothing," she said, feeling relieved. "Nothing, I guess. I suppose it's just that I didn't know you'd ever noticed me. I still don't know why you would."

"Well, you know it now, Jane." He reached for her hand and held it tightly, squeezing her fingers with his. "I could very easily fall madly in love with you." He drew her closer. "There're very few men in the world who could resist you, Jane. There's something about you that would appeal to almost any man. It's your beauty and personality, and something else that's undefinable, I suppose. Anyway, you'd attract almost any man the way you did me. Not many women have that rare combination, or whatever it is that you've got, but those who do possess it can bring any man in the world to his knees."

Russ drew her into his arms and was kissing her before she realised what was happening to her. She knew right away that she was helpless as long as he held her and kissed her the way he did and she was surprised that she was

making no attempt to stop him. Her head was swimming dizzily when he finally released her.

"I didn't know you really meant doing that, Coach," she said, gasping for breath. "I thought you meant just being friendly."

"I mean everything, Jane. Leaving out nothing. We've got to go beyond friendship. Friendship's not enough. I'm serious about it. I've thought of having you for so long that nothing can stop me now. You're the most desirable woman I've ever seen. I've got to have you, Jane. You've got to be mine."

Russ looked and talked like an entirely different person. Even when he was silent, she could feel him pleading with her. She could feel herself tremble but she could not stop it.

"Jane—you understand, don't you?"

"I really must go," she said, avoiding his penetrating look and trying to get up. He pulled her backwards on the couch with a strong masculine movement, completely ignoring her efforts to keep him from having his way with her. She had the feeling of no longer having control over herself as the touch of his hands charmed her whole being. Even though she could not make herself move, she knew she could still make herself speak. "I can't stay here any longer!" she cried out, but the words sounded as though they had come from the lips of somebody else.

"I don't think you realise what this really means to us both, Jane," he was saying. "It's the beginning of something very beautiful that nobody else can share. It belongs to us alone. Don't you feel something binding us close together?"

"Yes, but I ought to go home now."

"Then if you feel it Jane, you owe it to yourself to hold on to it and let nothing separate us after this."

"I don't know what to think about it, but I ought to go home now."

"No girl has ever regretted falling in love, Jane. It's nature's way of directing our lives. You mustn't let anything keep you from falling in love."

"I'll try to think about it, but——"

"Don't ever say a word about this to anybody, Jane," he said in a suddenly changed voice. He was breathing hard. "You've got to remember that. Not a single word to anybody in the world. Do you understand that, Jane?"

"I won't tell anybody, but I've got——"

"I can't let you go now, Jane. I can't. You've got to stay. If you only realised how lonely I've been, you wouldn't want to think of leaving now. Can't you see how much I need you, Jane? I can't let anything keep us from having our companionship now."

"There must be dozens of other girls in the world who'd keep you from feeling lonely."

"But none of them would be you, Jane. You don't seem to realise that you are the only one I want. I've got to have you now. Nothing can stop it."

"But you mustn't——"

"But I do, and I'm not going to let anything stop me now. You don't seem to understand the attraction you have. Sooner or later any man, regardless of his determination and will-power, would go to any extreme to have you. You'll find that out soon enough if you don't already know it. That's why I made up my mind to have you before somebody else does."

Once more he took her in his arms and kissed her until she was weak and helpless. At first she tried to stop him, but in the end she gave up completely. After a long time she opened her eyes and saw Russ looking down at her.

"I don't want you ever to feel that you can't belong to

me, Jane," he was telling her. "You mustn't let such things come into your mind. You know now that I wouldn't hurt you. All I want after this is your companionship—your intimate and complete companionship, Jane."

"I'll be your friend—Russ," she said. "If you'll let me go home now, I'll always be your friend. Honest, I will."

"But if you left now, it wouldn't be any different than it was before you came."

"I don't want it to be different. I'm afraid for it to be different." She watched him for a moment. "But I'll keep on liking you, Russ."

Russ shook his head. "That's not enough, Jane. It's not nearly enough. There has to be a complete sympathetic companionship between us before either of us can have a satisfying friendship. Nature doesn't provide a substitute for our kind of companionship. It has to be whole-hearted and complete, with no reservations whatsoever. It's something that only you and I can have together, or otherwise each of us will go through life feeling cheated and being lonely and unhappy. Now, don't you see how simple it is, Jane?"

She put her hands over her face. "I don't know—I don't know!" she cried helplessly. "I'm confused about everything. I don't know what to think now!"

Russ kissed her again, holding her so tightly in his arms that it was painful. She suddenly realised how hopeless it was to be struggling nakedly against his overpowering will and she did not know how much longer she would be able to hold out against him. She wanted to have time to think about everything, but Russ was too impatient to let her take the time. They had been there for almost two hours already and she was so exhausted that she could barely lift her arms after that. Russ was tiring, too. He was breathing hard and every once in a while he leaned against the back of the

couch and rested. He had taken off his coat and loosened his collar and he looked much older than he had when they first came into the room. She was surprised when she saw that he had several grey hairs.

Finally Russ leaned back and, drawing a deep breath, looked at her discouragedly.

"I don't understand you, Jane," he said wearily. "You're nothing at all like Vickie. It's hard to believe that you're her sister."

"I'm not like her," Jane said, surprised and angry. "If that's what you thought——"

"It wasn't that exactly," Russ said hastily. "All I know about Vickie is what I've heard. I've been told that she's friendly and likes to have a good time. I like you for yourself, Jane, but I did think that you'd be as reasonable as your sister's said to be. I didn't think for a minute that you'd act like this."

He glanced at his wrist-watch. It was past seven o'clock.

"It's getting late," he remarked in a thoroughly discouraged manner. "I've got to go home now. My wife's having some company for dinner, and I ought to be there when they arrive."

"Are you really going now?"

"I guess I'll have to."

She wanted to get up, but she was afraid to move until she was more certain about what Russ intended to do. He still had not moved from the couch.

"If I let you go now, Jane, will you promise me something? I want you to promise two things. It's very important. Will you promise, Jane?"

She nodded unhesitatingly. "I'll promise, if you'll really let me go now."

Russ sat on the edge of the couch. "I want you to promise me that you'll never say a word about what hap-

pened here tonight—not a word to anybody in the world. If there's one other thing that will cause a high-school coach to lose his job quicker, I don't know what it is. I'd be outlawed for the rest of my life if word ever got out about something like this, and I'd never get another coaching job. I had to take this risk, though, because of you, Jane. That's why I want you to make a sacred promise that you'll never say a word about this. Will you promise that?"

She nodded quickly. "I promise."

"And I want you to promise that you'll let me see you again somewhere in private. You've got to promise that, too, Jane."

She moved her head up and down while he watched her.

"You'll let me see you again—soon?"

"Yes—yes, I'll see you again."

"I wish you'd think about what I've told you tonight, Jane. About the way I need your intimate companionship."

"I'll think about it, Russ."

Russ stood up, and as soon as he had moved away from the couch she hurriedly got ready to leave. He stood in the middle of the room watching every movement she made. Several times she thought he was going to come and take her into his arms again, but when she was ready to go, he had not moved from the centre of the room. They looked at each other for several moments, and then Russ went to the door and unlocked it. As soon as she saw the door swing open, she wanted to run to Russ and throw her arms around him and beg him to let her stay. She closed her eyes and saw the way he looked when he went home and was met at the door by his wife, and she wanted to do something to keep him all for herself.

"What's the matter, Jane?" she heard him say.

She opened her eyes and looked at him. "Do you have to go, Russ?" she asked with a tremble.

He was nodding. "Yes, I've got to go, Jane. Will you let me take you home? My car's outside. Will you let me?"

She ran towards the door while tears were filling her eyes. "No, I'd rather you didn't!" she cried out.

Russ caught her by the arm. "Please don't go away thinking too many bad things about me, Jane," he said beseechingly. "You know I'm lonely. And you know you'd make any man feel the way I do about you. I can't help being attracted to you any more than you can keep from being what you are. Please don't blame me. I've never done a thing like this before in my whole life, and I wouldn't have this time if it hadn't been you. You believe me, don't you, Jane?"

She wanted to throw her arms around him and plead with him to keep her there, but she could see his wife waiting for him at home, and she ran through the door and disappeared in the darkness. She looked back once and saw Russ standing in the lighted doorway.

Russ closed the door and went back into the room. He looked first at the couch where he and Jane had been, and then he walked to the cabinet and took a bottle of whisky from it. Closing his eyes he drank from the bottle while his hand shook violently.

CHAPTER TEN

"I RECKON YOU KNOW that Daniel Boone Blalock's been in town the past few days," Chism said, rocking on the back legs of the chair. "Now, there's a man who can do you a world of good, son. He's just the type of successful politician I was talking about the other day. I sure admire a man like him. Dan Blalock's the biggest man that ever came out of this part of the world. The thing for you to do is to have a little private chat with him and see what you and him can work out. If I was in your shoes, I wouldn't lose no time, neither."

Ross glanced across the office at Grandpa Crockett before answering his father. Grandpa was sitting there in his old grey cotton sweater with a pained expression in his pale-blue eyes. His long white beard, which seemed to have grown longer and which now extended to the fourth button on his sweater, looked whiter and more majestic in appearance than ever before.

"Papa, I'm not interested in making a political alliance with Blalock or anybody else," Ross said determinedly. "The one thing I want to do in life is to establish myself in law, and I'm not going to let myself get involved in anything else until I first succeed right here in this office."

"That sure is a peculiar way to look at it," Chism said sadly, shaking his head. "You say you want to be a big lawyer, but you won't let yourself be smart enough to plan ahead for the next step. Where do you think Daniel Boone Blalock would be today if he hadn't stepped out into politics when he did? I'll tell you. He'd still be a one-horse lawyer in a one-horse town, that's what. He's smart, though, and

just look at him now. He's a famous man up there in Washington, and all of us down here are as proud of him as a hen with one lone chick, and rightly so, too. He can do more things for more people than anybody I ever heard of. Dan Blalock's the one man on the topside of the world to be on friendly terms with. Now, people could go around saying the same things about you some day, son, if you'd only stop and give it some real honest thought."

"Papa, you know what I think of Dan Blalock," Ross told him with a harsh look. "He's the most no-account, the most dishonest Congressman this state ever sent to Washington. He's a disgrace to the country." Chism looked down at the floor. Grandpa still had not said anything since he and Chism came in and sat down. Ross opened a drawer and took out a large envelope. After spreading the papers on his desk, he leaned back and smiled congenially at his father. Chism was watching Ross with a nervous blinking of his eyes. "Papa, let's forget Dan Blalock for a while and talk about the sawmill. I'm convinced it's worth considering. I don't believe it could be bought for two or three times the price if it weren't up for forced sale. What do you think, Grandpa?"

"Dan Blalock's a fine man," Chism stated flatly.

Grandpa cleared his throat, avoiding a direct meeting of eyes with Chism, and slowly stroked his long beard. They all knew why they were there, because Ross had asked his father and grandfather to come down to his office that morning to talk about buying the sawmill. Chism had refused at first, but he did not have anything else to do, and he had finally agreed to come down just to please Ross. It was still early in the morning, only a little after nine o'clock, and some of the night's chill dampness could still be felt in the bare carpetless room.

"I never did think it was wise to offer advice to a man

even when I was asked for it," Grandpa said slowly, "because it's always a dangerous thing to do. A man doesn't like to have *somebody else* tell him he ought to do this, that, or the other thing. A man likes to arrive at his own decisions in life, and that's the way it should be. A lot of harm's been done in the world by know-it-alls who think God favoured them with superior knowledge."

He paused and stroked his beard while he was thinking how he should express what he wanted to say. Chism continued to rock on the back legs of his chair with an occasional darted glance at Ross or Grandpa. "However," Grandpa spoke out forthrightly, "when it comes to the common good, it's an entirely different matter. If a man makes the wrong move in life, and if innocent people are suffering from the effects of it, I feel that somebody ought to bring it to his attention and help him correct the wrong. I've found that the bigger a man is, the more he appreciates that kind of advice. I still think the worst move a man ever made was when Chism traded off the home-place and moved here to town."

"I've heard a bellyful about that cussed farm," Chism broke in angrily. "I don't see why you always have to go and bring that up, Pa. The only reason I came down here at all this morning was to hear about a sawmill, and that's all I want to hear, too. Now, if anybody wants to mention it, let's hear it."

"I was getting around to that, Chism," Grandpa told him kindly. "The only reason I mentioned the home-place was——"

"Well, hurry up and get around to it before you start harping on that cussed farm again. To listen to you talk, anybody would think that blame farm was the Garden of Eden fitted out with gold-plated sprinklers and ripe bananas hanging on all the sneezeweeds."

Grandpa Crockett clasped his flowing white beard with his left hand as though it were the last possession he had on earth.

"I can't think of anything better for the children than seeing them grow up in the country," he said with a look of deeply felt concern. "It's still time to be helpful for Jarvis and Jane. They shouldn't be left, motherless and innocent, to grow up here on the streets without guidance. If we hadn't moved here from the home-place, Vickie wouldn't be out all night like she is and Dorisse would never have married that fellow. The next thing we know, Jarvis and Jane will be in serious difficulty. It's a pity for their sakes, and it's too late to call back what's already happened, but there's still time to keep Jarvis and Jane from having similar things happen to them. Alice would turn over in her grave if she knew what had happened to her children since she died. If there was one thing she wanted above all else, it was to have the children raised properly. They know how their mother felt about that.

"Only a few mornings ago Jane recalled that the last words her mother said before she died was that she wanted the children to have the good things of life. They want that for their mother's sake, and they know they're not getting it."

"Hell-fire!" Chism said with a sour look. "All you ever do is talk about that! You haven't said a blame word about the sawmill. I didn't come down here to get a blessing out for doing what I had a right to do. Now, if anybody wants to say something about the sawmill——"

"Grandpa was only trying to explain why he thinks it would be a good thing for you to buy the sawmill and move back to the country," Ross said mollifyingly. "Grandpa thinks it's important to consider Jarvis and Jane's welfare, Papa."

"I don't give a cuss what he thinks," Chism retorted.

"Pa's got it in for me because I went and traded the farm and he tries to take it out on me every chance he gets. I won't listen to it. I've heard it so many times already that my ears stay sore from hearing it."

"It's a strange thing about human beings," Grandpa said, stroking his beard. He appeared to be unperturbed by Chism's outburst. "It looks like God is set and determined to show us how imperfect we are by seeing to it that a good family skips a generation of its kind every once in a while and produces a family of black sheep instead. The finer and stronger a family gets, the more apt it's likely to happen. There's the Hair family, for instance. I never knew a more honest, hard-working, upright people than the Hairs, who moved out here over the big mountains about the same time I did, and yet they had to go and skip a generation of their kind and turn out a fellow like the one who married Dorisse. If there's a more no-account fellow than that one, I'm yet to lay eyes on him. He's a disgrace to the Hairs, and they even moved away to escape the shame of it. Now, you take us, on the other hand. The Crocketts have always——"

"I haven't got patience with Nobby, neither," Chism spoke up. He let the chair rest on its four legs. "That's one thing I can sure go along with you on, Pa. Nobby makes me so cussed mad sometimes, with his trifling good-for-nothing habits and lazy ways, that I could take a pole and whale the living daylight out of him. Maybe some day I'll do it, too, if he don't go to work and support himself and quit living off me."

"That's the one good thing about this sawmill, Papa," Ross said, hoping to take advantage of his father's receptive mood. "You'll start making money right away, and there's plenty of it to be made in lumber these days, too. Of course, I don't mind helping out, and I'm sure Vickie doesn't either, but what we contribute isn't enough to take proper care of

you and Grandpa, and Jarvis and Jane, too. And there's Dorisse to consider, also. You'll have more money in the bank in a month's time than you've had altogether since you moved to town. I wouldn't say that if I weren't sure of my facts, but I've checked the sawmill books carefully and I know what I'm talking about. There's a lot of money to be made out of that sawmill. Heaps of it."

"You sure do make it sound like a gold mine, son," Chism said thoughtfully. "It's a downright pity it ain't a sure-enough gold mine with nuggets oozing out of the dirt. That's what I'd like to run across some day before too long. I don't know anything I'd like better on the topside of the world right now than finding a way to keep my pockets crammed full of spending money."

"And you deserve it, too, Papa," Ross told him. "I want to see you live well and dress well. Jarvis and Jane need proper clothing very badly, too. I don't think you'd have to support Nobby and Dorisse if you moved out there to the sawmill. I'll be able to help her. She's trying very hard to get Nobby to go to work. I'll be able to help him if he'll show any willingness to keep a job. Everything would work out the way Mamma wanted it to. I'm sure of that."

"It's a pity your mother passed away before all you children grew up and got settled in life," Chism said soberly. He turned around in the chair and gazed out of the window. "Sometimes I don't know which of us misses her the more, you children or me. When she went, it sort of knocked the props out from under things, and I don't know if I'll ever be the same again. We don't seem like a family any longer. It's just like being cut loose to drift in the big wide ocean."

He turned from the window and looked down at his hands. He was twisting a piece of string he had found somewhere.

"I miss Alice a heap more than anybody knows. It looks

like I just can't amount to anything without her. Everything was different when she was here, and now nothing in the world seems to matter much. I get so lonely sometimes that I have to go off and do things just to keep my mind from getting all twisted from thinking about her too much. I took Jarvis off again with me the other night when I was in one of my lonesome spells. We overtook some coloured girls walking along the railroad track and made them crawl into a freight car. Everybody knows I wouldn't have taken him along if Alice had been alive."

They sat there thinking about what had been said. Chism was looking down at the piece of string he was twisting in his fingers and Grandpa was stroking his beard. After a while Ross got up and went to the window. He stood there with his back to the room for several minutes and looked out into the street.

"We can close the sale of the sawmill today, Papa," he said presently, turning around and facing the room. "I can get it financed without any trouble."

"How many hands does it take to run it, son?" Chism asked in a chastened manner.

"Six or seven, Papa, and they all live on the place, too. There're plenty of tenant houses out there for the hands, and the main house is the most up-to-date dwelling in that part of the country. You'd live like a country squire in that fine house, Papa."

"How much timber goes with all this?" his father asked with increasing interest.

"I was told there's enough standing timber to saw for two or three years, and there's plenty of timber on adjoining land that can be bought when you need it. You'll make enough profit the first year to pay for the sawmill and the land and everything else that goes with it. I'm confident of that, Papa. Anybody who takes over that sawmill operation

now is going to be rich in a few years, and I'd rather see you with the money than anybody else. There'll be a good market for lumber for a long time. Even when all the standing timber's cut, you can set out pine seedlings and begin cutting pulp wood in another twelve years or so."

"The big trouble is I don't know none too much about sawing lumber," Chism stated doubtfully. "I've done a little sawing of my own, but it wasn't much to speak of, and that's a pretty big operation you're talking about."

"You know enough, Papa," Ross said, watching his father's face and endeavouring to keep his interest aroused. "Don't worry about that part. There's a good mill-boss already on the job, and I'll help you with the accounts. All you'll have to do is keep the hands at work and see to it that the mill's kept supplied with logs. It's a big job, but it'll make big money for you."

"It does sound kind of nice, don't it?" Chism jerked his head to one side with an enthusiastic nod. "I know one thing about it for sure. It's a heap better life than being a cussed farmer and dripping sweat all over the topside of the world." He glanced at Grandpa with a superior look. "I'd rather drop dead than have to go back to farming again. I always did have the notion that I'd make a good general manager for something like sawmilling."

"I'm convinced it's a fine thing for you to do, Chism," Grandpa said. "That would be a wise move to make."

Chism twisted the string around his finger, and then slowly unwound it.

"I'd like to drive out there and take a look at it right away," he said, nodding to Ross. "How far out of town did you say it was, son?"

"About ten miles."

"Ten whole miles?"

Ross nodded.

"Ten whole miles," Chism said to himself as he twisted the string around his finger again.

"That's not far, Papa."

"It's not much when you're just thinking about pure miles and nothing else," he replied doubtfully, "but it's one hell of a long piece away from where you might want to be. I don't know that I'd want to get caught to hell and gone that far in the country again, no matter how good the reason was. It's too far from town. I've sort of got used to city ways now, and they agree with me mighty well. All I really want in life is——"

"But there's a paved road all the way, Papa, and it only takes fifteen or twenty minutes to drive that far in a car. That's no distance at all these days. Just think how well-off you'd be compared to——"

"I wouldn't want to rush headlong into something and then feel foolish about it afterward," he said doggedly.

"You oughtn't let that bother you at all, Chism," Grandpa spoke up anxiously. "An opportunity like this won't come your way many times in life, and it'd be wise to hold on to it while you can. Running a sawmill will give you something to do that you're capable of making a success of, and that's something that can't be said about everybody who comes along. If you moved out there and let the children grow up in the country away from all this——"

"Now, hold on!" Chism said in a loud voice. "Things are getting out of hand! They're going a little too fast to suit me. Now, hold on, both of you. I wouldn't sell the house here in town, to begin with. I'd want to keep it because I'd be coming back and spending the night in town every once in a while, specially on Saturday and Sunday nights and over Sunday. I'd feel like a lost soul away from the city on Saturday nights now."

"But what would happen to the children if you left like

that, Chism?" Grandpa, worried, asked him. "Who'd look after their welfare while you stayed in town?"

"Hell-fire! They're getting big enough to look after their own selves."

"Not Jarvis and Jane, Chism," Grandpa said with a firm shake of his head. "You couldn't go away and leave them. Of course, if I go along with you to the country, I'll be alive a little longer to help look after them, but I'm getting up in years faster every day now, and I won't be here much longer. After I'm gone, there wouldn't be anybody else. You know what Alice would say if she knew you were leaving them alone like that. She wouldn't want you to do it, Chism."

"Hell-fire! Is that all I'm going to hear the rest of my life! I've got my own self to think about."

"But, Papa, we're only trying to think of Jarvis and Jane, too," Ross said uneasily.

"Looks like all I ever hear is this blame fussing at me, coming from every which direction. I'm making a man out of Jarvis, and Jane's carrying on like she knows what she's out to get in life. Why can't people leave me alone and quit this everlasting fussing at me and trying to make me do what they want me to do instead of letting me do what I want! If I could have my way, I'd get me a little store and——"

"I tell you what let's do, Papa," Ross said, getting up and walking around the desk. "Let's drive out and look at the sawmill. We can talk about these other things some other time. It'll only take a few minutes to drive out there. After you've had a chance to look around, you can make up your mind better."

"I'm not going," he stated flatly.

"Not going?" Ross said with a glance at Grandpa.

"That's what I said, and I mean it."

"But just a few minutes ago you said you wanted to drive out there and look at the sawmill."

"Maybe I did say so, but right now I've changed my mind, and it's a lucky thing for me that I did before I let you and Pa rush me into doing what you had up your sleeve all the time. I ain't moving one inch to the blame country. Now, that's all there is to it!"

"But, Papa, you got to think of the future. This is something——"

"That's what I'm doing, and I'm doing it fast and quick, too. I'm thinking about my own future like I want to think about it and not like you and him," he nodded at Grandpa with a scowl, "trying every which way you can to trick me into thinking about it. I'm staying right here in town where I want to be."

He got up and walked stiffly towards the door. As he passed Grandpa, he looked down at his father and grinned broadly.

"You folks have had your say, and it was just exactly like I thought it'd be. Now I'll tell you something. You folks don't know it, but the reason I ain't interested in all this talk about the sawmill is because I'm going to work for the Government any day now. It's all fixed. From now on you folks can save your breath. I expect to be on the Government pay-roll before the week's out. Now, ain't that something?"

He opened the door, turned partly around, and smiled in a superior way at Ross and Grandpa. Then he walked out, slamming the door behind him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

VICKIE went across the street when the movie show was over at a quarter past eleven and walked into the Rainbow Café to wait until it was time to go around the corner to the Southland Hotel. Daniel Boone Blalock had told her he would expect her to come to his room at twelve.

Several couples who had been to the movies that night were already seated at the counter eating sandwiches and drinking coffee when Vickie walked in and found a seat at the far end of the restaurant. The gay carefree laughter and whispered intimacies all around her made her feel restless and lonely, and she watched the clock on the wall, silently counting the minutes before it would be time for her to leave. She had always looked forward to her night off, but for the past several weeks with each Tuesday night there came a feeling of acute loneliness that often made her wish she had kept on working. Even though she told herself that tonight would be different, because she had a date with Dan Blalock, she still could not keep from feeling lonely as she sat there in the noisy crowd waiting for midnight.

Each Tuesday afternoon she went to the beauty parlour and had her hair shampooed and set in roll curls. In addition to that, she always managed to buy something new to wear, even if it were only a pair of stockings or a costume pin from the variety store. This time, because she was looking forward so eagerly to her date with Dan Blalock, and because she wanted to make a good impression when she walked into his room, she had been extraordinarily extravagant and bought a new black wool dress for the occasion.

Presently, when most of the customers had left, Nick got up from his stool behind the cash register and walked down to where she sat at the counter.

"I've got a message for you, Vickie," he said right away. "With all this rush in here after the show, I almost forgot to tell you about it. This was one of the nights when everybody wanted Western sandwiches, and you know how it is when twenty or twenty-five orders pile up on the fry-cook back there. He always threatens to quit if the customers don't start ordering dry sandwiches or pie." Nick wiped his forehead with his handkerchief. "Now how can I make a customer eat pie when what he wants is a Western sandwich?"

"What was the message, Nick?" she asked, trying to remain calm.

"The Congressman telephoned about an hour or two ago. He wanted me to tell you that he had been called out of town for a few days on important business. Unexpected, he said. He told me to tell you that he'd get in touch with you when he got back. I think that's all he said, Vickie."

"That's plenty, Nick," she remarked, drawing in her breath. "What more would a girl want?"

"What do you mean?"

"That's a big help—on my night off." She placed her arms on the counter and leaned forward with a weary droop of her shoulders. She shook her head. "It's a man's world."

Nick made a gesture that was mildly sympathetic. "You can afford to wait him out, Vickie. He's a big man. He can do a lot for you."

"Except on Tuesday nights," she said as she slowly shook her head. "What's a girl supposed to do on Tuesday nights, Nick? Bring her diary up to date?"

"Why don't you go home and get a good night's sleep for a change?" he suggested.

"And have to stay awake all night listening to Nobby Hair quarrel with my sister and hear Papa argue about money?" She shook her head determinedly. "That's not my idea of heaven."

Nick looked at her for a moment before shrugging his shoulders and starting back to the cash register.

"Well, don't take it so hard, Vickie," he said as he walked away. "It makes you appreciate a man more when you do get him where you want him. Have a cup of coffee on the house."

As usual, Pauline walked back and forth behind the counter, frequently glancing at Vickie with a scornful look that was pointedly sarcastic and contemptuous, and at the same time she was obviously refraining from making any remark or comment. Pauline had always been envious of Vickie's good looks and the ease with which she attracted men and, even after working together for nearly a year, she still maintained her disdainful attitude. Pauline had complained to Nick several times about the studied manner in which Vickie walked up and down behind the counter when male customers were being served, saying that it was unfair to let Vickie purposely arouse their interest by swaying her hips and jiggling for their benefit, because most of the men took seats where Vickie would wait on them and then they always gave her much larger tips than Pauline received. Nick told her that Vickie was good for business and that she ought to learn a few things from Vickie. Pauline said she would quit before she would degrade herself to Vickie's level.

When the after-theatre rush was over and everyone had left except Vickie, Nick came back again to where she was leaning dejectedly on the counter. He did not say anything at first, but stood in front of her admiring her carefully waved hair and the new black wool dress she was wearing.

Vickie did not look up at Nick until she heard him click his tongue appreciatively.

"Well?" she said unsmilingly.

"Vickie, I hate to see you take it so hard."

She asked him how he thought she ought to take it.

"Maybe what you really need is a man who wants to marry you. I've been thinking about that for quite a while."

"Are you speaking for yourself, Nick, or a friend of yours?"

"No," he replied quickly. "No, you don't understand what I mean, Vickie. I mean you're the marrying type, and you'll always be miserable till a man comes along and wants to marry you instead of only dating you. You put up a big show about wanting to have a good time with the boys, but you've got the marrying urge sticking out all over you. I can always see that in a woman, no matter what she does to hide it. Of course, you're a good waitress, specially for night work when most of the customers are men, and I'd hate to lose you, but if I had to be honest about it I'd have to admit that you'd be ten times better off married. You'll say you like to have a good time with the boys and go out on parties and things like that, but deep down in your heart you want a home of your own and babies and a good, kind, providing husband."

"Nick, you're so right I could murder you for knowing how I feel," she said, clenching her teeth. "Get away from me!"

He patted her consolingly on the arm. "He'll be along one of these days when you're least expecting it, Vickie." He watched her for a moment and then walked to the front of the restaurant.

Vickie got up and drew herself a cup of coffee from the steaming urn behind the counter. After that she sat down

again and lit a cigarette. She did not know whether to be angry with Dan Blalock or with herself, but she did know that no matter how she looked at it, she was sitting there alone at midnight on her night off wearing a new dress that she would be paying on for the next three months. She crushed out the cigarette and immediately lit a second one.

After that she sat and stared at the seemingly motionless hands on the clock. It was half-past twelve, and if Dan Blalock had not telephoned to Nick, she would at that very minute have been in Room 505 at the Southland Hotel. In another instant she was wondering if Dan had really left town, or if he were entertaining somebody else in her place. The suspicion in her mind was too strong to be put aside and after that she was convinced he had invited some other girl to his room. She had no idea how she could get into his room, because she was certain that if he actually had somebody else with him, he would refuse to unlock the door and let her enter. She hastily got up and was almost out of the restaurant when she saw the telephone beside the cash register.

Nick was reading a newspaper and he looked up in surprise when he heard her call *Dan's room in the hotel*. She stood there nervously gripping the phone while she listened to the bell ringing in Room 505. The phone rang seven or eight times, but there was no answer, and when she hung up the receiver, she still did not know whether or not Dan was in his room. If he were entertaining another girl, she told herself confidently, he would answer neither the phone nor a knock on the door. She pushed the phone away from her, more confused and uncertain than ever.

"What's the matter, Vickie—don't you ever believe what a man tells you?" Nick asked in an injured manner.

"I'm not old enough to answer that yet," she replied coldly. "I'll let you know forty years from now."

Nick ran his hand over his bald head. "Why forty years?"

"Because by that time I won't care."

"But the Congressman wouldn't lie to you, Vickie. He couldn't afford to. Not a big politician like him."

"He's a man, isn't he?"

"Sure, but——"

"Then stop handing me that 'big politician' stuff and go ahead and say he's a man and he gets lonely in a hotel room and likes to smell a new perfume every so often—say, once during the middle of the week and twice on week-ends."

"I know, Vickie, but——"

"I know, too, so shut up!"

Ben Humphrey came in and asked Pauline for a cup of coffee. He sat midway down the counter, leaning on his arms and stirring the hot black coffee with a spoon. He turned and looked at Vickie several times before their glances met. Ben was a heavy-set boyish-looking man in his forties. He had dark-brown hair that was thick and wiry and a quick smile that was friendly and good-natured. It was the first time he had seen Vickie since the night Dan Blalock and the two engineers came in and ordered porter-house steaks.

She was still standing in front of the cash register when Ben walked up and paid his check. He smiled at Vickie as he always did. Vickie, to his surprise, returned his smile with a demure flicker of her eyelashes. He stared at her unbelievably.

"What's on your mind, Ben?" she asked him in a teasing, deep tone of voice.

Ben opened his mouth, but found himself momentarily tongue-tied. He swallowed several times before he could say anything at all. "Hello, Vickie," he said thickly.

"Hello yourself, Ben," she said with an upward glance.

"Vickie—are you leaving?" he asked.

"Just," she replied, walking towards the door.

She waited for Ben to open the door for her and then they walked out into the street, leaving Nick looking perplexed. Several automobiles passed their tyres singing on the damp pavement, while they stood there looking at each other. Presently Vickie shivered in the cold night air and Ben gripped her arm. As he did so, she moved close to him, and a moment later they were walking down the street. Ben had asked her for a date time after time, but she had always refused, and he wondered to himself how it happened that she was now actually going with him.

When they reached the funeral home at the lower end of Main Street, Ben unlocked the door and took her into the entrance parlour. A rose-shaded lamp was shining dimly on the large centre table and beside it stood a tall vase filled with red and yellow flowers. A large gilt-framed oil painting of Ben's father, who had established the undertaking business, hung on the wall over the fireplace. There was a deep-pile blue carpet on the floor and several overstuffed chairs and sofas were arranged in a circular pattern in the room.

Presently Ben took her by the arm and led her down a dimly lighted hall to a smaller parlour. A gas heater was burning in the fireplace and the room felt warm and cosy. Vickie stood in front of the heater while Ben put his arm around her. They stood close together for a long time and then she put her head on his shoulder.

"It's a lucky thing I went up to the Rainbow for a cup of coffee when I did," he said, hugging her. "I'd just about given up hope, Vickie. I've asked you so many times for a date that I was ashamed to ask you again. The last time I asked you, you wouldn't even bother to say yes or no. And

then tonight I walked in, and I didn't even have to ask you. We just walked out together, and now here we are. Are you sure you haven't got me confused with somebody else, Vickie?" He squeezed her gently. "I'm Ben Humphrey."

"I like you, Ben," she told him, turning quickly and putting her arms around his neck. "Maybe the reason I didn't come before was that I was afraid to come here—I mean to a place like this."

"It's no different than anything else, once you get accustomed to it. Now that you've been here the first time, you'll come back again, won't you, Vickie?"

"Maybe," she said, drawing herself close to him. She tightened her arms around him and clung to him desperately. "Do you ever get lonely, Ben?" she asked. "Do you know what it's like?"

"I get very lonely down here all by myself at night," he said huskily. "It's a lonely life."

"I'm lonely, too, Ben," she told him with a quaver in her voice. "I'm awfully lonely. I don't know what I'd have done tonight if you hadn't come into the Rainbow when you did. I was feeling so terrible I wanted to die. I didn't want to go home, because it's really not like a home at all, and nobody wanted me and I——"

"I want you, Vickie," he told her earnestly. They sat down on the green leather couch in front of the heater. "I've wanted you for a long time. I've wanted to make love to you ever since the first time I saw you. That's been a long time to wait."

"Why do you want to make love to me, Ben?" She looked straight into his eyes. "Because you think I'm bad? Is that the reason, Ben?"

"No, not that. I suppose it's because I'm lonely and I want you to be with me. There's not much in life, other than friendship, and when a man and a woman can feel

close to each other, everything else becomes bearable. A girl who shares that feeling with a man isn't necessarily bad."

Her arms tightened around him. "You don't think I'm bad, do you, Ben?"

"Why do you say that, Vickie?"

"Because sometimes I think maybe I am. A lot of people think I'm bad. My two sisters do. And my brother Ross. I don't know what Papa thinks. He never says anything to me. But Grandpa doesn't think so. He thinks I'm foolish sometimes, but he doesn't think I'm bad. Everybody else thinks I'm as bad as—as——" She stopped and drew herself closer to Ben. She was trembling. "But I'm not. I like to be with a man to keep from being lonely, I suppose. And it's not really being bad when you have to do something to keep that awful feeling from making you want to die. I'd do anything sometimes to drive that feeling away. I've just got to if I'm going to keep on living. We don't have any family life at home and if I had to stay there day after day I'd kill myself. It's that awful, Ben. It's terrible. Nobody knows what it's like. Except us. We know. That's why I went to work at the Rainbow. When Mamma died, everything changed. I stopped going to school, because Papa said I had to earn money. At first I was afraid to go out and work, but there was always so much quarrelling with Mamma not there to stop it that I couldn't stand staying in the house. Papa was quarrelling with everybody because he didn't have any money. He blames Grandpa for everything. He accuses Grandpa of ruining his life by making him stay on the farm when he wanted to move to town and open a store of some sort. I don't know exactly what he wanted, but he says it's too late now to do anything about it, so he just doesn't do anything, except make me give him money every week. Ross gives him some, too, but he's

always complaining just the same. If Mamma had lived, I'd have gone away to college, because that's what she wanted me to do. She said having an education was one of the good things everybody ought to have in life. Papa doesn't care what I do. I know it's wrong, but sometimes I wish something terrible would happen to Papa and he would die. It's a terrible thing to hate your own father the way I do, but I can't help it. I don't know what's going to happen to me. Sometimes I don't care any more."

Ben did not know what to say. He felt sorry for her, and he wanted to tell her that he would do anything for her that he could, but he did not know how to tell her.

"If you really like me, Ben, please keep on liking me after tonight," she begged childishly. "I've got to have somebody who likes me all the time. There's nothing I won't do if you'll keep on liking me, because then I'd care for you so much I'd want to do everything in the world to make you happy. Other men have said they liked me and I got to like them and that made me stop feeling lonely, but they lied to me and didn't mean it, because they left me and went back to their wives. When that happened, I felt so lonely I didn't want to live any longer. From now on if a man really likes me, I'm going to make him so happy that he won't let me go, whether he's married or not. I mean every word of it. I've just got to have somebody who likes me all the time, not just when we're having a date. That's what hurts most of all. When you're lonely, you've got to have somebody to go to when you need it most."

The clock in the hall had just finished chiming three times when Mary Lou Humphrey opened the door and walked in. Mary Lou was a small, dark-haired, intense woman of thirty-seven. She wore her expensive clothes well and she always appeared in public fashionably dressed. Even at that time of the morning she was wearing a veiled hat and

black kid gloves. She looked several years younger than Ben.

"This would be quite a surprise, Ben," she said in an unhurried manner as she carefully worked the black kid gloves from her fingers, "if I hadn't known what to expect. It's not quite as exciting as I thought it would be, though. Did I get here too soon? Or am I late? I thought surely you and Vickie Crockett would be somewhat more intimate. I'd expected a scene, of course, and that you'd——"

"What are you doing here, Mary Lou?" Ben said as he moved away from Vickie.

"I came to surprise you and Vickie, of course."

"How did you know?"

"A kind friend was thoughtful enough to take the trouble to phone me, Ben."

"Nobody knew about it, except Nick Dopolous."

"It wasn't the proprietor of the Rainbow Café, Ben."

"I don't know who else it could be."

Vickie and Ben glanced inquiringly at each other.

"I know—it was Pauline!" Vickie said impulsively. "That's who it was!"

Mary Lou dropped her gloves on the table. Then she turned and smiled condescendingly at Vickie.

"Yes," she agreed with exaggerated politeness. "Yes, it was Pauline. She said she was a very close friend of yours, Vickie, and that she was doing it for your own good. It must be nice to have such dear friends, Vickie."

Ben got up and walked towards his wife.

"We were just sitting here talking, Mary Lou," he said. "You can see that for yourself."

"But right now you're looking at me, Ben Humphrey, and frantically trying to think what to say next, aren't you? Do you need more time to think of something to say? How would you like a suggestion? Why not give the injured

wife some small satisfaction? You could speak right out and say you'll do the injured wife a magnanimous favour by giving her the satisfaction of hearing you plead for forgiveness. How does that sound to you, Ben? Or would you like to consult Vickie Crockett before you answer?" She unclasped her handbag. "Why don't you and Vickie talk it over, Ben, while I look in here for something?"

She put her hand inside the bag, drew out a small pearl-handled pistol, and pointed it at Ben.

"Mary Lou!" he said excitedly. "Don't do that! You mustn't do that, Mary Lou!"

She moved closer, holding the pistol unwaveringly in her hand, and Ben backed away. Then she pointed it at Vickie.

"Some things aren't nice, Vickie," she said sweetly. The smile on her face slowly disappeared. "One of them is trying to take another woman's husband," she said in a loud clear voice. "If you didn't know that before, you're going to know it before you leave here!"

With a quick nervous motion she turned around, prodded Ben with the pistol, and forced him into the hall. Then she shut the door and locked it. Vickie was standing beside the couch when Mary Lou laid the pistol on the table beside her gloves. A moment later she had reached forward and grasped a handful of Vickie's hair. Vickie, screaming, fought back with all her might. Mary Lou's veiled hat went sailing across the room and her tight dress split across the shoulders. Her carefully combed hair fell over her face. They were soon fighting like two children as they ripped and tore each other's clothes. Vickie began to cry when she saw her new black wool dress ripped from her, and she snatched savagely at Mary Lou's clothes until there was nothing left for her hands to grasp. Mary Lou pulled Vickie's hair with both hands and Vickie clamped her teeth into the flesh of Mary Lou's shoulder. They both were screaming

with pain when Ben broke the lock on the door and got to them. He had to shoulder his body between them in order to separate them, and then he held the two crying women at arm's length. While he was wondering what to do next, Mary Lou sank exhausted to the floor. Vickie backed away and began searching tearfully for her clothes. Ben went to the closet and got a raincoat for her. When he came back and put it around her, she was holding a piece of her new black dress in her hand and crying brokenly. Ben took her to the street door, led her outside, and then hurried back to his wife. Mary Lou was still sobbing when he lifted her from the floor and carried her to the couch. After that he sat down beside her and looked solemnly at the shreds of clothing scattered over the room.

CHAPTER TWELVE

DANIEL BOONE BLALOCK and the two engineers from Washington, who had spent the past three days inspecting the Middle Valley water-power project, drove into town shortly before midnight and got out of their car in front of the Southland Hotel. They were muddy, tired, and stiff-kneed. Their car had been stuck in the mud several times and once they had had to walk eight miles to get a farmer to pull the car out of a mud-hole with a team of horses.

Dan, as usual at that time of night, was hungry, but for once he felt too tired to walk around the corner to the Rainbow Café, and he followed the two men into the hotel and, after saying good-night, went straight to his room on the fifth floor.

He had taken off his muddy shoes and pants and was pouring himself a drink of bourbon when he heard a timid, hesitant knock on the door. The first thought that came to his mind was that Vickie had heard he was back in town and had come to see him. He hoped it was Vickie, even though he was tired, and while he hastily drank the whisky he assured himself that after a quick hot shower and a few drinks he would feel like himself again and not let his fatigue disappoint her. She differed so amazingly from any other girl or woman he had ever known intimately, because of the particularly pleasing and unusual manner of her aggressiveness at a time when all the others he had known were merely submissive and traditionally supine, that the memory of her suddenly made him determined to keep her at any cost. Her surprising actions the night they had their first date had been the cause of his reversing his

lifelong conception of a woman's ideal behaviour, and now the prospect of renewing the experience made his hand shake nervously. He put down the empty glass and went to the door. He had not seen Vickie since the earlier part of the week and it gave him a feeling of pride to think she was so anxious to see him. He threw open the door to greet her. Only an instant passed before his heavy jowl was sagging disappointedly.

Chism, nodding familiarly with a downward thrust of his chin, walked leisurely past him without waiting to be invited into the room. Dan, expelling his pent breath in a burst of anger, watched helplessly as Chism continued across the room to the table where the bottles and glasses were kept.

"What do you mean by walking in here like this, Crockett?" he demanded in a loud voice. He slammed the door and hurried gingerly to Chism on his bare feet. "What do you want here, Crockett?"

Chism helped himself to a generous portion of bourbon, tossing down the drink with a backward jerk of his head. Dan grabbed him by the shoulder and turned him around roughly. Chism stepped back, his heavy black brows lowered, and eyed him coldly.

"What'd you do that for?" Chism said.

"I didn't invite you to my room and you know it!" Dan said, both angry and disappointed because he had expected Vickie. All at once he felt tired again. He leaned against the table for support. "What makes you think you can walk in here like this and help yourself to my liquor!"

"You opened the door for me, didn't you?" Chism said. "Where I come from that always means welcome."

"I was expecting somebody else, not you," Dan was quick to tell him.

Chism sat down on the bed.

"Mr. Blalock, I've been waiting three whole days and nights for you to get back to town. Where in the world have you been all this time?"

"I don't like to be questioned," Dan snapped at him. "How did you know I came back to town tonight, anyway?"

"I've been sitting across the street in front of the hotel door waiting for you to drive up in your car. That's how I came to know about it."

"For three days?" Dan asked, looking surprised. "You've been waiting out there all that time?"

"Just near about, except for the time when I went away to get a bite to eat."

"I'm dog-tired, Crockett," Dan pleaded. "I'm all fagged out. You can see that just by looking at me. I've been tramping through sloughs and swamps and God-knows-what-else on both sides of the Middle River for three whole days. Just look at my clothes over there in the corner. Just look at the mud on them. That shows what I've been through. He watched Chism's unchanging expression with a helpless feeling. "I've got to get some rest. Please go away now and I'll see you first thing in the morning. Will you be considerate enough to do that for me? I'd appreciate it from the depths of my heart."

Chism shook his head. "Tomorrow'll be too late, Mr. Blalock. I've just got to get a few things settled right away. I ain't had a wink of sleep for three whole nights, sitting up and waiting for you like I've been. It's too important to put off. I want to get it straightened out now."

"What do you want to know?" Dan asked resignedly. He poured himself another drink, and sat down with a weary sigh in the chair. "Hurry up and tell me so I can get some sleep. I'll be a wreck tomorrow if this keeps up much longer."

"I'm worried about my government job, Mr. Blalock," Chism said with a worried look. "You gave it to me nearly a week ago, but I've got a feeling I ain't been put on the payroll yet, and I don't even know what kind of work I ought to be doing. I hate to think I'm just sitting around loafing and cheating the government out of honest work, when I could be hard at work like any government man. It ain't fair to the taxpayers, neither. I ought to be earning my pay. I asked at the post office about my government pay-check yesterday, the day before, and twice today, but they said they didn't know a thing about it. Every time I asked them what they thought I ought to do about it, they said the best thing was to speak to you about it, since you was the one who promised me the job in the first place. That's why I've been waiting across the street from the hotel all this time. I wanted to make sure to see you and ask you about it the minute you got back to town."

Dan rested his elbows on his knees and ran his hands over his shiny bald head. He groaned deep in his chest and then sat there in silence for a minute or longer staring at his bare feet and tried to think of some way to get Chism out of the room. He still hoped that Vickie would come to see him and he wanted to get Chism out of the way before she got there. He raised his head and glanced at his watch on the table. It was already quarter to one.

"I've been doing my part just like I said I would at the start," Chism finally spoke up. "I always was one to hold up my end of a bargain."

"What are you talking about now?" Dan asked, turning with a harsh look.

"Well, there's been talk, and plenty of it," Chism explained. "And I've been doing my part by going around town saying there ain't a shred of truth in it, just exactly like you said you wanted me to. I've put in considerable

time doing that, and if I learned one thing from it, it's that it's a heap easier to get somebody to believe anything you want to tell them than it is to get somebody to disbelieve it."

"What kind of talk?"

"Mostly about Vickie, Mr. Blalock, and you."

"Why didn't you put a stop to it like you said you would?"

"That's the whole trouble, Mr. Blalock. It looks like it got out of hand, I'm afraid. Three nights ago Vickie went down to the undertaker's and got into a hell of a big scrap with the undertaker's wife, Mrs. Mary Lou Humphrey. That was the same night you left to go away. Well, she and Vickie pulled hair and ripped clothes and things like that. It was just about the biggest fight between two women that ever took place in this town. They tell me that both of them was as naked as jay birds in moulting season when they got through. And then they ended up biting one another with their teeth. You know yourself there ain't no holds barred when two females get to fighting over a man."

"What man?" Dan asked, sitting up erectly. "You don't mean me, do you?"

"No, it was Ben Humphrey, Mary Lou's husband. He's the undertaker. Right now he's carrying around some scraps of cloth in his pocket just to show how little the pieces was when they got through stripping one another. They look exactly like he'd reached down and pulled them out of a rag-bag. You ask Ben to show them to you and you'll see for yourself. None of the piece is as big as a common handkerchief."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Dan said uneasily. He got up and took another drink. "I wish Vickie hadn't been mixed up in it." He sat down again. "But, after all, what's that got to do with me? The agreement you and I had was con-

cerned with an entirely different matter. What I mean is, it was concerned with gossip about Vickie and myself."

"I'm trying to explain how it all leads up to just that," Chism told him. "That's what I'm trying to get around to. The next day after the big fight, Mary Lou Humphrey came right out and told a lot of people that she knew for a fact that Vickie had been up here in the hotel sleeping with you and that she ought to stay up here and not go down to the undertaking parlour and try to sleep with Ben. If you ask me, I'd say the whole trouble is that Ben Humphrey's been on the nightwatch at the undertaker's job so long he's got out of the habit of sleeping with his own wife. But, anyway, Mary Lou said she knew all about Vickie sleeping up here with you because Pauline, who works in the Rainbow Café, too, told her all about it at the same time she was telling Mary Lou about Vickie going down to the undertaker's parlour to sleep with Ben because you left town."

"Because I left town!" Dan said, raising his voice. "Good Lord! Why should she do that?"

"Mr. Blalock, you know what makes women do what they do as well as me. That's just the way they are, and they don't change from one year to the next, neither. They don't have to have a reason for what they do. You know that."

"That was part of your job—to keep my name from being mentioned in things like that!"

"I think I was doing all right till Mary Lou Humphrey started talking like she did, and I don't know no way to overcome that."

"Well, I hope you denied it most emphatically. I mean, the part about me. You certainly wouldn't want that kind of gossip to spread over the country, would you?"

"I tried my best to do what I could, but all the while I was worrying myself sick about my government job, too. I

couldn't separate the two things in my mind to save my life. It just seemed natural for them to go together. I got to figuring that if a man does what he's paid for, on one hand, then there ain't no sense in his doing it if he don't get paid for it, on the other hand. I can't seem to figure it any other way in my mind."

Dan got up and went to the window. He stood there with his back to the room and gazed for a long time down into the street. A taxicab drove up to the hotel entrance and stopped. He watched hopefully, wondering if Vickie was coming to see him after all, but nobody got out of the cab. He turned from the window, disappointed and angry.

"You're a scoundrel, Crockett!" he shouted at Chism. "A damn scoundrel!"

"I don't see why you'd say that, Mr. Blalock." Chism protested with an injured look.

"You're a damn scoundrel because you're blackmailing me, that's why! It's blackmail if I ever saw it. You're trying to make me give you money for what you ought to do of your own accord. Don't you feel duty-bound to protect your own daughter's good name? Don't you want to defend womanhood?"

"I sure do. I want to defend womanhood just as much as the next man to come along."

"Then why in thunderation don't you!"

"Mr. Blalock, I'm only trying to hold up my end of the bargain me and you made. I want to defend womanhood just as much as you do, and I will, too, when I get this other thing settled right. The big thing right now is straightening out this bargain me and you had for me to talk down anything I might hear about you and Vickie, and you was to get me this fine government job. I don't see no sense in talking good about you if I ain't drawing down pay from the govern-

ment. That'd make the bargain come out all in your favour, and none in mine. Now, ain't that a fair and square way to look at it?"

"Chism, you don't want people to gossip about your daughter, do you? Don't you feel deep down inside of you somewhere that it's your duty to defend womanhood in general, come what may?"

"Mr. Blalock, every living soul in town knows all about Vickie and the way she runs around with every Tom, Dick and Harry, and you know good and well yourself that you can't turn a creek around and make it run uphill. The biggest thing I could say in her favour was that it was some other woman sleeping with you up here in the hotel, and not Vickie, and I couldn't tell that to sound like anything but a great big lie, unless I felt I was getting some lasting good out of it."

"I wish you'd been honest enough to tell me before we entered into our agreement that this was going to be your point of view."

"You didn't ask me."

"This is out-and-out blackmail and I won't stand for it," Dan stated.

"I could make it a lot worse by going around talking about it and saying you made Vickie a big promise, like marrying her, to get her to sleep with you and that you tricked her and don't defend womanhood like you boasted about, but always tried to do the opposite. People would believe that in a jiffy." His bushy black eyebrows moved upward towards his wrinkled forehead. "They wouldn't like that, Mr. Blalock."

"Who are you talking about?" Dan asked nervously. "Who are 'they'?"

"All the men in the Klan," Chism stated while a smile broke from one corner of his mouth.

Dan squirmed uncomfortably in the chair. One of his big toes began to twitch nervously.

"I can see that I'll have to do something," he said after a while. "I can't afford to have that kind of unfavourable publicity. It would ruin me. I wish to God I'd never laid eyes on you in my life." He ran his hands over his bald head. "Let me think it over, Chism. Give me a day or two. In the meantime, I beg of you, Chism, to be decent enough to counteract as much of the gossip as you possibly can. Tell people it was all a big mistake about Vickie coming up here to my room and say she's secretly engaged to marry some other man. Any man. Think up somebody. Anybody you want to. But for God's sake leave my name out of it. I'm a married man, and everybody knows it. Mentioning my name in that connection would play havoc."

"I'd sure like to accommodate you, Mr. Blalock, but I hate to go away not knowing a speck more than I did when I walked in," Chism stated doubtfully. "I still want to know where I stand about getting on the pay-roll and start living off the government. I wouldn't mind doing a little work for the government, because it'd sort of give me an elevated standing around town."

"You can give me a day or two to straighten this out, can't you, Chism?" Dan asked him. "You'll hear from me not later than the day after tomorrow. In the meantime, I'd consider it a great personal favour if you'd go around town telling the people it was all a mistake about my having any connection whatsoever, in a personal way, with your daughter. You'll be defending womanhood, and at the same time it'll do me a world of good, too."

"But what about the government job, Mr. Blalock?" Chism asked with unflagging persistence.

"I've always made it a practice to take care of people who

go out of their way to do me a personal favour. I don't forget things like that."

"If that means I'm getting the government job, I'll do all I can to help you out, Mr. Blalock. That's what had me worried sick, I reckon. But if you say I don't have a thing to worry about from now on, I can go away feeling easy in my mind."

Chism got up and poured himself a drink. He drank the whisky in a gulp and went to the door. He stood there uncertain for several moments as though he might change his mind and not leave, and Dan was relieved when he finally opened the door and stepped into the hall.

"Well, I'm mighty glad we understand each other now, Mr. Blalock," he said, nodding with satisfaction. "I'm going home now and get some sleep. First thing tomorrow I'm going out and start talking about the big mistake people made about thinking Vickie's been sleeping up here in the hotel with you. I'll take care of that for you, Mr. Blalock, so don't worry about it no more. And don't forget about my government job, neither."

As he walked away, Dan hurriedly closed the door and locked it to prevent Chism from getting into the room again in case he changed his mind. Just as he turned the key in the lock, Chism pounded urgently on the door.

"What do you want?" Dan shouted.

"Mr. Blalock, how'd you like to go possum hunting one of these nights soon? I've got three of the finest possum hounds that ever trailed a scent. How about going tomorrow night, Mr. Blalock?"

"God Almighty, no! I've been running with the hare or hunting with the hounds for twenty years, and I'm completely frazzled out."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

NOBBY WOKE UP in mid-afternoon and yelled for Dorisse. Jarvis, who was playing in the front yard with several of the neighbours' children, heard him and ran around the house to tell Dorisse that Nobby was awake and wanted her right away. She was on the back porch wringing clothes, and she quickly dried her hands and ran into the house. Nobby was propped up in bed with the pillows stuffed behind his back and was sleepily rubbing his eyes when she went into the room and closed the door.

"Noble——" she said softly.

"What time is it?" he asked, gruff and hoarse, as he looked up and saw her standing at the foot of the bed.

"It's about three o'clock, Noble," she told him. She went to the side of the bed and sat down beside him. "Did you have enough sleep?"

"Naw," he grumbled gruffly. He ran his fingers through his hair and yawned. "Why don't you make those damn kids shut up out there? Nobody can sleep with all that racket going on. Some day I'm going to get after them with a stick, and then they'll stay away from here."

"Will you try to go back to sleep, Noble? I'll ask the children to play in the back yard and then I'll wake you up in plenty of time for dinner. Would you like that, Noble?"

"Get me a cigarette," he told her, waving his hand in the direction of the bedside table.

Dorisse took a cigarette from the pack, lit it, and placed it between his lips. Then with a quick movement she leaned over and kissed him on the forehead before he could push her away.

"Noble, it was almost six o'clock when you got home this morning," she said with an exaggerated pretence of chiding him as she would a small child. She reached for his hand and squeezed him affectionately. "Why do you stay out so late, Noble? Couldn't you come home by midnight, like you used to? You don't know how much nicer it'd be if you only would. I miss you so much, Noble."

"There you go—bellyaching again!" he said disagreeably. "Leave me alone and stop preaching at me." He pushed her away.

"I'm sorry, Noble. I didn't mean it that way. It's just that I miss you so much at night. I never have you with me at night any more. I dread to see the day end, because as soon as it gets dark I feel lonely. I worry all the time, too, wondering where you are and if anything's happened to you. Don't you see, Noble?"

He drew on the cigarette, sucked the smoke deep into his lungs, and then noisily expelled it through his lips.

"It would be so wonderful if we were together every night, Noble, like we were when we were first married. You remember that, don't you? It was heavenly. I get awfully lonely just sitting here. If we had any kind of home of our own, you wouldn't stay out at night, would you? I know you wouldn't want to, Noble. It'd be just us, and nobody else. Can't we do that, Noble? Please say we can!"

"I wish you'd shut up!" he said roughly. "I'm tired of hearing that talk. I told you I was going to stay right here."

She tried to move close and put her arms around him. Nobby shoved her away.

"I want some money, Dorisse," he told her bluntly. After he had spoken, he watched her with a defiant stare. "That's what I said. Money."

"Oh, Noble," she said miserably. Her hands fell weakly

to her lap. "What's going to happen! What are we going to do!"

"I can tell you. It's that I want ten dollars right away. And you're going to get it for me."

"No!" she said breathlessly.

"Yes!" he said in a mocking manner.

She was shaking her head slowly from side to side and biting her lips in an effort to keep from bursting into tears. She knew by the cruel narrowing of his eyes that it would be useless to try to plead with him, and she tried frantically to think of some way of getting money for him. Vickie was still asleep in the next room, but she knew that if she woke up her sister, she would not lend her the money even if she had it, because Vikie had said emphatically that she was not going to give her another dime to hand over to Nobby Hair.

"Please, Noble!" she said helplessly.

"Go get me some money like I told you."

"I can't—I can't!"

"The hell you can't."

"I'll do anything else in the world for you, Noble."

"You'll do this first, and then everything else, too, if I tell you."

She sat there for second after second while his narrowed unrelenting stare forced her to believe that she should do as he demanded. She moved away from him.

"All right," she said without looking at him.

She got up and walked across the room to the dressing-table where she picked up her comb and ran it with a listless motion through her hair. Nobby watched her, but said nothing more to her. Still not looking at him, she crossed the room, opened the door, and went out. She had no idea where to go or what to do when she left the house and walked in a daze towards town, but she could hear herself

saying over and over again that she had to get the money for Nobby somehow before she could go back home.

She walked the length of Main Street and back again. Several men spoke to her and she returned the greeting each time without knowing what she was saying or to whom she was speaking. When she passed the pool-room the second time, one of the men standing in the doorway stepped in front of her.

"Say, aren't you Nobby Hair's wife?" he asked her.

She nodded.

"Are you looking for Nobby? I haven't seen him all day. He usually doesn't come out until dark."

"No, I'm not looking for him. I know where he is."

"Well, then——"

She walked past him before he could say anything more.

Each time somebody spoke to her after that all she could hear was Nobby's angry voice telling her to get some money for him and, even though she knew she had to obey him, she was afraid. During all the time she had been walking along Main Street she was trying to think of some way to escape the humiliation of having to go to Ross. She was standing undecidedly on the corner when a man came up and said something to her. With a frightened glance at his strange face she ran across the street. It did not occur to her that Ross might not be there until she was at the door of his office. With her heart pounding in her breast she opened the door.

"Ross!" she cried out in relief when she saw him sitting at his desk. "You're here!"

Ross got up immediately and went to her. She was trembling when he put his arm around her.

"What's the matter, Dorisse?"

"I was so afraid you wouldn't be here!"

He took her to a chair.

"How'd you get yourself into a state like this?" He bent over her with concern. "What's happened?"

"Noble——" she said with a sob.

Ross pulled up another chair and sat down in front of her. He held her hand comfortingly.

"What about him, Dorisse?" he asked when she had become quiet. "I want to know all about it."

She lifted her head and looked at him. "He needs some money, Ross."

Ross leaned back in his chair.

"It's time we did something about this," he stated in a firm voice. "Things have gone far enough."

"No!" she cried, wildly shaking her head. "You mustn't do that!"

"Do what?"

"Do anything to hurt him."

"I'm not thinking of his feelings, Dorisse. I stopped that a long time ago. I'm thinking of you."

She looked down at her hands in her lap. "I don't know what to do, Ross."

"I'll tell you the same thing I'd tell any girl who came in here with a story like yours."

"What do you mean?" She bit her lips while she waited to hear what he was going to say.

"Divorce him."

"No!" she said, sobbing.

"But it's for your own good, Dorisse."

"I don't care about myself—I could never do that!"

"You've got to listen to me, Dorisse."

"I'll listen to anything else—but not that! I could never do that, Ross. I don't want to. I love Noble. He's my husband. Don't you understand, Ross?" She looked at him pathetically. "No matter what happens, I could never do that, Ross."

"But just look how unhappy you are," he said to her. "You'll never be happy with him."

"But I am happy—in my own way. Can't you see, Ross? I am happy!"

He watched her for a moment and then shook his head. "It'll never work out. You've given it more than a fair try, and the wise thing to do now is to get yourself out of this unfortunate situation while you can. It's the only wise thing to do, Dorisse."

"I couldn't leave Noble for anything in the world. He's my husband and I love him and——"

"You're only trying to fool yourself now, Dorisse. You're whistling in the dark. Why don't you admit it's true? Deep down in your heart you know better than that."

"It's in my heart that I know I love Noble. That's why I'm so sure of it."

He shook his head to himself. "You almost convince me that I'm trying to break up a happy marriage. But not quite."

Ross leaned back and looked out the window for a long time. It was getting late, and the afternoon shadows under the trees along the street were becoming darker each minute and it would soon be time to turn on the lights in the office. While they had been sitting there in silence he had tried to think of some way to convince his sister that she should give up Nobby, but in the end he knew he had failed.

Dorisse was watching him when he turned around and faced her again.

"Please don't ever say things like that again, Ross," she asked appealingly.

He did not say anything for a moment. "How are you going to get money for him?" he asked finally.

"I don't know."

"Do you honestly believe everything would be different

if you and Nobby lived somewhere else—if you had our own home?”

“I’m sure of it, Ross,” she replied confidently. Her face brightened with a smile. “That’s all it would have to be. It’s as simple as that. It’s living at home, with Papa the way he is, and everything else, that makes it so terrible. We’ve never had a chance to live our life alone. There’s always somebody around—it’s Grandpa or Jane or Jarvis, and Vickie and Papa. It’s not like being married at all.”

“You can certainly make it sound simple.”

“It is, Ross. Noble would go to work and stop staying out all night gambling like he does and we’d have——”

“I can try to find somebody who’ll give Nobby a job,” he told her. “It won’t be easy, but I’ll try. You’ll have to persuade him to go to work, though. That’s too much of a task for me. I couldn’t force Nobby to work.”

“I’ll talk to him, Ross,” she said gratefully. “Noble will listen. I just know he will.”

“Well, in the meantime, what about his money?”

“Noble needs ten dollars.”

“What’s he going to do with it?”

“I don’t know, exactly.”

“Yes, you do. And I know, too.” Ross took out his pocket-book. “Here’s five dollars. I’m not going to give him ten.”

“I’m sure that’ll be enough, Ross.” She stood up. “I don’t know how to thank you, or to say when I can pay it back.”

“You can thank me right now by making Nobby Hair go to work,” he told her, smiling.

Dorisse went to the door and stood there hesitantly with her hand on the knob as though there was something she wanted very much to tell Ross. He waited, watching her inquiringly, and was about to ask her what it was she

wanted to say when she quickly opened the door and ran to the street. He followed her part way down the hall, calling to her but, even though she heard him, she continued running. She had wanted to tell Ross that she was afraid, but the humiliation would have been more than she could stand.

She hurried home as fast as she could, clutching the money in the palm of her hand so as not to lose it, and when she reached the house, she ran up the steps and went inside. She stopped abruptly at the bedroom door. She did not want to be afraid of Nobby, but she knew at that moment that she was, and had been for a long time. Closing her eyes momentarily, she knew there was nothing she could do about it, and she opened the door and went into the room.

Nobby was still in bed. He raised his head from the pillows and watched her expressionlessly as she came towards him. She hurried to the side of the bed and handed him the money.

A wide pleased smile came to his face. "You got it, didn't you?" he said.

She nodded, holding her clenched hands in her lap.

"What did I tell you?" he said. "Didn't I say you could do it?"

She nodded again with a slight movement of her head.

"It's easy for you," he said, laughing at her. "Next time you'll be able to do it with your eyes shut."

Nobby had begun to unfold the money. The smile faded from his face.

"This's only five," he said, scowling. "Where's the rest of it?"

"Noble, that's all I could get," she said uneasily. "Won't that be enough this time—five dollars is a lot of money!"

She could see the familiar sullen expression coming over

his face and she hastened to say something to him before he became angry.

"I want you to do something for me, Noble. I did this for you. Please say you'll do something for me. It means so much to both of us."

"What is it—the same old story?"

"I want you to take any kind of respectable job you can get so we can move away from this house and have a home of our own. It's the most important thing in the world, Noble. It's for both of us. It's not just for me. We love each other, and we don't want anything to spoil it. Don't you see, Noble?"

"All I want out of life from now on is to break that crap game for a big wad of money so I can live on easy street. I'd never have to work if I could do that. And I'm going to break it, too, one of these days. You just wait and see."

"But you must go to work, Noble."

"Why must I?"

"Because it's the only way. Gambling won't do it. And I can't go out and get money for you like this again. I just can't do it again!"

"Is that so?"

"Yes, Noble."

"Why can't you get money again? You did it this time."

"But I can't do it again."

"You will if I tell you to."

"Please, Noble——"

"Where's the rest of the money? You got ten dollars and kept five for yourself, didn't you?"

"No," she said, watching him fearfully.

Nobby threw aside the covers and got out of bed.

"You're lying to me. You got ten dollars. You're holding out on me. Now, give me that other five before I cuff you."

"Please believe me, Noble. That's every cent I could get. It was only five dollars. Honest, Noble!"

"Who'd you get it from?"

"Don't make me tell you. Please don't."

"What's his name?"

She shook her head.

"What'd you do to get it?"

Again she shook her head.

"He gave you ten dollars, didn't he?"

She was still shaking her head when she saw him come towards her.

"I'm going to teach you something you won't forget for a long time. You think you're as smart as hell, don't you? Holding out five dollars, and then won't say who you got it from! You're not as smart as you think you are!"

He struck her on the face with his open hand. Dorisse fell backwards on the bed and tried to shield her face from his blows. He jumped on her and began hitting her with both hands as hard as he could. She tried to keep from crying out, because she did not want anybody in the house to know about it, but Nobby's fists hurt her so much she could not keep from screaming with pain. He struck her time after time until she rolled off the bed. After that he stood over her and watched her crying at his feet.

"Next time you'll know better," he told her. "If I ever catch you holding out on me again, I'll cuff you silly. You won't even be able to bawl your head off like that. You hear me? Next time I ask you who you got the money from, you'll tell me in a hurry. You'd better listen to what I'm telling you, if you don't want a worse cuffing next time."

Nobby put on his clothes. He did not look at her again until he was opening the door and leaving the room. Long after he had gone, Dorisse lay sobbing on the floor. Presently Vickie came running to her from the next room and

knelt down beside her. She lifted her sister's head from the floor and held her in her arms.

"Call the police and have him arrested, Dorisse," Vickie begged her. "You've got to this time. This's awful. Will you let me call the police, Dorisse? Please let me."

"No," she said weakly between sobs. She held tightly to her sister. "You mustn't. I don't want you to."

"But just look at what he's done to you!"

"It's all right, Vickie. Noble didn't mean to hurt me. He didn't do it on purpose. I don't want him to go to jail."

"I suppose you'd even say you still love him after he did this to you!"

"Of course I do."

Vickie shook her head. "I'm sure going to count to seven million by ones the next time I feel myself getting sweet on a man—any man."

"Noble didn't really mean any harm," Dorisse said weakly to herself as she put her arms around her sister and clung to her.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

IMPELLED BY A PERSISTENT FEELING that somebody was looking at her, Jane glanced up from the magazine she was reading and saw her father standing at the corner of the shed fifty feet away. She thought at the time that there was something peculiar about the way he was leaning against the shed and watching her, but she returned to her reading without thinking about it again. She had been sitting in the sun in the back yard drying her hair for almost an hour and she had become so absorbed in the magazine that she had forgotten how long she had been there. It was Sunday afternoon. That morning she and Jarvis had gone to Sunday School at the Presbyterian Church and afterwards had stayed with Dorisse for the sermon. Grandpa Crockett had come down to hear Reverend Edwards preach, too, and when the services were over, they all had walked home together.

Nobby and Vickie were still asleep when they got there, and Chism was impatiently walking up and down in the hall and complaining about having to wait such a long time for something to eat on Sundays. Grandpa told him that he would enjoy his meal a lot more if he would go to church and listen to the kind of sermons that Reverend Edwards preached, but Chism walked away to keep from having to listen to Grandpa. When Sunday dinner was over, and the dishes had been done, Jane took off her clothes and put on an old dress and washed her hair as she always did every Sunday afternoon. Jarvis had gone up the street to play with some children, and the others were somewhere inside the house. Chism had turned Liz, Rocky, and Margie out of

the shed and they were sleeping quietly on the back porch.

Once again Jane looked up, some impulsive thought distracting her interest in the magazine, and she saw Chism walking slowly back and forth in the alley behind the shed. Each time he turned around, he looked in her direction. There was something about his way of looking at her that made her feel uneasy. She could not go back to her reading after that, and she watched her father with increasing apprehension until he stopped at the corner of the shed and stared at her. She immediately got up and turned to run to the house. Before she could go more than a few steps she heard her father calling her. She wanted to run into the house, even if it meant disobeying him, but something, either the commanding tone of his voice or her fear of him, made her remain where she was. She had always obeyed her parents, and after her mother's death she had been unable to force herself to go contrary to her father's demands. She stood there with her back towards him for what seemed like several minutes, unable either to turn and face him or to run into the house. Then when she heard him call her the second time, she knew she would have to go to him if he told her to come to the alley.

Chism raised his arm and with a commanding motion of his hand indicated that he wanted her to come to him. Jane, trembling, carefully laid the magazine on the chair and walked across the yard towards him. She did not look directly at her father when she reached the shed, but she could see him point towards the door. She stopped at the threshold. She was not surprised when she smelled the familiar odour of whisky on his breath, but the realisation that he had been drinking made her more uneasy. She remembered how cruel and unreasonable he usually was when he was partly drunk, and she stood there shaking her head until Chism reached forward and pushed her inside.

There were no windows in the shed, and when he followed her inside and locked the door, she could not see anything except several long slits of light coming through the cracks in the wall of the building. Gradually her sight became accustomed to the semi-darkness and the first thing she saw after that was her father sitting on a box against the wall and rolling a cigarette. She thought it was strange that the expression on his face did not change in any manner when she looked at him, and she immediately began looking for some way to get out of the shed. She had no idea why he had brought her there and she wondered if he were planning to punish her for something she had done. He was slow and deliberate in making the cigarette. Finally, he lit it, but still did not look at Jane, and she felt her knees suddenly become weak. After that she dropped to the floor.

Chism made no effort to help her. He sat on the box against the wall, pinching the cigarette between two fingers of one hand and fingering a rusty belt buckle he had picked up in the alley, and occasionally glanced not at her but in her general direction. They had been there for nearly five minutes when she saw him motion to her. After a moment's hesitation she obediently got up and went to where he was sitting. She wanted to plead with him to let her go, but she was afraid to speak to him. Chism blew smoke over his head. The cigarette had been smoked until only a small butt remained pinched between his tobacco-stained fingers. She knew she would not be able to control herself much longer, and she turned and started towards the door. Before she could get beyond his reach, he caught her dress with a snatching motion of his hand. She was still trying to find some way to unlock the door when he pulled her back across the shed. She sank to the floor with her back against the wall. Chism sat down on the box again.

"You're acting mighty queer," he said to her with a short laugh. "What makes you so scared?"

She looked up at her father, but said nothing.

"I want to talk to you about something important," he told her. "This's the best place to have a little private chat. That's what I wanted you to come out here for."

She waited, watching her father's face.

"You wouldn't want some folks to know everything I know, now would you?" he began. He had fingered the belt buckle until some of the rust had been rubbed from the metal. "Well, I've been thinking it over, and I'd be mostly willing to forget all about what I saw up under the stadium the other night when I happened to look through a crack in that little room up there, provided me and you could make a square deal. I've been thinking it over and I've come to the conclusion that if you don't want Mrs. Thornton and the high-school principal and a few others to know about you and Russ Thornton, the thing for you to do is to help me out every week like Vickie does. I need the money bad till I start drawing down government pay. Anything would help. It wouldn't have to be much, maybe five dollars a week'd be enough to start with. I know you don't have it now, but you could get it from Russ Thornton if you wanted to. Unless, of course, you wanted to go to work somewhere like Vickie does. You can make up your mind about that, because it'd be all the same to me either way, as long as the money was coming to me every week."

"You don't mean that, do you, Papa?"

"I sure do."

"But——" She stopped and caught her breath. He was calmly fingering the rusty buckle. "Please don't make me stop school and go to work, Papa," she begged. "I'll graduate next spring, and after that I'll do anything you say. It means

so much to me to finish school. Please don't make me stop now."

"You wouldn't have to stop school, if you wanted to work it the way I had in mind. Get the money from the coach. It'd be a lot simpler that way."

"But I couldn't do that, Papa. I just couldn't."

"Well, it looks like I'm pushed in a corner with only one way to move. If you want to change your mind before I have to tell about what I saw you and Russ Thornton doing up there that night, I'd still be willing to make the deal with you. It all depends now on just exactly what you want done about it."

Jane put her hands over her face when she knew she was no longer able to keep from crying.

"Crying won't help none," he said indifferently. "You're a big girl now and you know the main thing in life is to get along the best you can. You've grown up so fast in the past six months that you haven't stopped to think about the things you have to do to get along in the world, and that shows it's time for you to figure out the best move to make. You have to do that figuring while you have the chance. And the best time of all is when the men are making fools of themselves over you. I've seen women just as good-looking as you shoo a man away just once too often, and after that they got passed by for life. A man's going to put up with a stingy woman for just so long, and after that he's going out and find himself one that ain't stingy. You've got your chance right now to get yourself a man, and I'd hate to see you spoil everything by not listening to me. Now, the thing for you to do is to give me that five dollars every——"

"Papa, can I go now?" she pleaded. "I don't want to stay any longer."

Chism got up and looked through the cracks in the wall. The sun was shining brightly outside and from one of the

neighbours' houses across the alley came the faint sound of music from a radio. Chism went from one side of the shed to the other, looking carefully through the cracks in all four directions. He did not see anybody, but he could hear two men talking on the back porch of the Mitchells' house next door. He listened for a while and then came back to the box. Jane was still sitting on the floor, and when she saw that he was not going to unlock the door and let her leave, she jumped to her feet and tried to run past him to the door. Chism caught her before she could get away.

"Please let me go!" she begged tearfully. "I don't want to stay here any longer. I've got to go!"

While she struggled to get away from him, Chism held her by twisting her arms behind her back. After a while she sank exhausted to the floor.

"You've got to let me go, Papa," she said beseechingly. "Please don't make me stay here any longer."

"I know what I'm doing. I've been thinking this over in my mind ever since I happened to pass by the stadium that night and saw that light shining through the crack, and I've made up my mind it's the thing to do. I ain't heard a thing about that job Dan Blalock promised me, and I'm hard up for money. This's a pretty good time for me and you to make a deal, because you'll be wanting to see Russ Thornton again soon and I know you wouldn't want something to come up and spoil it for you. You wouldn't want him to lose his job and be run out of town would you? Maybe you're thinking I'm just talking, but I ain't. The people who'd run him out of town know how to handle a man they don't like, white or black. We ran a nigger clear out of the state a couple of weeks ago, and he'll never come back here again as long as the Klan's on its toes. And we're here to stay, believe me. If you think so much of Russ, you'll want me to keep quiet about what I know."

"I hate you! I can't help it—I hate you!"

"You'll get over that."

"I wish somebody would break down the door!"

"Nobody's got business coming on my private property."

"You've got to let me go sometime, and when you do, I'll tell somebody—I'll tell Grandpa!"

"He's nothing but a doting old fool. Nobody'll pay attention to what he says."

She got up and tried once more to run past him to the door, but Chism caught her by the arm. She hit him with her fists, but he laughed at her efforts to hurt him.

"I'd better take precautions," he said, continuing to laugh at her. He quickly reached down and grabbed the bottom of her dress. He ripped the dress up over her head and shoulders and then threw it across the shed. "Now, maybe you'll stay here till you make up your mind about what you're going to do."

She tried once more to get away from him, but the harder she struggled the tighter he held her. She did not realise how helpless she was until he forced her to the floor. She lay there watching him fearfully until she thought of kicking him so hard he would have to release her.

She waited, watching for an opportunity, and then suddenly kicked him with all her strength. With a wild leap she got past him and ran screaming to the door. She beat against the rough boards and screamed as loudly as she could until Chism got to her. He jerked her roughly and slapped his hand over her mouth. She could not make a sound after that and all she could do was hope that somebody had heard her. Chism took her away from the door and made her go back to the far end of the shed. With his hand pressing painfully over her mouth he forced her into the corner.

"Now, the thing for you to do is be sensible," he told her

unsmilingly. "You're acting like a young hell-cat. There's no sense in getting all upset like this and yelling your head off. Nobody's coming in here, anyhow."

He watched her while she tried to shake her head.

"I'm willing to meet you half-way," he told her, "but if you keep on acting like this, I can be as mean as hell about it. I brought you out here to make a trade with you, and I'm still willing. All this yelling and fighting won't settle a cussed thing. I can hold out just as long, maybe a heap longer, than you can."

Just then they both heard somebody talking in the alley. Chism turned his head and listened, and as he did so, Jane pulled his hand from her mouth and screamed before he could stop her. Almost instantly there was a sound of somebody running around the corner of the shed, and then the door rattled. The lock held at first, but it gave way when weight was thrown against it, and the door flew open, banging loudly against the wall.

Two men rushed inside. They were Ed Mitchell, who lived next door, and his brother Tom, who was visiting him that afternoon. They came forward cautiously while they squinted into the semi-darkness of the shed. Jane still could not call to them for help, and they did not see her until they were almost at the corner. Ed Mitchell bent over and recognised her at once.

Chism turned and thrust his hand against Ed's chest. Ed and Tom stepped aside.

"Good God, Chism," Ed said. "What's going on?"

"None of your business. Get out of here. What do you mean by breaking down my door? This's my property."

"Now, wait a minute, Chism," Ed said, holding up his hands. "I don't like to butt into a neighbour's affairs, but this time it's different." He took several steps forward.

"She wouldn't have yelled like she did if there hadn't been something wrong."

"You always was too much of a nosy neighbour, and I don't have to put up with it if I don't want to."

He drew back his fist and hit Ed Mitchell as hard as he could. Ed staggered backward, but kept his footing. He did not attempt to hit Chism, as he wished to avoid a fight, but Chism, his face flushed with anger, kept on coming towards him until he was standing with his back against the wall. Before he could get out of the way, Chism hit him again. Ed's lip began to bleed, and Tom grabbed Chism by the shoulder and swung him half-way around. Tom did not hit him, but Ed did. He swung his fist against the side of Chism's head, knocking him against the wall. Before either of them could strike another blow, Tom got between them and held them apart.

"Let's call this off before it goes too far," Tom said. "I never did like to walk over to another man's house and get mixed up in a fight. Let's quit while we can."

"You Mitchells are yellow," Chism said, fighting to get at Ed. "That's why you want to quit—you're yellow! I never did have much regard for you Mitchells, and now I ain't got a bit left. If I ever catch a Mitchell nosing around over here again where he ain't wanted, I'll—I'll——"

"That suits me fine," Ed retorted. "You can stay away from my house, too, after this."

While they were talking, Jane ran from the shed. As soon as she had gone through the doorway, Ed and Tom, carefully watching Chism as they backed away, went outside and stood in the alley.

Dorisse, who had heard the loud voices, came running from the house as Jane ran to her. Just behind Dorisse came Grandpa Crockett hurrying as fast as he could. He stopped and looked at Jane as she ran past him and then, flourish-

ing his cane, went towards the shed. He saw Ed and Tom Mitchell standing in the alley, but he did not stop to speak to them. He went straight to the shed door. After stepping inside, he stood just beyond the threshold squinting his eyes and looking for Chism. Chism was sitting on the box in the corner and rolling a cigarette. He did not look up until it was too late to move. Raising the heavy oak cane over his head, Grandpa swung it downward upon Chism's shoulder as hard as he could. Chism, taken completely by surprise, yelled and ran out of the shed before Grandpa could hit him again. He was backing away from the shed door, cursing the Mitchells, when Grandpa came out. Grandpa walked to the middle of the alley.

"Thank you for the help, Ed," he said in a shaky voice. "I'm mighty grateful that you came over here when you did."

Ed nodded, but made no reply. He and his brother waited in the alley a little while longer, but Chism made no threats against Grandpa Crockett and presently they walked up the alley and went into the house.

Grandpa, holding his long white beard against his chest, took several steps in Chism's direction. He stopped when he saw that Chism was backing away and getting ready to run if he came any closer.

"If I had the strength, I'd give you the whipping of your life, Chism," Grandpa said with a threatening motion of his cane. "It's a pity I don't have the strength to do it, because if ever a man needed a sound thrashing, it's you. I never thought there'd be a Sunday afternoon like this in my life."

"Why don't you mind your own business and leave me alone? I wasn't doing nothing. I was only trying to make a trade with her. I've got a right to do that if I want to. All you've ever done is butt into where you're not wanted.

This is my place, and I'll do as I please on it. You can get off it if you don't like what I do."

"It was bad enough when you took Jarvis off and got him drunk and then took him down to the railroad yard, but this's worse. I don't know what to expect next. Everybody knows things have been getting worse every day since you sold the home-place and moved to town. We'd never have come to this if we'd stayed on the home-place."

"There you go fussing about that cussed farm again. You can fuss about that blame farm from now till you're dead for all I care. I ain't going to pay no more attention to it. Why don't you find fault with something else for a change? Is that cussed farm all you can ever think about?"

"I'm going to keep on talking about it till you get some sense into that head of yours. Maybe some day you'll wake up before it's too late and realise what a fool you've been. That's the only hope I can see for you, Chism."

Chism, saying nothing, backed down the alley, leaving Grandpa standing at the side of the shed. Grandpa waited until he was out of sight before going into the house to ask Dorisse about Jane.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

IT WAS A FEW MINUTES past midnight when Vickie walked through the lobby of the Southland Hotel, carefully keeping behind the potted plants to prevent the night clerk from seeing her, and went up to the fifth floor. She had changed her clothes a few minutes earlier in the washrom of the Rainbow Café and had put on the new dress she had bought to replace the one that Mary Lou Humphrey had ruined. Nick had agreed to let her have the remainder of the night off with the understanding that she would make up the lost time on the following Tuesday night. She disliked working on her weekly night off, but it was almost twelve o'clock then and she did not want to be late getting to the hotel. She had merely nodded to Nick and then left without saying anything more about it, because she knew Pauline had been listening to every word said. Instead of entering the Southland through the side door, she had gone through the lobby to the elevator in order to save time. Several men in the lobby had turned and looked at her as she passed, but she was sure the night clerk had not seen her. She woke up the negro elevator boy and told him to hurry to the fifth floor.

Daniel Boone Blalock, wearing the brightest red silk pyjamas she had ever seen, was propped up in bed reading a newspaper and smoking a cigar. The aroma of his cigar was familiar to her, and it gave her a pleasurable sensation to smell it again. Dan had not expected her to enter his room without first knocking on the door, and he looked up in surprise when she walked in. He immediately threw the paper aside and laid his cigar on the ash-tray. Vickie closed the door behind her, at the same time looking around the room

as though she were surprised not to find anyone else there, and then, feeling relieved to know that he had been alone, sat down on the bed beside him. She could not resist the desire to let her hand touch the smooth silky softness of his pyjamas, and she wondered if she would ever be able to have such expensive garments.

"Vickie, my dear, I don't believe a lonely man has ever had the extreme good fortune to see such a charming person come into his life." Dan laid his hand on hers and held it tightly. "I've been sitting here for the past hour trying with all the will-power I possess to contain my anticipation within reasonable bounds, but now that you have actually appeared in all your beauty, I am forced to renounce my faith in the ability to restrain myself. This has happened to me very few times in the past, I assure you, and as you know I've had a long and varied career in public life. But being a lonely man in public life does have its gratifying rewards, after all."

"It's awfully nice of you to say such wonderful things about me, Mr. Blalock."

"Dan, Vickie—Dan!"

"—Dan."

"That's more like it, Vickie," he said, patting her knee. "Always call me Dan, Vickie. It makes me feel more human."

He got up and locked the door securely and pulled the shades still farther down over the windows. After that he turned out all the lights except the reading lamp on the bedside table and poured a generous amount of bourbon whisky into two water-glasses.

"Now," he said as he touched his glass to hers, "we can feel secure from prying eyes. We can enjoy the privilege of being our natural selves."

Dan drank some of the bourbon and sat down beside her.

"It's a wonderful feeling, Vickie, for a man in my position to be able to let down one's guard and indulge in mankind's slightest whim and wildest impulse. A politician in my station in life has to be far more circumspect than a minister of the gospel, because the average voter will take offence to the most innocent remark or action with damaging results, while a minister can always take refuge in some relevant quotation from the Bible. A politician has nothing like that to fall back upon as a last resort. He has to appear at all times like Cæsar's wife, or run the dire risk of having the voters turn against him at the polls with all the ferocity of a vengeful mule's kick."

Vickie was enthralled by the sonorous sound of Dan's voice as it receded deep into his chest at the end of each sentence. She looked at him admiringly.

"I'm going to vote for you the next time you want to be elected to something, Dan," she told him with a fervent look in her eyes.

"You'll be my most charming supporter, Vickie, and I appreciate the pledge of your vote." He emptied his glass and refilled both his own and Vickie's. "The trust you place in me symbolises the faith of the people."

He reclined beside her and felt the material of her new dress.

"Isn't this something brand spanking new you're wearing tonight?" he asked with an upward movement of his heavy eyebrows. "It's lovely, Vickie, but of course you'd make any garment seem lovelier. Some women have that very rare, fortunate ability to adorn clothes, rather than to be adorned by them, and it's good to know that you are among those fortunate few." He raised his glass to her. "Here's to a lovely young woman—from a lonely man who's thankful he's in a position to appreciate your charm and beauty!" He drank half the whisky and put his glass

on the table. "Your presence has made me realise how lonely I've been since that first night you came here to charm me with your beauty and personality, Vickie."

"Did you really have to go out of town the other night?" she asked, unable to wait any longer to question him about the night he broke their date. "The night you sent the message for me not to come to see you?"

"Yes, Vickie," he said unhesitatingly, looking straight into her eyes. "I was called away, unfortunately. It happened to be an extremely urgent matter of a political nature. Why do you ask?"

She fingered a button on his pyjamas in a thoughtful manner. Dan watched her expression closely.

"Why, Vickie?"

"Well, I wasn't quite sure, Dan. I didn't know what to think, at the last minute. I was afraid somebody else——"

"You mean—another woman?"

"Well, there are women who'd literally throw themselves at an important man like you, and I was afraid——"

Dan, chuckling, smiled to himself. "You mustn't let your imagination run wild at a time like that, Vickie," he told her as he patted her reassuringly. "Actually, I was called away on an important matter. Being a public servant has its duties, you know, and there are times when a man like me has to drop everything and perform those duties. A doctor of medicine is in much the same position. We must all respond to a call to duty. I most sincerely regret being unable to keep our appointment and I humbly ask your forgiveness, Vickie."

"And you really and truly did have to go away, and weren't up here in your room all the time with somebody else?"

The phone on the bedside table suddenly began ringing

with a loud startling sound. It rang time after time while Dan watched it with an irritated frown.

"Aren't you going to answer it?" she said.

Dan waited until it stopped ringing before he answered her.

"I don't wish to be disturbed at a time like this. It's very annoying."

"But suppose it was something important?"

"I am entitled to some private life of my own, Vickie."

She waited a few moments before saying anything more.

"Well," she said calmly, "if you honestly did have to go away that night——"

"Do you have reason to believe that I was here with some—with another female companion?"

"No, but some men don't tell the truth about such things," she said, glancing at his face. "That's why a girl has to be very careful."

Dan put his arms around her. "Vickie, I did go out of town that night and I was not here with somebody else. I was gone for three days and nights and I was miserable all the time. I missed you, Vickie, but it made me realise something I didn't know before. You not only fill a vast empty space in my life, you've made me realise how vast the empty space has been all these years. I don't ever again want to be that long without your very special kind of attention. I knew the first time I saw you that you were going to be different, and that's why I got you up here to my room, but it was the surprise of my life to find out how different you were from the other women I've known. You know what I mean. Other women just don't do that, either because they lack the courage or the knowledge. I've been thinking about this very seriously ever since I got back last night, this matter of finding ways and means of continuing our com-

panionship without interruption, and extending it beyond its present status."

"You mean staying together all the time—like being married?"

"Well," he said hurriedly, "not that exactly, but in a sense, yes. I mean, having each other's company, in our own way. You see, I've been called back to Washington for an important conference, and I must leave tomorrow. That's why I was so insistent over the phone that you come up here tonight. I'll be tied up in Washington until the next session of Congress. That means I'll be unable to come back until some time next summer. Now, I've given this a great deal of thought all day and evening, and I've come to the conclusion that we must take a forthright step immediately. Naturally, this leads to an important question, Vickie——"

"You mean, get married?"

"No, Vickie! I didn't mean that, exactly. Let me explain."

Vickie was shaking her head. She was on the verge of bursting into tears. "Dan, you don't mean this is the end of our——" She watched him with bated breath.

Dan drew her tighter. "You must let me explain, Vickie. I want to tell you how——"

"Haven't I been the kind of girl you like, Dan—haven't I done everything you wanted——"

"Please, Vickie," he begged her, nervously rubbing his hands over his face.

"Yes, Dan," she said, trying to remain calm.

Dan drew a deep breath. "Have you ever considered the possibility of going away somewhere and perhaps taking a course of training that would fit you for a different type of work?"

"I don't know what you mean, exactly," she replied, confused.

"Well, young girls often go away from home for a course of training. I had something like that in mind."

"Do you mean taking a course in beauty culture and then getting a job somewhere in a beauty shop?"

"Well, that wasn't exactly what I had in mind, Vickie. That has its place in life, of course, but what I had in mind was perhaps taking a business training course at a good business college, perhaps in Washington, and then I could offer you a position on my secretarial staff."

"But going to business college would cost a lot of money. I couldn't afford that."

"The cost involved is a matter you wouldn't have to worry about at all, Vickie. That is, of course, as long as we remain the same congenial close friends we are now. Naturally, that's important. In fact, it'd be necessary, Vickie."

"You mean like coming up here to your room and spending the night with you, and such things?"

"Well, let's put it another way, Vickie," he said with a short nervous laugh. "Let's say that you and I have a great deal in common and that we take particular delight in each other's company, regardless of the fact that you are a charming young woman and I'm a man."

"That still means sleeping with you, doesn't it?"

"Well, yes. It could possibly be so construed, under certain circumstances, but I prefer calling it by another——"

"And you'd still want me to sleep with you, even if I was going to the business college in Washington?"

"In ordinary language, yes."

"What would I do after I finished college?"

"The usual things. Take dictation and do typing and filing and such things. It's very interesting work, Vickie. Many highly intelligent young women find that it's an ideal outlet for self-expression. The emotional release of secre-

tarial work is a source of great satisfaction to them. I know of no better field for a charming young woman who wants to make interesting contacts."

"But would I keep on seeing you while I was working like that? I mean, seeing you at night."

"Naturally, Vickie. That's the most important part of our plans. I'd arrange for you to have a nice quiet apartment where I could drop in from time to time. I need you in Washington, Vickie. A man like me gets awfully lonesome in Washington. The vast majority of congenial young women who come to Washington, especially if they're blessed with any looks at all, have been previously earmarked before leaving their home towns. It is extremely difficult to find an unattached young woman there. Such a practice makes it necessary for me likewise to make my own arrangements."

"I've been thinking about leaving home, anyway," she said. "I can't put up with that terrible Pauline—she's the other night waitress at the Rainbow—any longer. Nick won't fire her, because he says she's dependable and never asks for time off like I do. She's always doing something mean to me. Like the other night when you said you were out of town."

"What did she do?"

"Well, she was extra mean to me that night."

"Then you would like to go to Washington?"

"I really do, Dan."

"That settles it, Vickie. I'm going back tomorrow. In about a week I'll expect you to come up and enrol in one of the good business colleges we have there. In the meantime I'll make arrangements for a small apartment so it'll be ready for you when you arrive. Here's my card. As soon as you get there, phone me, and ask whoever answers to put you straight through to me on a personal call. Just ask for

Dan, and my secretary will know you're a personal friend."

"What about Ross, Dan? You said you'd do something for him, too. Have you forgotten?"

"I spoke to your brother this afternoon, Vickie, and I regret to say that little was accomplished. I ran into him at the court-house. He's a very pleasant young man, but he did not appear to be interested in anything I suggested. I got the impression that he would not even consider an appointment as Assistant Postmaster-General if I had anything to do with it. I'd say he's a young idealist. I don't believe he would approve of even the most casual association with me. I can understand to some extent his attitude. Most ambitious young attorneys begin life being idealists and do-gooders in general, and I admire such worthy and lofty ideals. The world would be a far poorer place today if we did not have our young idealists. Young men should be idealists, and old men should be practical and conservative and slow to advocate changes in our way of life. It happens that I, perhaps as a result of sober judgment, am one of the latter. In the course of time young idealists and firebrands in general become mellow and philosophical. I propose to speak to your brother again after a few years. Sooner or later each of us mortals reaches the point where we must decide once and for all whether we are going to dedicate our lives to doing the most good for the greatest number of people, or whether we are going to allow a youthful idealism to become our master. Your brother Ross will reach that stage in life after a few years of disappointment. I left with him the reminder, however, that I would feel honoured to find him a place in the government in Washington, and I hope some day he will come to me with a completely changed attitude. At that time I will gladly take care of him."

"I hope it's all right for me to go to Washington and let

you keep—what I mean is, let you help me get along ”

“My dear girl,” Dan said, quick to reassure her, “you must not get the wrong impression about this plan of ours. I am doing you a favour, just as I would do a favour for any qualified voter in my district. I am arranging for you to take a course in business training to fit yourself for a responsible position in life and, being a personal friend, I’m arranging for you to have a suitable apartment. It can be said that it is merely a coincidence that you and I find that we enjoy mutual satisfaction in each other’s company. All things being equal, I’d do the same for any qualified voter in my district. It’s expected of a man in my position. Of course, the fact that we’ll want to continue being close friends in Washington, to no less an extent than we are here, means that there’ll be no change whatsoever in our relationship. I wouldn’t want it to be any other way. Otherwise I’d never have made the suggestion in the first place.”

“It’ll seem strange going to school again and not working at night in the Rainbow Café,” Vickie said “I won’t know what to do with myself half the time.”

“You’ll find life in Washington very pleasant, once you adjust yourself to a different way of living, Vickie. Naturally, I wouldn’t want to hear of you getting a job as a waitress in a Washington restaurant even if you did have a lot of time on your hands. That wouldn’t be at all in line with your plans. I’d want you to be free when it’s convenient for me to call on you, day or night. I’m looking forward to that. You know, a man in public life today has to relax just like any other tired man at the close of a strenuous day.”

“When we have our apartment, Dan—I mean, what will your wife say—if she hears about it?”

“That’s something we won’t worry about, Vickie. We politicians don’t dread such things now as we once did.

Times have changed. Nowadays we lay the blame for irresponsible gossip of that nature squarely on the doorstep of our political enemies, because everybody knows some politicians will resort to the vilest smear and slander to discredit a man like me in the eyes of the people. Our wives have been instructed to ignore such inevitable gossip as the price we must pay for being servants of the people. It's all part and parcel of political tradition for an opponent to utter slander as long as it'll bring him votes. No, our wives have been told to discredit every confounded word of it."

Vickie sighed deeply. "It's so thrilling to think that I'm actually leaving here and going to Washington to live. I don't know how I'll ever wait till the time to leave." She lay on her back and looked up at the ceiling. "It's going to be so different from living here. It'll be wonderful. It's actually getting one of the good things of life that Mamma was always talking about. I won't have to hear Nobby quarrelling with my sister any more and Papa won't be there trying to make me give him more money. Papa——" She stopped and looked at Dan. "What about Papa? Are you going to get him that government job that he talks about so much?"

"I had to discard the idea, Vickie. It didn't work out any too well. It won't be necessary, anyway, under the circumstances."

"What do you mean, Dan?"

"I was a little too hasty in my judgment, Vickie. At first I wanted to take all possible precautions against the results of idle talk, but now that you are coming to Washington with me, the danger of small-town gossip, politically speaking, has been removed. You can never tell what a man like your father might do, and I wanted to see to it that he didn't feel that he ought to shoot me if he heard you had been visiting me in my room. As things turned out, the latter

precaution was unnecessary, and the former has shown me the wisdom of taking you to Washington. As a result, I have no future plans for your father. I'm sure he'll be able to get along as he has in the past."

"Now that I'm actually going away, I'd like to see Ben Humphrey and tell him that I'm leaving. He's been awfully nice to me."

A frown came to Dan's face.

"I'd like to know just why you feel that you are obligated to see him."

Vickie, startled by the harshness of Dan's voice, bit her lip momentarily.

"Ben's an undertaker, but that's not the reason I want to tell him I'm going away."

"Then what is the reason?" he said quickly.

"Well, it's just that Ben used to come into the Rainbow almost every night, and he never got discouraged, and I got to know him that way, and then one night I went down to the funeral parlour with him."

"Yes?" he said unsmilingly.

Vickie nodded doubtfully. She was sorry she had ever mentioned Ben's name.

"What did you go down there for?" he said

She caught her breath. "You don't know about it?" she asked. "Nobody told you about it?"

Dan continued to watch her but said nothing.

Vickie closed her eyes in order to avoid his penetrating gaze. "Well," she said slowly, "I'm glad you didn't hear all the gossip. It wasn't much, anyway, except that everybody in town seemed to think it was a queer place for Ben's wife and me to get into a fight."

Dan got up and poured some more bourbon into their glasses. He looked at her thoughtfully over the rim of his glass while he was drinking the whisky.

"Vickie, my dear," he said after putting down his glass, "I want you to hurry and get ready to go to Washington. You won't have to wait a week as I said a while ago. It'll be better if you left right away, no later than tomorrow night. Now, remember not to talk about your plans to anyone. You can say you're going away to business college, but no more. And not a single word about me, remember. Don't, whatever you do, mention my name. And not a word about the apartment being arranged for you. Is that clear now?"

"Do you think I could have the ring after I get there?"

"What ring?"

"The ring I said I wanted. The diamond ring. You asked me the first time I spent the night with you what I wanted, and I said I wanted a diamond ring."

"So you did," Dan said with a nervous laugh. "Well, that's certainly something to think about. I'll make a point to think about it, Vickie. You can be sure of that." He reached for the bourbon bottle. "Here, let's have another drink."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ABOUT AN HOUR after breakfast the next morning, Ross drove up the street in his car and stopped in front of the house. Grandpa Crockett, wrapped in his old grey cotton sweater, was sitting in the sun on the porch. As soon as he saw Ross get out of the car and walk towards the house, he moved his chair closer to the edge of the porch and leaned over the railing.

"How are you this morning, Ross?" he called out, waving one hand and holding his beard close to his chest with the other.

"I'm fine, Grandpa," Ross replied. "Are you getting over your cold, all right?"

"Oh, yes. I dosed myself up pretty well night before last, and the cold doesn't bother me much today. After a man gets to be as old as I am he knows fairly well how to take care of himself."

Ross stopped for a moment and listened, but there were no sounds anywhere in the house. He came up the steps, making as little noise as possible, and sat down on the railing.

"What does Papa want to see me about, Grandpa?" he asked in a low voice. "Jarvis came down to the office a little while ago and said Papa wanted me to come up here right away."

"It's about Vickie," Grandpa told him, glancing backwards over his shoulder to make sure he was not being overheard. "Your pa got mighty upset at breakfast this morning when Vickie told him she was leaving home and going away to a business college. Then, on top of that, he

found out from her that Dan Blalock had left town and gone back to Washington without getting him that government job he's been counting on. He went on a rampage for a full half-hour after that, but he's quieted down now and he's somewhere out back. He threatened to whip Vickie if she left, but she told him that wouldn't stop her, and he slapped and swore at her after that. She told him she never wanted to see him again and then she packed her things and left. That was about an hour ago, and I guess she's left town by now. I hated to see her go, but it may be the best thing, after all, even if Dan Blalock is mixed up in it."

"She came to my office to tell me good-bye, but she didn't mention Blalock's name." Ross was angry. "All she said was that Papa didn't want her to leave home, but I thought there might be more to it than that. If I'd known Dan Blalock had anything to do with her leaving——"

"Now, wait a minute, Ross," Grandpa said calmly. He stroked his beard several times. "I don't want to see you get all upset about this thing. Let's talk about it for a minute. I've lived in this world a heap longer than you have, and maybe I know more about some things than you do. Vickie's a good girl at heart, and a few missteps don't necessarily ruin a woman. The one thing Vickie's trying to do is to find her place in life, just like every woman tries to do at her age, one way or another, and if she wakes up to find that she's made a mistake in going to Washington with Dan, she'll get out of the alliance before too much harm's done. Maybe she is reaching for the moon, but the try is worth while, and if she fails, she'll benefit by the experience the next time she tries. I've got a hunch she won't fail, though, and I'm glad she's got the spunk to get up and leave."

"I know, Grandpa, but Dan Blalock——"

"I don't approve of Dan Blalock any more than you do,

Ross, but even so her association with him can't be any worse than the life she was living down at that Rainbow Café. One man, even Dan Blalock, will be better for her than the dozens she'd associate with down there. With this change, and in new surroundings, she has a far better chance in life now than she had at that place. Vickie told me about Dan Blalock in confidence, Ross, and your pa doesn't know she went with him. It's losing the ten dollars a week she's been giving him for the past year that upset him. That, and the fact that he realises now he's not going to get the government job Dan promised him."

Chism had walked around the corner of the house while Grandpa was talking and, although he had not heard what was being said, he was standing in the yard a few feet away. Ross was the first to speak.

"Good morning, Papa," he said, turning around.

He expected his father to be belligerent and angry after what had happened but, instead, Chism merely stood there in a forlorn manner looking thoroughly grief-stricken. He nodded and then took a few shuffling steps and leaned wearily against the porch.

"This's the last straw," Chism complained in a sorrowful voice, tilting back his head and looking up at Ross with his moist grey eyes. "Here I've been good to my children all my livelong life and now that I'm getting too old to work any more, they up and leave me high and dry like this. I'll end up starving to death. All Vickie's leaving for is to get out of giving me a little money now and then. It was only ten dollars a week. Everybody in this house knows that's God's own truth. I hope to drop dead if it ain't. It's a sorry shame, that's what it is. A cussed sorry shame."

"Vickie will soon be twenty-three, Papa," Ross reminded him. "She has a right to leave home if she wants to."

"I'll end up at the county poor farm, that's what. That's

what'll happen to me. I'll spend the rest of my days in the poor-house. I'll be cooped up there with all the rest of the poor people whose children walked off and left them cold and hungry and no clothes to wear. (I used to drive past the poor farm and feel sorry for all the old folks sitting there like they was staring at a blank wall, but I never thought my own children would leave me behind and send me there when I was all worn out and broken down after a lifetime of working to make ends meet. It makes a man lose faith in human nature to see a thing like this happen to him.)'

Ross turned and glanced at Grandpa. Grandpa was stroking his long white beard and gazing at the house across the street with a faraway look in his pale blue eyes. Chism, dragging his feet on the ground, went to the middle of the yard and, after standing there and looking down at the brown dry grass for several minutes in a thoughtful manner, came back to the steps. He looked at the steps for a moment and then, suddenly bending over, slammed his fist against the board as hard as he could. Both Grandpa and Ross were startled by the sound.

"No, sir!" he shouted resolutely. "I ain't going to the poor farm!" He straightened up and shook his fist at Ross and Grandpa. "If my own children won't take care of me in my old age, I'll look after my own self! That's what I'll do!" He raised his arm and beckoned to Ross with an urgent gesture. "Come on, Ross! Where's that sawmill you've been talking about? I want to go look it over right now. If I own that, I'll have all the money I need in the world. I won't have to depend in my old age on nobody. Come on, now!"

Ross got up and went to the steps.

"Hurry up, I tell you!" Chism shouted at him, gesturing wildly with both arms. "I'll run that blame sawmill night and day and make me so much money I won't know what

to do with it all. Come on, like I tell you! Let's get in your car and go right now. Bring your grandpa along if you want to. Come on, Pa! Let's get started! My mind's made up!"

"It may be too late now, Papa," Ross said as he went down the steps to the yard where his father was waiting impatiently. "The sawmill may be sold by now."

"You call yourself a lawyer, don't you? Well, it's your business to stop the sale or something if I make up my mind to buy it. Come on, now! Hurry up, Pa! Let's all hurry and get in the car and go!"

Grandpa got into the rear seat and Chism sat in front with Ross. They drove through town at a fast rate of speed while Chism leaned forward with his face almost touching the windshield. He did not lean back against the seat until they were several miles out of town. After that he settled himself comfortably and rolled a cigarette while he watched the passing scenery. As they sped past a large dairy Chism nudged Ross with his elbow and pointed out of the window at a herd of cows. Ross nodded dutifully. Most of the country through which they were passing was rolling and wooded with small groves of oak and pine on the hill-tops. The farms along the streams and lowlands were laid out in sharply defined squares and oblong tracts of tillage separated by wild blackberry hedges and sassafras growth. The whole countryside looked neat and well tended. At that time of the year the uncultivated fields were tan and brown with grain stubble and dry grass. They had gone about eight miles when Chism began glancing apprehensively at the landscape along the highway.

"Looks to me like we've been travelling a mighty long time, Ross," he remarked without enthusiasm. "How much farther on is this sawmill?"

"Another two miles and we'll be there, Papa," Ross

replied. "We'll be able to see it as soon as we get to the ridge ahead."

"Well," Chism commented doubtfully, again glancing out of the window with a mistrustful look, "I didn't know it'd seem this far from town. Looks to me like we're going to hell-and-gone back in the cussed country. There's nothing out here but the ground itself and trees sticking up out of it. Ten miles away from where you want to be can seem like a hundred."

They went over the top of the ridge and began going down the smooth highway to the lowlands. Two miles below them they could see Middle River meandering westerly through the forested timber lands. The sawmill could be seen in a clearing on the south bank of Middle River and a hazy blue cloud of woodsmoke was drifting with the breeze from the tall iron stack of the boiler. Chism remained silent while they approached the log road leading from the highway to the sawmill. He still had made no further comment when Ross drove into the clearing and stopped the car.

"Well, here we are, Papa," Ross said with a nervous feeling as he got out of the car.

Several men were working under the tin-roofed shed where the large oak logs were being moved up a skidway to the carriage. The whine of the circular saw was so loud and piercing that Grandpa had to raise his voice in order to make himself heard.

"It makes me homesick for the country again," he said enthusiastically as he got out of the car and stood in the sun. He stroked his beard and smelled the pungent odour of freshly sawn lumber. "It makes me think of the time when I moved out to this part of the world sixty-some years ago. A lot of changes have taken place since then, but fresh sawdust smells just the same as it always did. The first thing a

man had to do in those days was to set up a sawmill and clear his land of timber, because crops couldn't be grown till the fields were cleared. The hardest part of all was digging up the stumps afterward, because it all had to be done by hand. Dynamite was too expensive for the pioneers in those days, and we dug at the roots and chopped away at the stumps and then set fire to as much of it as we could. That was a real pioneering job. Virgin timber covered the country so thick you couldn't drive a team through it till you'd first cut a road wide enough through the forests. I sort of hate to think about it sometimes, because it's all in the past and won't happen again. In those days people were too busy working to waste time quarrelling and bickering like the world does now. The new generations don't have much to do except benefit by it now, and I can't help feeling they don't appreciate what the pioneers did for them in the beginning. If it hadn't been for us, you wouldn't see all the fine farms around us today."

Chism glanced at Grandpa with a pitying look and began making a cigarette. Ross walked around the car to where Grandpa was standing.

"It's a busy place, isn't it, Papa?" he shouted through the open window.

Chism nodded indifferently without looking up from the cigarette he was making.

"Do you want to get out and look around some, Papa?" he asked hopefully. "We've got plenty of time. I don't have to hurry back to town. Let's go over and watch them saw up some of those big logs."

Chism delicately moistened the edge of the paper with the tip of his tongue, shaped the cigarette with a deft motion of his fingers and closed the end with a slight twist of the paper. Then he struck a match and lit it. A cloud of smoke drifted through the car window.

"I can see all I want to see from right where I am," he told Ross with a determined nod of his head. "I don't have to go one blame step farther to know all I want to know about it. *It's just like I thought.*"

"What do you mean, Papa?"

"The whole blame thing's to hell-and-gone out here in the cussed country. Just look at all the cussed country spread out all over the topside of the world as far as the eye can see. Right now I feel like I'm a million miles from nowhere."

"But we're only ten miles from town."

"I'd *forgotten* how far ten miles is, I reckon. I thought it'd only be a whoop and a holler outside of town. How'd a man ever get to town in a hurry if his car wouldn't run and he wanted to be there? I'd be just as bad off as being locked up in jail. I know that's the way I'd feel. I'd be scared to death all the time I couldn't get to town when I wanted to. Let's turn right around and go back, Ross."

Grandpa looked at Chism a little while longer and then he walked away. He went to the shed and watched the sawyer ride the carriage into the tall spinning saw. Specks of golden sawdust clung to his snowy-white beard, but he was so absorbed in watching the saw cut into the huge logs that he did not notice it.

"Papa, I don't know what to say now," Ross told him disappointedly. "A little over half an hour ago when we left home you'd set your heart on coming out here with the expectation of buying this sawmill. Now, after we get here, you suddenly change your mind. Don't you realise nothing else has changed in the meantime? Vickie has gone, and you won't be getting the money every week from her like you used to. Will you change your mind again when we get back to town?"

"No, sir!" Chism said with a resolute shaking of his head. "My mind's made up once and for all. I ain't going to let

myself get muddle-headed again like this. If I came back out here to the country, the first thing I'd know, something'd happen and I'd end up being a cussed farmer again. The blame sawmill would catch on fire and burn down, or something'd be sure to happen, and I'd have to go to work raising crops. I'd rather drop dead than do that. Let the other fellows farm all they want to, but I ain't. I'd rather starve to death in the city than shrivel up like a cussed sneezeweed out here. Let's turn around and go back to town right away, son."

Ross decided it would be better not to say anything more to his father at that time.

Chism pointed at Grandpa under the saw-shed. "Go get your grandpa. I want to hurry back to town."

Ross left the car and walked across the clearing to where Grandpa was standing. The whine of the circular saw in the log was so loud that Ross did not attempt to speak to him. He merely shook his head discouragingly and motioned at his father in the car. Grandpa turned and walked across the clearing in the sun while the yellow flakes of sawdust sparkled like bright metal in his gleaming white beard. He went straight to the automobile.

"Chism," he said as he stood at the car window, "all the time I was over there under the saw-shed I was thinking about the mess we've made of things. For a long time I've been trying to figure out what the trouble is, and now I know. It was coming out here today to the sawmill that opened my eyes."

Chism's mouth fell agape. It had been many years since he had heard his father talk in such a kindly manner.

"When a family starts quarrelling among themselves like we've done," Grandpa said, "the wise thing to do is to break it up into as many pieces as there are human beings and let each one of them go their own way. Otherwise we'd all end

up gnarled and cross-grained. You tried to escape from it by moving to town, but you didn't, and so you tried to show Jarvis how he could get away from it. That's why Dorisse married that fellow, but she didn't succeed, either. Vickie left home for the same reason, and I pray that she'll find happiness. And then there's Jane——"

He stopped and stroked his beard.

"I'm the cause of all this trouble, I was selfish and short-sighted. If anybody ever tries to blame you for what's happened, Chism, I want you to know that I'm the one to be blamed for it all. I should have known better than to try to run your life for you. Back when I was a young man, my father wanted me to go to work in his store and learn the business, but I didn't want to be a crossroad storekeeper all my life, and I ran away from home and crossed the big mountains with the other pioneers who were coming out here to the valley in those days. I caused all this trouble by trying to make you be a farmer when all the time you wanted to move to town and run a little store. Every last one of us would be better off now if I'd had the sense to let you live your life the way you wanted. I'm sorry, Chism. From now on you won't hear me say anything about the home-place. Ross or Jarvis will have a feeling for it, or if they don't, their children will, and one of these days Crocketts will buy back the home-place and go there to live. I'm convinced of that now. What convinced me was coming out here today and being made to remind myself how I happen to pioneer this country instead of being a storekeeper like my father wanted me to be. If you're so minded, the one thing for you to do is buy a little store somewhere in town and settle down to doing what you've always wanted to do. If nature has her way she'll see to it that Crocketts go back to the home-place before too many generations pass."

"You don't sound like yourself, Pa," Chism said, sitting

up and looking amazed. "I've never heard you talk like that before. What's come over you?"

"It was driving out here and seeing this sawmill on Middle River that started me to thinking. It took me back sixty-some years, and I remembered how I felt about life when I was a young man. I guess it proves that an old man who's already lived out his life ought to keep out of other folk's affairs. A man like me is bound to get crusty and short-sighted, and that can cause a lot of misery for others. But a human being still has a lot of nature in him and sooner or later it's bound to crop out and right a lot of wrongs. I've made a big mistake in trying to bend you to my will all this time. Now I want to do what I can to make up for it before I pass away."

Chism took out his tobacco and began making another cigarette. His hands were shaking and he spilled tobacco flakes on his trousers and on the floor of the car.

"There's one thing I can't do much about," Grandpa said, sadly shaking his head, "and that's undoing all the harm that's been done. Vickie's left home and Dorisse's still married to that fellow. We can't undo that. But there's still time to do a lot for Jane and Jarvis so they'll have a better chance to get some of the good things of life. I won't mind passing away if I know they're going to grow up the way they should. We don't have to worry about Ross. He'll make his way in the world a lot better if we let him go his own way."

"You hear that, Ross?" Chism called out eagerly. His face wrinkled with a pleased smile. "Let's hurry back to town and look around for a little store. I've always wanted to have me a little store, and now I'm going to get it if it's the last thing I do on the topside of the world. It'll be a fine way to live from now on. Let's hurry back to town!"

Grandpa brushed the sawdust from his beard and got into

the back seat. Ross started the engine and turned the car around. In a few minutes they were going along the highway at a fast rate of speed. Chism sat on the edge of the seat moving forwards and backwards as though he expected the shoving motion to make the car go faster.

They were half-way home before anyone spoke. "It sure feels good not to be at cross-purposes with the world any more," Chism said, nudging Ross with his elbow. "From now on it's going to be a real pleasure just to live. I'm glad that government job petered out because I'd have been tied down so bad I couldn't have called my soul my own. I'll get me a little store now and, when I feel like it, I'll just close up shop and go possum hunting. I could use me another possum hound, because I'll be doing a lot of hunting from now on. Next time you hear of somebody offering a good dog, Ross, will you let me know about it?"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE FAMILIAR-LOOKING green coupé had been parked across the street when she left Maud Flowers's house, where she and Maud had been studying history that evening, and she walked faster when she heard the engine start. The car rolled to a stop at the kerb before she could reach the corner.

"Jane," Russ called to her in a low voice. "Come here, Jane."

She was still six blocks from home and she knew she would not be able to run all the way there before Russ stopped her. She glanced at Russ from the corner of her eyes while she wondered what she should do. He had moved across the seat and was beckoning to her. She looked back down the street towards the Flowers's house, but she quickly realised that Russ could catch up with her if she tried to run away from him.

"Jane, I've been waiting for you all evening," he told her. "I've just got to talk to you."

She had gone to Maud's directly from dinner and it was now ten o'clock. That meant Russ had waited almost three hours for her.

With a swift glance at him, she shook her head. Russ had opened the door and put one foot on the kerb. He was close enough then to reach out and touch her.

"Please come here, Jane," he said entreatingly.

She shook her head resolutely. "I can't see you again."

"Why not?"

She did not answer him and he asked her again.

"I couldn't begin to tell you all the reasons. There are so many of them."

"You made them all up in your mind," Russ said. "They are not real."

"I can't help it, if you don't believe them."

Russ was silent for a moment. "I want you, Jane. I've got to have you."

"You mustn't talk like that."

"It's the only way I can talk, Jane. That's why it's so important. Please come here."

Jane shook her head determinedly. She told herself that should run away from him, but before she could move, Russ had grasped her arm and was pulling her into the car. She was surprised at herself for making no attempt to get away from him until she found herself seated beside him. Then she tried to keep him from closing the door. Russ closed the door, anyway, and put his arms around her.

"You mustn't hold me like this," she protested.

"Don't you remember the promise you made me, Jane?"

She shook her head.

"You don't make promises that you don't intend to keep, do you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do, too. You haven't forgotten what you promised the other night."

She looked away from him, refusing to let herself speak.

"You promised two things, Jane. You promised not to tell anybody and you promised you'd let me see you again. Isn't that true, Jane?"

"But I can't see you now," she protested. "Please let me go."

"Have you told anybody?"

She said she had not.

"It's sure good to know that you kept your promise, Jane," he said, relieved. "I've been worried."

Russ started the car. As she felt the forward motion of

the automobile she tried to open the door, but Russ caught her by the arm and pulled her away from it. He turned up a dark street, avoiding the lights of town. They went several blocks before he spoke to her again.

"I don't want you to feel that I'm forcing you to do this, Jane," he said, turning and looking at her face in the dim reflection of light. She looked straight ahead. "I'd like to think that you're willing to listen to me. I'm very serious about it, because it's important. Can't you understand, Jane?"

"I still don't think you ought to make me stay in the car like this," she said.

"But it's the only way I can get you to listen to me." They drove slowly through the outskirts of town. The street lights had been left behind and some of the houses were already dark for the night. "I tried to see you last night, but you didn't leave the house. I waited until almost midnight."

They were soon out of town on an unpaved road and after a few minutes he turned the car into a narrow lane and stopped at the edge of a field. He switched off the lights and lit a cigarette.

"I suppose you're wondering why I was so anxious to get you into the car and bring you out here" he said, speaking rapidly. He waited for her to say something, but Jane remained silent. "I had to see you, Jane. I couldn't wait any longer. All the time I was waiting for you last night across the street from your house I was thinking what you mean to me. I couldn't tell you back there in town a while ago, because it would take too long and somebody might see us. I couldn't afford to be seen talking to you like that—at least not yet. You understand, don't you?"

She could not keep from wondering what it was he wanted to explain, but she still would not allow herself to look at him. Now that she was alone with him, she was glad she

was there. She tried not to admit it to herself, but she knew she had been unhappy during the past few days.

Russ drew nervously on the cigarette several times in rapid succession and then crushed it in the ash-tray on the dash.

"I don't know what I'd have done if I hadn't found you tonight, Jane. I was getting desperate."

He put his arms around her and she made no effort to stop him. At first her body felt tense and rigid, but when his arm tightened around her, she became relaxed and unafraid.

"Have you ever been in love, Jane," he asked her in a quick rapid flow of words. "Do you know what it means?"

He felt her head move for a moment against his shoulder. "No," she said almost inaudibly.

"Jane," Russ whispered hoarsely, holding her so close that she thought she could feel the beat of his heart, "I've got to have you. I don't care what you say. You've got to belong to me. Do you understand, Jane? I've thought about you every minute since that night under the stadium and I've made up my mind to win you at any cost. That's fair warning, Jane. From now on you know what to expect."

"No," she said frightened by the thoughts that raced through her mind. She tried to push Russ away so she could think clearly about what she was going to do, but Russ held her tighter and she felt his lips pressing with a clinging warm dampness against hers. She evaded him for a short moment. "No, Russ!" she cried, but after that she was unable to evade him any longer.

The moment he began kissing her throbbing lips, she no longer felt the will to resist. She closed her eyes submissively as she realised that she had neither the ability nor the desire to make him stop. She felt as though she had her first possession in life. She knew she had undergone a change as she remembered how she had struggled that late afternoon

under the stadium to prevent him making love to her and she was not surprised that she was submitting so willingly now. After what had happened to her, she knew she would never be completely happy and content with anyone else. Russ had kissed her for a long time when, with some impulsive desire urging her onward, she returned his kiss for the first time.

She was so bewildered by what she had done and so excited by the sensation that it was several moments before she actually heard Russ speaking to her.

He was talking rapidly and entreatingly. "Jane, I don't know how to tell you this, but you've got to listen to me. I've got to tell you how much I've missed you since that first time we were together. I've tried every way I can think of to convince myself that I ought to give you up, but nothing changes my feeling for you. I know now what I didn't realise then. I love you, Jane. That's what I had to tell you. I was lonely that afternoon and I needed you. It's different now. I'm still lonely, but it's because I know nobody else can take your place and I'll never be happy till I have you. At first I wanted to make love to you because you're beautiful and lovely and desirable, but now I want you because I love you. I'm glad you didn't give in to me that time, because it's made me realise that I want you because I love you. Do you understand, Jane?"

"But I mustn't—and you mustn't, either," she said, looking at Russ and trying to be as persuasive as possible. "You mustn't talk like that, Russ. You're married. It wouldn't be right. You're married, Russ." She pressed her face against his. "I don't know what to think. I want you, too. But I mustn't. I don't know what to think. I don't know what to do."

He put his hands on her shoulders and held her at arm's length while he looked straight into her eyes. She tried to

keep from looking at him, but there was something so compelling about him that she could not force herself to avert her eyes for long.

"Jane," he said in his rapid manner of speaking. "You know we've got to have each other. Nothing can prevent that now. We were made for each other. There's no other way. We've got to, Jane. You're mine, and I'm yours."

Her eyes closed as she felt her heart yearn for him.

Russ gripped her shoulders more tightly. "Jane, if I divorce my wife, will you marry me?"

She held her breath for moment after moment. "Divorce your wife—to marry me!"

"I mean it, Jane," he was saying in a rapid flow of words. "I mean every word of it. Don't you understand what I'm saying? I want to marry you, Jane. Will you marry me—if I divorce my wife?"

It was unbelievable that any man would want to divorce his wife in order to marry her. It was as likewise unbelievable that anyone would want to marry her—Jane Crockett—Chism Crockett's daughter—Vickie Crockett's sister—Nobby Hair's sister-in-law. But she could still hear Russ's words resounding over and over again in her ears and she told herself it was true, after all.

"As soon as I resign we'll leave here and go somewhere else, Jane. I'll get a better job, too. I'm going to try to get on a university coaching staff. That's what I've always wanted. I've always wanted to step into faster company, and this'll be my chance. You'll be a big help to me that way, because you're beautiful and young and that'll give me a better chance to get the kind of job I want. I've never been happy with my wife, after the first year, because we're not suited to each other. I didn't know how unhappy I was, though, until that night in my office. I knew then that I'd have to have you. You're everything in the world to me

now. Don't you see how much you mean to me, Jane?"

"I don't know what to say, Russ," she told him with a feeling of calmness. She had suddenly felt older and better able to understand what Russ was saying to her. "I do like you. I guess I didn't realise it until we came out here tonight. I really liked you a little that night under the stadium, but I was afraid. I wanted to stay with you, but that made me afraid, too. I'm not afraid now. But there's something else. You're married. It doesn't seem right to take you from your wife. I keep on thinking how I would feel if I were her. That makes a difference, Russ."

Russ shook her gently. "None of that matters, Jane, and you can't let anything stand in the way. I won't let you."

"I don't know," she said uncertainly. "I don't know what to think now."

"Just say you'll marry me, Jane. That's all you have to do."

"I couldn't say it—not now, anyway."

"Why not?"

"Because I'll have to think about it first. I never dreamed you'd actually want to marry me."

"Will you promise to think about it very seriously—more seriously than you've ever thought about anything before?"

"Yes, Russ."

"All right, Jane. That's fair enough. Will you let me know in a few days?"

She said she would.

"Neither of us would be happy with anyone else after this, Jane. Remember that."

"I feel sorry for your wife, Russ."

"Let's stop right now feeling sorry for other people and feel glad about ourselves, Jane. It's too wonderful to spoil

like that. We've got a right to have each other now. I can't wait any longer. I've got to have you, Jane."

"But you said you'd wait a few days, Russ——"

His lips sought her mouth and once more she lay submissively in his arms. She felt compelled, regardless of the consequences, to kiss him.

It was after midnight when they started home. They did not talk during the drive back to town but sat close together and watched the beams of light from the car cut into the darkness. When the car stopped in front of the house, they sat there for a while in silence and then, still not speaking, kissed each other as though they feared they would be parted for ever.

Russ left her at the door and she went inside and shut the door behind her. She stood there holding her hand on the knob until she heard his car leave and then she walked slowly down the hall to her room. Half-way there she recognised the sound of Nobby's voice. He was loud and abusive. The whole house suddenly seemed to be filled with it. She stopped. A painful throb clutched at her heart. Faintly came the sound of her sister crying in her room, and then once more Nobby cursed her. Putting her hands over her ears she ran to her own room and fell across the bed. Even with the sound of Nobby's angry voice shut out her mind continued to race with the terrifying thought that if she married Russ the same thing might happen to her. She took her hands from her ears just as Nobby shouted at Dorisse, and almost immediately afterwards she heard her sister begging him not to hurt her. Jane sat up and looked at the door between the two rooms. When she could stand it no longer, she ran to the hall and called her grandfather.

Grandpa came out of his room wearing his long flannel night-gown and holding his long beard close to his chest.

"What is it, Jane?" he asked anxiously.

"Grandpa, please make Nobby stop hurting Dorisse!" she said tearfully. "I can't stand it! Please stop him!"

Grandpa took her back to her room and they sat down on the bed. Nobby's voice had become louder and more abusive.

"I knocked on her door a little while ago," Grandpa was saying, "but she asked me to go away. She said everything would be all right after a while."

"But he's hurting her, Grandpa! I can't stand it!"

Grandpa did not say anything, and presently she put her arms around him and sobbed against his chest. He patted her comfortingly. After a long time she looked up into his face.

"Grandpa, I'm going to leave home."

"Why, Jane?" He did not appear to be surprised by what she had said. "Tell me why, Jane."

"I can't stand this any longer—the way Nobby treats Dorisse. I'm afraid something like that might happen to me, Grandpa." She tightened her arms around him. "I don't want it to happen to me!"

"What makes you say that, Jane?" he asked. "How could it happen to you?"

"I had a date with Russ Thornton tonight. It wasn't exactly a date, but I got into his car while I was walking home from Maud Flowers' house and we drove to the country. I think I love him, and I think he loves me. Then—then Russ asked me to marry him. If he divorced his wife. I don't know what to do now. I'm afraid. He might mistreat me like Nobby——" She tightened her arms around him. "I've got to go away, Grandpa! I'm afraid if I stay here I'll marry him!"

"Do you really want to leave home, Jane?"

"Yes, Grandpa, I want to leave."

"And you think it's what you should do?"

"Yes, Grandpa."

"Making your own way in the world isn't easy, Jane. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, but it doesn't matter. Anything would be better than staying here now, because—because I can't keep from marrying him if I stay."

"Where will you go if you leave, Jane?"

"To Aunt Susan's. The late night bus will get me there in the morning," she said. "She'd let me stay with her and finish school. I know she would."

"I'm sure she would," he agreed. "Now, what about money? Do you have any at all?"

"I have fifteen dollars saved up. The bus fare is only a few dollars. I'd have plenty left over."

"I don't have a single cent to my name," Grandpa said sadly. "I wish I had something to give you." He looked down at her as he stroked her hair. "A girl your age shouldn't leave home like this, Jane. It's not a wise thing to do." He was silent for a while before he looked at her again. "But maybe it's all for the best, all things considered. I have a feeling your mother would say it's all right for you to go. I think she'd understand. Just remember that life is full of good things and that you can have your share of them. The important thing is to select those you want and then strive to get them. It might be a mistake for you to marry Russ Thornton, but marriage can be one of the good things of life, even if it hasn't been for your sister. If you come back and marry him, I'll know that you are sure in your heart."

He left the room and went across the hall. While he was gone, Jane hurriedly packed some of her clothes in a small suit-case. She was standing at the dresser when Grandpa returned. He stood beside her holding his gold watch in his hand.

"Jane, this is for you," he said to her. "I want you to have it. It's all I have left in the world to give you, and I want you to sell it for as much as it'll bring. It won't be much, but the money you receive will be a help. I'm thankful I've got this much left to give you. Put it in your purse and sell it as soon as you can."

"I'll always think of you, Grandpa," she said as she hugged him while tears filled her eyes. "Maybe some day I'll come back and you'll still be here. Don't die Grandpa! Please don't die and leave me all alone in the world! Please don't ever die, Grandpa! I don't want to be left all alone!"

Finally she picked up the suit-case and ran through the hall while Nobby's abusive voice resounded behind her. Grandpa followed her as far as the front steps and stood there, clutching his long white beard, until long after he could hear the sound of her footsteps in the night.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

FOR THE PAST HOUR Dorisse had been waiting for Ross to return from the court-house and, when he walked through the door and found her sitting in his office, it was after five o'clock and rapidly becoming dark. He switched on the lights, tossed his hat into a chair, and laid his brief-case on the desk. As he turned and walked to her, the first thing he noticed about his sister was the unusual paleness of her skin and the nervous twisting of her hands, one in the other. Dorisse had tried to smile away her tears when he pulled up a chair and sat down beside her. He thought he knew why he had found her crying in his office and, instead of questioning her, he waited for her to speak first. Presently she looked up.

"Oh, Ross!" she cried unhappily.

He held her hand to comfort her.

"Ross, I don't know what's going to happen to me."

"It can't be as bad as all this, now can it?" he said, smiling and trying to make her feel better.

"But it is," she said solemnly.

Ross leaned back in the chair and watched her with an anxious frown. He was worried, but he tried not to let her see how concerned he actually was.

"Did he send you out to get money for him again?"

She glanced at him briefly before lowering her head and looking down at her hands in her lap.

"Did he, Dorisse?"

"Yes," she said almost inaudibly.

"The time has come to put a stop to this, Dorisse," he told her as forcefully as he could. After that he was no longer

able to conceal his concern. "We can't let this go on any longer. This is a dangerous situation now. We've got to do something about it. You realise that, don't you, Dorisse?"

"I don't know," she replied with a helpless feeling. She closed her eyes and shook her head confusedly. "But I want to help Noble."

"I don't suppose it would do any good at all for me to tell you again as I have I don't know how many times in the past that Nobby doesn't deserve help from anybody—not even from you, Dorisse. Nobby is dangerous now. He should be confined in an institution. When a man gets backed into the kind of corner he's in, his actions are unpredictable, regardless of whether he put himself there or whether other forces are responsible. That's why I say he's dangerous now. You should never go near him again, Dorisse."

She continued to sit there with her eyes closed while tears ran down her cheeks

"Let me send you away somewhere, Dorisse. To some place where Nobby can't find you and abuse you the way he does. That's the only way you'll ever be able to think your way through this clearly. As long as he's anywhere near you, he's going to continue to dominate you and abuse you. Will you take this brotherly advice from me just this once? Will you go right away?"

She put her hands over her face and sat there in silence for a long time. She was no longer crying when she looked up at Ross.

"No," she said calmly, shaking her head. "I couldn't go away and hide from Nobby like that. He's my husband. It wouldn't be fair, Ross."

"Even for your own safety?"

She shook her head. "No, Ross. I'm going to keep on trying to the very last minute."

Ross go up and stood at the window looking out into the gathering darkness. A gust of wind sent a shower of brown autumn leaves twisting and tumbling over the ground. A fine mist was beginning to fall and already the black asphalt pavement glistened brightly in the beams from the headlights of passing automobiles. Offices across the street were being closed for the night and one by one the lights were turned off. He felt a slight shiver as he closed the blinds over the window.

He had turned around and was facing the room when the door opened and Nobby walked in. He saw Dorisse clutch nervously at the arms of the chair. Nobby glanced suspiciously around the room.

"Noble——" Dorisse said uneasily.

"Hello, Nobby," Ross said, raising his voice above his sister's. "Come on in," He motioned to a chair. "Have a seat, Nobby."

"I had a hunch you'd be down here," Nobby said, turning to Dorisse and ignoring Ross.

"Noble, I had to come to see Ross."

"That wasn't the way I understood it. What made you think you had to come to see him?"

Nobby shoved both hands deep into his pockets and watched Ross with a sullen smile.

"Just what are you plotting against me?" he demanded belligerently. "I know something's up when you two get together." He turned to Dorisse. "I want you to stay away from him after this. Do you hear? If there's anything you want to know, just ask me. I'm the one who tells you what to do. I don't want him nosing into my business."

Dorisse was about to say something, but she stopped herself in time.

"You'll never outsmart me, shyster."

"Now, look here, Nobby," Ross spoke up. "You've got to

stop this thing of ordering my sister around the way you do. I'm not going to let you abuse her any longer. There're such things as restraining orders that would look good on you, and the courthouse is just across the street. If I ever hear you utter a threat to do her bodily harm, I'll slip one on you so quick you won't know what hit you. Is that plain?"

"That kind of talk doesn't scare me. I'm not scared of you shysters who open up a hole in the wall and walk around wearing vests and think you're God Almighty."

"Never mind about me, Nobby, but remember that Dorisse is my sister. That means I'm going to see to it that she's not abused by you or anybody else. That's something for you to think about."

With a contemptuous scowl at Ross, he reached down and caught Dorisse by the wrist. For an instant she looked at Ross indecisively, but when Nobby motioned to her with a jerk of his head, she hastily arose from the chair and stood beside him. Nobby laughed outright at Ross.

"Wait, Dorisse," Ross said. "I want to talk to Nobby. Don't leave yet."

"You haven't anything to say that I want to listen to, shyster," Nobby said with a contemptuous smile.

"Maybe Dorisse wants to hear what I have to say."

"You've already interfered too much to suit me. Go give your advice to the damn fools who don't know any better than to listen to you. I've got better things to do than listen to you, shyster."

"Dorisse, please don't leave," Ross said, turning to her. "Let's settle this thing once and for all."

She glanced at her brother as though she would change her mind and not leave, but Nobby turned her around with a shove and pushed her towards the door. She left the office without looking back again. Nobby, laughing insolently at

Ross, followed her out of the office and slammed the door so hard that the entire building shook.

Nobby did not speak a word to her all the way home. They walked side by side across the square and went up Main Street and around the corner of the Presbyterian Church. Long before they were within sight of the house Dorisse had fallen behind and she had to run in order to keep up with him.

The lights were burning in the hall but she saw neither Grandpa nor her father as they entered the room. Nobby locked the door as they were inside and put the key into his pants pocket. Then he turned upon her in sullen anger. She backed away from him.

"I thought I told you to stay away from that shyster brother of yours!" he yelled at her. "What are you trying to do to me—pull some sort of trick on me!"

"But, Noble——"

"Shut up! I'm doing the talking now! What are you and him trying to do to me!" He took out a cigarette and hastily lit it. His hand shook while he held the match. "I know when something's up. Is he trying to fake a non-support charge against me? Or what is it? If that's what you two were chinning about, you'd better forget it in a hurry, because you know damn well what I'll do to you if you let him try a stunt like that. I never did like him, anyway. I'll break his neck if he ever makes a move at me."

"Noble, I went to see him about getting some money for you."

"Trying to make it sound good, huh?"

"But, Noble——"

"Why him?"

"Because I didn't know what else to do, Noble," she pleaded softly. "I couldn't ask anybody else for money. I just had to go to Ross. Don't you see, Noble?"

"That's a lie."

"You know I always tell you the truth."

He leaned against the foot of the bed.

"There're plenty of other places to get money in this town, and you know it."

"Noble, please——"

"What were you and him plotting down there?"

"Nothing, Noble. I wasn't plotting anything against you."

"That's a lie. Somebody was."

"Ross mentioned something—but I wouldn't listen to him. I told him I wanted to stay with you."

"I thought so. That sounds like a shyster. So you used some sense for once, didn't you, and wouldn't listen to his shyster tricks?"

"I don't want to leave you, Noble. I love you too much to do something like that."

"He's like all those court-house tricksters. They'd talk their own mothers into getting a divorce if they thought there was money in it for them," he shouted at her. "Wouldn't they?"

She nodded, afraid to speak to him unnecessarily. Nobby came closer.

"Where's the money?" he demanded.

"I don't have it, Noble."

"You don't have it! You didn't get any?"

"Noble, I couldn't get any money for you. Don't you see? I waited for Ross for at least an hour, and he'd just got back when you came. That's why I didn't have a chance to ask him. I was going to, but I was afraid to ask him while you were there. If I could have stayed, I was going to ask him. Honest, Noble."

"You've got more excuses than a shyster's got pockets to keep the money he steals. You'd make anybody suspicious. You're telling a lie! I'll find out!"

He jerked her purse from her hand and searched it for money. After throwing everything in her purse on the floor, he tossed it aside. Among the things he had thrown on the floor was a small snapshot of them with their arms around each other. She wanted to reach down and pick it up before it was stepped on, but she was afraid to move. The picture slowly became blurred before her eyes.

"Either you didn't try to get the money, or you're holding out on me!" he yelled in anger. "You think you can trick me, don't you! I'll show you!"

She knew instantly that he was going to strike her, and she closed her eyes and put her hands over her face. Nobby slapped her as hard as he could with his open hand. She stumbled backwards against a chair, upsetting it noisily. The stinging blow did something to her. For the first time since they had been married she felt incapable of enduring the pain he was inflicting upon her. Something in her rebelled against the willingness to endure the indignity as well as the pain. She opened her eyes and looked at him for a fleeting instant. Nobby no longer looked the same to her. He was a different man. She could think of no reason why she should allow this strange man to be abusive and cruel to her.

She got behind the overturned chair.

"Noble, let's sit down and talk about this," she said calmly. "I want to tell you what I think we ought to do. It's important, Noble."

"Aw, shut up! I've heard all the preaching I'm going to listen to!"

"I mean it, Noble," she said in an even tone of voice. "This is important."

She went to the bed and sat down. She closed her eyes momentarily as she gripped her hands tightly in her lap. Nobby came to the foot of the bed.

"Well, why don't you go ahead and say something?" he

said to her. "You said you were so crazy about wanting to talk. Let's hear it."

She looked up at him and saw the sullen twisted smile on his face. A feeling of sadness sank to the depths of her heart as she realised that she no longer loved him.

"Hurry up!" he said impatiently. "Let's hear it!"

"Noble, I'm leaving."

The smile vanished from his face. His eyes narrowed.

"What?" he said unbelievably. "What did you say?"

"I'm leaving, Noble."

A facial muscle twitched nervously between his cheek and eye.

"Like so much hell you will! Who do you think you are!"

"I've made up my mind. Nothing will change it now."

"I'll change it for you so damn quick you won't know what did it!"

She could see him coming towards her, but she had no desire to plead with him this time. When he drew back his hand to strike her, she jumped aside and ran to the door. They both got there at the same time and he flung her away before she could call to Grandpa to help her. She expected to feel the stinging blow of his hand any moment, but instead he shoved her again so roughly that she stumbled and fell over the chair.

"You can't stop me now, Noble," she told him as calmly as she could. "I can't stay any longer. Nothing you do will stop me. I've got to leave, Noble."

The colour left Nobby's face. He wet his dry lips with his tongue.

"What'll happen to me?" he said slowly. "You can't go away and leave me. Your old man'll kick me out in no time. Let me go with you, Dorisse. I'll get a job. I swear I will."

She watched him but said nothing.

"You can't go away and leave me here, Dorisse," he said, pleading with her. "What'll happen to me? I'll get a job and go to work. I swear I will. Don't you believe me, Dorisse?"

While she watched him she kept on telling herself over and over again that no matter what happened she was not going to change her mind. He was staring at her but she would not let herself look at him after that. She knew that if he said one more word to her that she would feel so sorry for him that she would throw her arms around him and promise never to leave him. She closed her eyes and prayed silently for him not to say anything.

Nobby looked around the room. She had been pressing a dress that afternoon and the flat-iron was still on the table in the corner. As soon as he saw the iron, he ran for it. Dorisse, hearing him turn and run towards her, tried to rise to her feet, but Nobby had come back and was standing over her before she could move. When she suddenly realised what he was doing, she screamed at the top of her voice.

Grandpa was hitting the door with his heavy oak cane. In another moment Chism came running from the back yard to find out what had happened. Together he and Grandpa broke open the door and ran into the room. They found Nobby standing over Dorisse. Grandpa struck at him with the heavy cane while Chism was wrenching the iron from him. Neither of them fully realised what had happened until Chism shoved Nobby across the room and turned around. It was then that Grandpa, swaying unsteadily on his feet, tried to reach the foot of the bed for support. Before his hand could touch it, he fell heavily to the floor. As Chism went to him, Ross and Jarvis ran into the room. Nobby had backed into the corner and was standing there with his back against the wall. Grandpa had not moved since he fell.

"Nobby did it!" Chism said, pointing accusingly at Nobby in the corner. "I saw him! He was hitting her with the iron! Pa saw him, too, didn't you, Pa?" He looked down at his father. "Pa!" He looked around at Ross. "Ross, he's dead——"

Ross went first to Dorisse and then to Grandpa. After a few minutes he stood up again.

"I was afraid of this," Ross said, rubbing his face with his hand. "That's why I hurried up here. I should have come sooner." He turned to Jarvis. "Jarvis, run as fast as you can over to Ed Mitchell's and phone for a doctor—any doctor! Tell him to hurry!" As soon as Jarvis left, he came back and looked down at Grandpa.

"It was his heart," Chism said. "Nobby didn't hit him. Pa just keeled over and died. His heart couldn't stand it."

Nobby was moving cautiously out of the corner.

"I couldn't help it," he said, trembling all over. "Honest to God, I couldn't help it, Ross! I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't mean to hurt her."

"I never did have any use for you, Nobby Hair," Chism said, "not since the day I found out you wouldn't go possum hunting with me. When you married Dorisse, I thought I'd have somebody to go along with me any time I wanted you to. If I'd known in advance you'd rather shoot pool than hunt possums, I'd have fixed it so she'd have married somebody else. But even after that I begged you I don't know how many times, and you still wouldn't go with me."

Nobby picked up a chair and smashed it against the window. While the glass was still falling, he jumped through the opening and ran off into the night.

"Nobby got away, Ross!" Chism said excitedly, running to the window.

"They'll catch him," Ross told his father. "The sheriff's bloodhounds will track him down by morning."

"It serves him right, having the hounds track him down in the end," Chism said.

They both knew there was nothing the doctor could do for either Dorisse or Grandpa when he got there. Ross sat down on the bed and covered his face with his hand. In a little while Chism walked heavily out of the room and went to the back porch. He sat down in the darkness. After several minutes he heard a car stop in front of the house and somebody hurried inside. He could hear Ross and the doctor talking in low voices, but he made no effort to hear what was being said. Sitting there on the steps in the dense darkness with his head resting wearily on his arms and his eyes closed he felt as though he were alone in the world.

It was a quarter of an hour before Ross came out on the porch. Jarvis was with him.

"There's no use to say anything, Ross," he said, his position unchanged. "The worst has happened. It couldn't have been worse if everybody had tried to see how much harm could be done to the Crocketts. Two of the girls ran away from home, and Dorisse is dead. And Pa's gone, too."

Ross sat down beside his father.

"What are you going to do, Papa?" he asked quietly.

Chism said he did not know what he was going to do.

"Jarvis is going to live with me from now on," he stated.

Jarvis came and sat down close to his father.

"Pa tried to take all the blame for what happened," Chism said slowly, "but it wasn't his fault. I'm the one to blame for it all. Trying to raise a family was too much for me. It'd been the same if I'd tried to run a little store or hold down that government job Dan Blalock promised me. I never really wanted to join up with them, but they told me I'd better listen to them and sell the farm and move to town, because they wanted all the members they could get when they held one of their meetings. I wish to God I'd never

heard of the Kluxers. They've been the ruination of me. It looks like the only thing on the topside of the world I want to do is hunt possums. The only time in all my life when I've been happy, was when I was out there following the hounds. Some folks will say I don't have a speck of ambition, but I can't help it if I like a little simple thing of life best of all. I know there must be other folks like me, and too ashamed to admit it, like I was. That was the big trouble with me all along. I was too ashamed to be what I was. I know it don't sound like amounting to much in a world like this, where everybody else makes a big to-do about getting rich or being famous for something or other, but I'd rather be proud of what I am, than ashamed of what I'm not. If I'd only had the sense to realise that twenty years ago——"

He reached out and patted Jarvis on the arm. Then, not saying anything more, he bent over and retied his shoelaces in hard knots and whistled for the spotted hounds. Liz, Rockie, and Margie came trotting briskly from the shed and stood expectantly in front of him. Chism reached down and patted each of them affectionately before getting up and walking away towards the alley.

