

LIGHT
IN
AUGUST

by

WILLIAM
FAULKNER

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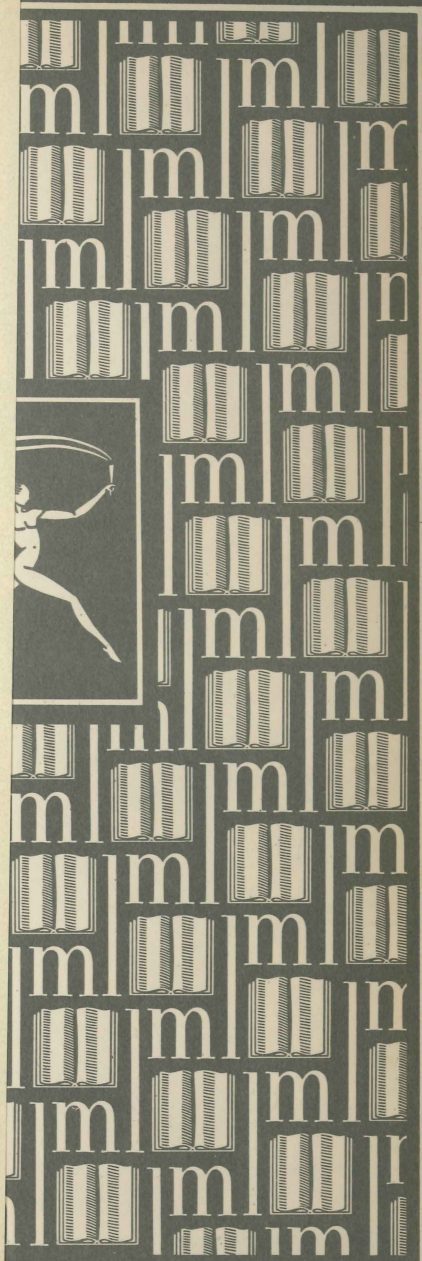
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LIGHT IN AUGUST

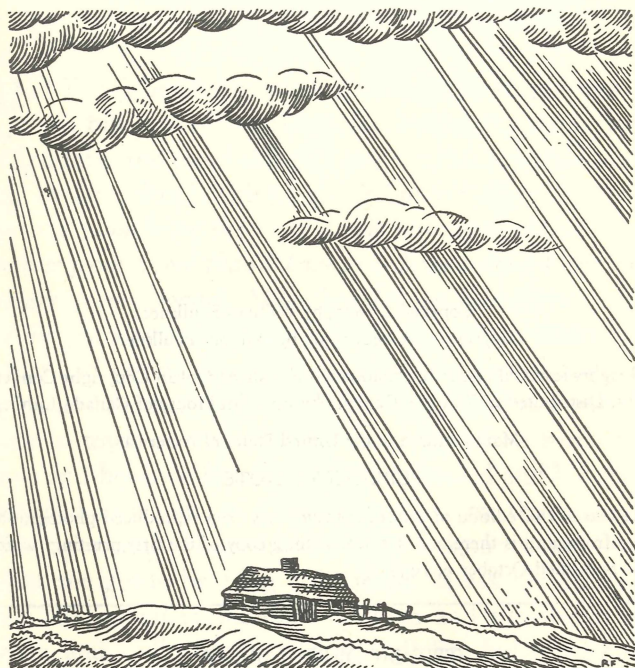
by William Faulkner

First published in October, 1932, *Light in August* was the seventh of Faulkner's novels to appear. Unquestionably one of his masterworks, it has always stood near or at the top of any critic's attempted listing of the author's works in the order of their excellence or importance; and it will continue to be one of the most widely read, studied, and written about novels of this century.



LIGHT IN AUGUST

WILLIAM FAULKNER



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BENNETT CERF • DONALD S. KLOPPER

that he would purloin his own garments from the family wash before she could get to them and replace the missing buttons. When she foiled him he set himself deliberately to learn and remember which buttons were missing and had been restored. With his pocket knife and with the cold and bloodless deliberation of a surgeon he would cut off the buttons which she had just replaced.

His right hand slid fast and smooth as the knife blade had ever done, up the opening in the garment. Edgewise it struck the remaining button a light, swift blow. The dark air breathed upon him, breathed smoothly as the garment slipped down his legs, the cool mouth of darkness, the soft cool tongue. Moving again, he could feel the dark air like water; he could feel the dew under his feet as he had never felt dew before. He passed through the broken gate and stopped beside the road. The August weeds were thightall. Upon the leaves and stalks dust of a month of passing wagons lay. The road ran before him. It was a little paler than the darkness of trees and earth. In one direction town lay. In the other the road rose to a hill. After a time a light began to grow beyond the hill, defining it. Then he could hear the car. He did not move. He stood with his hands on his hips, naked, thighdeep in the dusty weeds, while the car came over the hill and approached, the lights full upon him. He watched his body grow white out of the darkness like a kodak print emerging from the liquid. He looked straight into the headlights as it shot past. From it a woman's shrill voice flew back, shrieking. "White bastards!" he shouted. "That's not the first of your bitches that ever saw . . ." But the car was gone. There was no one to hear, to listen. It was gone, sucking its dust and its light with it and behind it, sucking with it the

white woman's fading cry. He was cold now. It was as though he had merely come there to be present at a finality, and the finality had now occurred and he was free again. He returned to the house. Beneath the dark window he paused and hunted and found his undergarment and put it on. There was no remaining button at all now and he had to hold it together as he returned to the cabin. Already he could hear Brown snoring. He stood for a while at the door, motionless and silent, listening to the long, harsh, uneven suspirations ending each in a choked gurgle. 'I must have hurt his nose more than I knew,' he thought. 'Damn son of a bitch.' He entered and went to his cot, preparing to lie down. He was in the act of reclining when he stopped, halted, halfreclining. Perhaps the thought of himself lying there until daylight, with the drunken man snoring in the darkness and the intervals filled with the myriad voices, was more than he could bear. Because he sat up and fumbled quietly beneath his cot and found his shoes and slipped them on and took from the cot the single half cotton blanket which composed his bedding, and left the cabin. About three hundred yards away the stable stood. It was falling down and there had not been a horse in it in thirty years, yet it was toward the stable that he went. He was walking quite fast. He was thinking now, aloud now, 'Why in hell do I want to smell horses?' Then he said, fumbling: "It's because they are not women. Even a mare horse is a kind of man."

He slept less than two hours. When he waked dawn was just beginning. Lying in the single blanket upon the loosely planked floor of the sagging and gloomy cavern acrid with the thin dust of departed hay and faintly ammoniac with

that breathless desertion of old stables, he could see through the shutterless window in the eastern wall the primrose sky and the high, pale morning star of full summer.

He felt quite rested, as if he had slept an unbroken eight hours. It was the unexpected sleep, since he had not expected to sleep at all. With his feet again in the unlaced shoes and the folded blanket beneath his arm he descended the perpendicular ladder, feeling for the rotting and invisible rungs with his feet, lowering himself from rung to rung in onehanded swoops. He emerged into the gray and yellow of dawn, the clean chill, breathing it deep.

The cabin now stood sharp against the increasing east, and the clump of trees also within which the house was hidden save for the single chimney. The dew was heavy in the tall grass. His shoes were wet at once. The leather was cold to his feet; against his bare legs the wet grass blades were like strokes of limber icicles. Brown had stopped snoring. When Christmas entered he could see Brown by the light from the eastern window. He breathed quietly now. 'Sober now,' Christmas thought. 'Sober and dont know it. Poor bastard.' He looked at Brown. 'Poor bastard. He'll be mad when he wakes up and finds out that he is sober again. Take him maybe a whole hour to get back drunk again.' He put down the blanket and dressed, in the serge trousers, the white shirt a little soiled now, the bow tie. He was smoking. Nailed to the wall was a shard of mirror. In the fragment he watched his dim face as he knotted the tie. The stiff hat hung on a nail. He did not take it down. He took instead a cloth cap from another nail, and from the floor beneath his cot a magazine of that type whose covers bear either pictures of young women in underclothes or pictures of men in the act of

shooting one another with pistols. From beneath the pillow on his cot he took his razor and a brush and a stick of shaving soap and put them into his pocket.

When he left the cabin it was quite light. The birds were in full chorus. This time he turned his back on the house. He went on past the stable and entered the pasture beyond it. His shoes and his trouser legs were soon sopping with gray dew. He paused and rolled his trousers gingerly to his knees and went on. At the end of the pasture woods began. The dew was not so heavy here, and he rolled his trousers down again. After a while he came to a small valley in which a spring rose. He put down the magazine and gathered twigs and dried brush and made a fire and sat, his back against a tree and his feet to the blaze. Presently his wet shoes began to steam. Then he could feel the heat moving up his legs, and then all of a sudden he opened his eyes and saw the high sun and that the fire had burned completely out, and he knew that he had been asleep. 'Damned if I haven't,' he thought. 'Damned if I haven't slept again.'

He had slept more than two hours this time, because the sun was shining down upon the spring itself, glinting and glancing upon the ceaseless water. He rose, stretching his cramped and stiffened back, waking his tingling muscles. From his pocket he took the razor, the brush, the soap. Kneeling beside the spring he shaved, using the water's surface for glass, stropping the long bright razor on his shoe.

He concealed the shaving things and the magazine in a clump of bushes and put on the tie again. When he left the spring he bore now well away from the house. When he reached the road he was a half mile beyond the house.

A short distance further on stood a small store with a gasoline pump before it. He entered the store and a woman sold him crackers and a tin of potted meat. He returned to the spring, the dead fire.

He ate his breakfast with his back against the tree, reading the magazine while he ate. He had previously read but one story; he began now upon the second one, reading the magazine straight through as though it were a novel. Now and then he would look up from the page, chewing, into the sunshot leaves which arched the ditch. 'Maybe I have already done it,' he thought. 'Maybe it is no longer now waiting to be done.' It seemed to him that he could see the yellow day opening peacefully on before him, like a corridor, an arras, into a still chiaroscuro without urgency. It seemed to him that as he sat there the yellow day contemplated him drowsily, like a prone and somnolent yellow cat. Then he read again. He turned the pages in steady progression, though now and then he would seem to linger upon one page, one line, perhaps one word. He would not look up then. He would not move, apparently arrested and held immobile by a single word which had perhaps not yet impacted, his whole being suspended by the single trivial combination of letters in quiet and sunny space, so that hanging motionless and without physical weight he seemed to watch the slow flowing of time beneath him, thinking *All I wanted was peace* thinking, 'She ought not to started praying over me.'

When he reached the last story he stopped reading and counted the remaining pages. Then he looked at the sun and read again. He read now like a man walking along a street might count the cracks in the pavement, to the last and final page, the last and final word. Then he rose and

struck a match to the magazine and prodded it patiently until it was consumed. With the shaving things in his pocket he went on down the ditch.

After a while it broadened: a smooth, sandblanched floor between steep shelving walls choked, flank and crest, with brier and brush. Over it trees still arched, and in a small cove in one flank a mass of dead brush lay, filling the cove. He began to drag the brush to one side, clearing the cove and exposing a short handled shovel. With the shovel he began to dig in the sand which the brush had concealed, exhuming one by one six metal tins with screw tops. He did not unscrew the caps. He laid the tins on their sides and with the sharp edge of the shovel he pierced them, the sand beneath them darkening as the whiskey spurted and poured, the sunny solitude, the air, becoming redolent with alcohol. He emptied them thoroughly, unhurried, his face completely cold, masklike almost. When they were all empty he tumbled them back into the hole and buried them roughly and dragged the brush back and hid the shovel again. The brush hid the stain but it could not hide the scent, the smell. He looked at the sun again. It was now afternoon.

At seven o'clock that evening he was in town, in a restaurant on a side street, eating his supper, sitting on a backless stool at a frictionsmooth wooden counter, eating.

At nine o'clock he was standing outside the barbershop, looking through the window at the man whom he had taken for a partner. He stood quite still, with his hands in his trousers and cigarette smoke drifting across his still face and the cloth cap worn, like the stiff hat, at that angle at once swaggering and baleful. So cold, so baleful he stood

there that Brown inside the shop, among the lights, the air heavy with lotion and hot soap, gesticulant, thickvoiced, in the soiled redbarred trousers and the soiled colored shirt, looked up in midvoice and with his drunken eyes looked into the eyes of the man beyond the glass. So still and baleful that a negro youth shuffling up the street whistling saw Christmas' profile and ceased whistling and edged away and slid past behind him, turning, looking back over his shoulder. But Christmas was moving himself now. It was as if he had just paused there for Brown to look at him.

He went on, not fast, away from the square. The street, a quiet one at all times, was deserted at this hour. It led down through the negro section, Freedman Town, to the station. At seven o'clock he would have passed people, white and black, going toward the square and the picture show; at half past nine they would have been going back home. But the picture show had not turned out yet, and he now had the street to himself. He went on, passing still between the homes of white people, from street lamp to street lamp, the heavy shadows of oak and maple leaves sliding like scraps of black velvet across his white shirt. Nothing can look quite as lonely as a big man going along an empty street. Yet though he was not large, not tall, he contrived somehow to look more lonely than a lone telephone pole in the middle of a desert. In the wide, empty, shadow-brooded street he looked like a phantom, a spirit, strayed out of its own world, and lost.

Then he found himself. Without his being aware the street had begun to slope and before he knew it he was in Freedman Town, surrounded by the summer smell and the summer voices of invisible negroes. They seemed to enclose him like bodiless voices murmuring, talking, laugh-

ing, in a language not his. As from the bottom of a thick black pit he saw himself enclosed by cabinshapes, vague, kerosenelike, so that the street lamps themselves seemed to be further spaced, as if the black life, the black breathing had compounded the substance of breath so that not only voices but moving bodies and light itself must become fluid and accrete slowly from particle to particle, of and with the now ponderable night inseparable and one.

He was standing still now, breathing quite hard, glaring this way and that. About him the cabins were shaped blackly out of blackness by the faint, sultry glow of kerosene lamps. On all sides, even within him, the bodiless fecundmellow voices of negro women murmured. It was as though he and all other manshaped life about him had been returned to the lightless hot wet primogenitive Female. He began to run, glaring, his teeth glaring, his inbreath cold on his dry teeth and lips, toward the next street lamp. Beneath it a narrow and rutted lane turned and mounted to the parallel street, out of the black hollow. He turned into it running and plunged up the sharp ascent, his heart hammering, and into the higher street. He stopped here, panting, glaring, his heart thudding as if it could not or would not yet believe that the air now was the cold hard air of white people.

Then he became cool. The negro smell, the negro voices, were behind and below him now. To his left lay the square, the clustered lights: low bright birds in stillwinged and tremulous suspension. To the right the street lamps marched on, spaced, intermittent with bitten and unstirring branches. He went on, slowly again, his back toward the square, passing again between the houses of white people. There were people on these porches too, and in chairs upon

the lawns; but he could walk quiet here. Now and then he could see them: heads in silhouette, a white blurred garmented shape; on a lighted veranda four people sat about a card table, the white faces intent and sharp in the low light, the bare arms of the women glaring smooth and white above the trivial cards. 'That's all I wanted,' he thought. 'That dont seem like a whole lot to ask.'

This street in turn began to slope. But it sloped safely. His steady white shirt and pacing dark legs died among long shadows bulging square and huge against the August stars: a cotton warehouse, a horizontal and cylindrical tank like the torso of a beheaded mastodon, a line of freight cars. He crossed the tracks, the rails coming momentarily into twin green glints from a switch lamp, glinting away again. Beyond the tracks woods began. But he found the path unerringly. It mounted, among the trees, the lights of the town now beginning to come into view again across the valley where the railroad ran. But he did not look back until he reached the crest of the hill. Then he could see the town, the glare, the individual lights where streets radiated from the square. He could see the street down which he had come, and the other street, the one which had almost betrayed him; and further away and at right angles, the far bright rampart of the town itself, and in the angle between the black pit from which he had fled with drumming heart and glaring lips. No light came from it, from here no breath, no odor. It just lay there, black, impenetrable, in its garland of Augusttremulous lights. It might have been the original quarry, abyss itself.

His way was sure, despite the trees, the darkness. He never once lost the path which he could not even see. The woods continued for a mile. He emerged into a road, with

dust under his feet. He could see now, the vague spreading world, the horizon. Here and there faint windows glowed. But most of the cabins were dark. Nevertheless his blood began again, talking and talking. He walked fast, in time to it; he seemed to be aware that the group were negroes before he could have seen or heard them at all, before they even came in sight vaguely against the defunctive dust.

There were five or six of them, in a straggling body yet vaguely paired; again there reached him, above the noise of his own blood, the rich murmur of womenvoices. He was walking directly toward them, walking fast. They had seen him and they gave to one side of the road, the voices ceasing. He too changed direction, crossing toward them as if he intended to walk them down. In a single movement and as though at a spoken command the women faded back and were going around him, giving him a wide berth. One of the men followed them as if he were driving them before him, looking over his shoulder as he passed. The other two men had halted in the road, facing Christmas. Christmas had stopped also. Neither seemed to be moving, yet they approached, looming, like two shadows drifting up. He could smell negro; he could smell cheap cloth and sweat. The head of the negro, higher than his own, seemed to stoop, out of the sky, against the sky. "It's a white man," he said, without turning his head, quietly. "What you want, whitefolks? You looking for somebody?" The voice was not threatful. Neither was it servile.

"Come on away from there, Jupe," the one who had followed the women said.

"Who you looking for, cap'm?" the negro said.

"Jupe," one of the women said, her voice a little high. "You come on, now."

For a moment longer the two heads, the light and the

had been sweating for some time, that for some time now he had been doing nothing else but sweating. He was not hearing anything at all now. Very likely he would not have heard a gunshot beyond the curtain. He seemed to be turned in upon himself, watching himself sweating, watching himself smear another worm of paste into his mouth which his stomach did not want. Sure enough, it refused to go down. Motionless now, utterly contemplative, he seemed to stoop above himself like a chemist in his laboratory, waiting. He didn't have to wait long. At once the paste which he had already swallowed lifted inside him, trying to get back out, into the air where it was cool. It was no longer sweet. In the rife, pinkwomansmelling obscurity behind the curtain he squatted, pinkfoamed, listening to his insides, waiting with astonished fatalism for what was about to happen to him. Then it happened. He said to himself with complete and passive surrender: 'Well, here I am.'

When the curtain fled back he did not look up. When hands dragged him violently out of his vomit he did not resist. He hung from the hands, limp, looking with slack-jawed and glassy idiocy into a face no longer smooth pink-and-white, surrounded now by wild and dishevelled hair whose smooth bands once made him think of candy. "You little rat!" the thin, furious voice hissed; "you little rat! Spying on me! You little nigger bastard!"

The dietitian was twentyseven—old enough to have to take a few amorous risks but still young enough to attach a great deal of importance not so much to love, but to being caught at it. She was also stupid enough to believe that a child of five not only could deduce the truth from

what he had heard, but that he would want to tell it as an adult would. So when during the following two days she could seem to look nowhere and be nowhere without finding the child watching her with the profound and intent interrogation of an animal, she foisted upon him more of the attributes of an adult: she believed that he not only intended to tell, but that he deferred doing it deliberately in order to make her suffer more. It never occurred to her that he believed that he was the one who had been taken in sin and was being tortured with punishment deferred and that he was putting himself in her way in order to get it over with, get his whipping and strike the balance and write it off.

By the second day she was well nigh desperate. She did not sleep at night. She lay most of the night now tense, teeth and hands clenched, panting with fury and terror and worst of all, regret: that blind fury to turn back time just for an hour, a second. This was to the exclusion of even love during the time. The young doctor was now even less than the child, merely an instrument of her disaster and not even that of her salvation. She could not have said which she hated most. She could not even say when she was asleep and when she was awake. Because always against her eyelids or upon her retinæ was that still, grave, inescapable, parchmentcolored face watching her.

On the third day she came out of the coma state, the waking sleep through which during the hours of light and faces she carried her own face like an aching mask in a fixed grimace of dissimulation that dared not flag. On the third day she acted. She had no trouble finding him. It was in the corridor, the empty corridor during the quiet hour after dinner. He was there, doing nothing at all. Perhaps he

seen one before: the close room, warm, littered, woman-pinksmelling. "Womanfilth," he said. "Before the face of God." He turned and went out. After a while the woman rose. She stood for a time, clutching the garment, motionless, idiotic, staring at the empty door as if she could not think what to tell herself to do. Then she ran. She sprang to the door, flinging herself upon it, crashing it to and locking it, leaning against it, panting, clutching the turned key in both hands.

At breakfast time the next morning the janitor and the child were missing. No trace of them could be found. The police were notified at once. A side door was found to be unlocked, to which the janitor had a key.

"It's because he knows," the dietitian told the matron. "Knows what?"

"That that child, that Christmas boy, is a nigger."

"A what?" the matron said. Backthrust in her chair, she glared at the younger woman. "A ne— I dont believe it!" she cried. "I dont believe it!"

"You dont have to believe it," the other said. "But he knows it. He stole him away because of it."

The matron was past fifty, flabby faced, with weak, kind, frustrated eyes. "I dont believe it!" she said. But on the third day she sent for the dietitian. She looked as if she had not slept in some time. The dietitian, on the contrary, was quite fresh, quite serene. She was still unshaken when the matron told her the news, that the man and the child had been found. "At Little Rock," the matron said. "He tried to put the child into an orphanage there. They thought he was crazy and held him until the police came." She looked at the younger woman. "You told me . . . The other day you said . . . How did you know about this?"

The dietitian did not look away. "I didn't. I had no idea at all. Of course I knew it didn't mean anything when the other children called him Nigger—"

"Nigger?" the matron said. "The other children?"

"They have been calling him Nigger for years. Sometimes I think that children have a way of knowing things that grown people of your and my age don't see. Children, and old people like him, like that old man. That's why he always sat in the door yonder while they were playing in the yard: watching that child. Maybe he found it out from hearing the other children call him Nigger. But he might have known beforehand. If you remember, they came here about the same time. He hadn't been working here hardly a month before the night—that Christmas, don't you remember—when Ch—they found the baby on the doorstep?" She spoke smoothly, watching the baffled, shrinking eyes of the older woman full upon her own as though she could not remove them. The dietitian's eyes were bland and innocent. "And so the other day we were talking and he was trying to tell me something about the child. It was something he wanted to tell me, tell somebody, and finally he lost his nerve maybe and wouldn't tell it, and so I left him. I wasn't thinking about it at all. It had gone completely out of my mind when—" Her voice ceased. She gazed at the matron while into her face there came an expression of enlightenment, sudden comprehension; none could have said if it were simulated or not. "Why, that's why it . . . Why, I see it all, now. What happened just the day before they were gone, missing. I was in the corridor, going to my room; it was the same day I happened to be talking to him and he refused to tell me whatever it was he started to tell, when all of a sudden he came up and stopped me; I

thought then it was funny because I had never before seen him inside the house. And he said—he sounded crazy, he looked crazy. I was scared, too scared to move, with him blocking the corridor—he said, ‘Have you told her yet?’ and I said, ‘Told who? Told who what?’ and then I realised he meant you; if I had told you that he had tried to tell me something about the child. But I didn’t know what he meant for me to tell you and I wanted to scream and then he said, ‘What will she do if she finds it out?’ and I didn’t know what to say or how to get away from him and then he said, ‘You dont have to tell me. I know what she will do. She will send him to the one for niggers.’”

“For negroes?”

“I dont see how we failed to see it as long as we did. You can look at his face now, his eyes and hair. Of course it’s terrible. But that’s where he will have to go, I suppose.”

Behind her glasses the weak, troubled eyes of the matron had a harried, jellied look, as if she were trying to force them to something beyond their physical cohesiveness. “But why did he want to take the child away?”

“Well, if you want to know what I think, I think he is crazy. If you could have seen him in the corridor that ni—day like I did. Of course it’s bad for the child to have to go to the nigger home, after this, after growing up with white people. It’s not his fault what he is. But it’s not our fault, either—” She ceased, watching the matron. Behind the glasses the older woman’s eyes were still harried, weak, hopeless; her mouth was trembling as she shaped speech with it. Her words were hopeless too, but they were decisive enough, determined enough.

“We must place him. We must place him at once. What applications have we? If you will hand me the file . . .”

wherever the street of the imperceptible corners should choose to run again. Yet when he moved, it was toward the house. It was as though, as soon as he found that his feet intended to go there, that he let go, seemed to float, surrendered, thinking *All right All right* floating, riding across the dusk, up to the house and onto the back porch and to the door by which he would enter, that was never locked. But when he put his hand upon it, it would not open. Perhaps for the moment neither hand nor believing would believe; he seemed to stand there, quiet, not yet thinking, watching his hand shaking the door, hearing the sound of the bolt on the inside. He turned away quietly. He was not yet raging. He went to the kitchen door. He expected that to be locked also. But he did not realise until he found that it was open, that he had wanted it to be. When he found that it was not locked it was like an insult. It was as though some enemy upon whom he had wreaked his utmost of violence and contumely stood, unscathed and unscarred, and contemplated him with a musing and insufferable contempt. When he entered the kitchen, he did not approach the door into the house proper, the door in which she had appeared with the candle on the night when he first saw her. He went directly to the table where she set out his food. He did not need to see. His hands saw; the dishes were still a little warm, thinking *Set out for the nigger. For the nigger.*

He seemed to watch his hand as if from a distance. He watched it pick up a dish and swing it up and back and hold it there while he breathed deep and slow, intensely cogitant. He heard his voice say aloud, as if he were playing a game: "Ham," and watched his hand swing and hurl the dish crashing into the wall, the invisible wall,