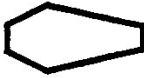


'It's about,' I say. 'He's ready to nail.'

While they are getting up Anse comes to the door and looks at us and we return to the porch. We scrape our shoes again, careful, waiting for one another to go in first, milling a little at the door. Anse stands inside the door, dignified, composed. He waves us in and leads the way into the room.

They had laid her in it reversed. Cash made it clock-shaped like this with every joint and seam bevelled and scrubbed with the plane, tight as a drum and neat as a sewing basket, and they had laid her in it head to foot so it wouldn't crush her dress. It was her wedding-dress and it had a flare-out bottom, and they had laid her head to foot in it so the dress could be spread out, and they had made her a veil out of a mosquito bar so the auger holes in her face wouldn't show.



When we are going out, Whitfield comes. He is wet and muddy to the waist, coming in. 'The Lord comfort this house,' he says. 'I was late because the bridge has gone. I went down to the old ford and swum my horse over, the Lord protecting me. His grace be upon this house.'

We go back to the trestles and plank-ends and sit or squat.

'I knowed it would go,' Armstid says.

'It's been there a long time, that ere bridge,' Quick says.

'The Lord has kept it there, you mean,' Uncle Billy says. 'I don't know ere a man that's touched hammer to it in twenty-five years.'

'How long has it been there, Uncle Billy?' Quick says.

'It was built in . . . let me see. . . . It was in the year 1888,' Uncle Billy says. 'I mind it because the first man to cross it was Peabody coming to my house when Jody was born.'

'If I'd a crossed it every time your wife littered since, it'd a been wore out long before this, Billy,' Peabody says.

We laugh, suddenly loud, then suddenly quiet again. We look a little aside at one another.

'Lots of folks has crossed it that won't cross no more bridges,' Houston says.

'It's a fact,' Littlejohn says. 'It's so.'

'One more ain't, no ways,' Armstid says. 'It'd taken them two-three days to got her to town in the wagon. They'd be gone a week, getting her to Jefferson and back.'

'What's Anse so itching to take her to Jefferson for, anyway?' Houston says.

'He promised her,' I say. 'She wanted it. She come from there. Her mind was set on it.'

'And Anse is set on it, too,' Quick says.

'Ay,' Uncle Billy says. 'It's like a man that's let everything slide all his life to get set on something that will make the most trouble for everybody he knows.'

'Well, it'll take the Lord to get her over that river now,' Peabody says. 'Anse can't do it.'

'And I reckon He will,' Quick says. 'He's took care of Anse a long time, now.'

'It's a fact,' Littlejohn says.

'Too long to quit now,' Armstid says.

'I reckon He's like everybody else around here,' Uncle Billy says. 'He's done it so long now He can't quit.'

Cash comes out. He has put on a clean shirt; his hair, wet, is combed smooth down on his brow, smooth and black as if he had painted it on to his head. He squats stiffly among us, we watching him.

'You feeling this weather, ain't you?' Armstid says. Cash says nothing.