THE MIND BRUISERS

Sam Whyte

Vergie knew that sooner or later she would handle snakes at church. She thought little about it, certainly never fretfully tossing in bed and wondering how it would feel to caress--and in turn be caressed by--a rattlesnake or a copperhead. Nor did she burden her mind with fears and worries while she went about her daily work, plumping up feather ticks with hefty smacks from both hands or carrying chunks of logs every morning for her baking fire. She had lived with snakes all her life, just as most children have lived with toys. She had her share of play-pretties, but, as her mother so often stressed, they were just passing things. The things of God were everlasting. Since snakes were used to test faith, they were to be respected and honored.

Vergie's mother, Etta Rollins, had led more services than any woman in Salt Hollow, sometimes gently singing four or five hymns while a four-foot long rattler oozed through the palm of her hand and down an uplifted arm toward her neck where it would seem to rest contentedly. For more than 15 years, about a year before Vergie was born, Etta proclaimed her faith to the members of the Church of the Abundant Jesus to God by her handling of snakes. Seeing her mother standing in front of the church so often, Vergie thought she was a preacher until the Reverend Cletis Chidester told the girl whenever he had a chance, “No woman in the entire state of West Virginia will ever be a preacher. And don't you forget it, Miss smarty pants!”

Vergie's father, Hiram, did not belong to the church. He had never been inside the building, had never seen his wife standing transfixed at the altar, snakes collected about her-Every time a service took place, though, he could hear the shouting and the singing, high-pitched and frenzied, from any place in his own home a quarter a mile away. Hiram, who had lost three fingers from his left hand in a mining accident when he was 19, knew life's dangers were always within a gnat's heel of striking. Why his woman would put herself right smack in a den of snakes he could not in the slightest comprehend. “She's the God-awfullest thing I ever did see,” he often remarked.

As Vergie knew, you didn't plan ahead to handle the snakes in service; you didn't decide three weeks before upon a date, making elaborate preparations in the meantime, and then lead the service at the appointed hour. No, snake-handling was as spontaneous as sneezing--or speaking in tongues. When the Lord Jesus was ready, he told you. He sent the Holy Spirit descending down, notifying and annointing you then and there. That's the way her mother and Cletis explained it.

Lately, though, in the valley, all anyone talked about was snakes. Unrest was growing daily. Curious strangers from Charleston and other city places had found their way into the valley and to the tiny log and clapboard church hidden among the stately hemlocks. Crowded against the sides and back of the one-room building, they would gawk at the workship service, now and then startling Vergie and the others with flashing bright lights used to take pictures., One man even finished his pictures--in black and white--right in the church; he had shown them to Vergie. She wondered if this was the way the Holy Spirit worked.

Another picture arrived in the mail from her married cousin Docia who had cut it out of the Huntington paper. It was the same picture that must have drawn the loud and inquisitive strangers to the church: Lucian Casto holding a jelly jar of strychnine to his lips, and Etta Rollins, fondling a snake draped about her neck and over and under both arms like a yoke on oxen. Vergie wanted to pin the picture over her bed on a piece of pretty quilting, but her mother called it a graven image and threw it in the fire.

And now there was talk about television, that wondrous “picture box” that everyone in the valley knew about but which not a family had, partly because of superstition and religious cautiousness but also because of a more practical reason: the mountains surrounding Weary River were too high for receiving signals. But, more than all of that, scarcely a single family, with one or two exceptions, could have afforded it, and some had no electricity. The men from Charleston claimed that they could take “fil-ums” of the church service that could be put on the “picture box.” After some discussion among the church members, and some subtle manipulation from Cletis, it was finally agreed that the people; from the city--or wherever they were from, Satan very likely, as some thought--could make one picture of a snake-handling service. Then they were to come back no more.

Vergie could not figure out why people from the city, people who supposedly saw everything, knew everything, and had everything, would be so interested in a mountain church service. She knew her church was neither Methodist nor Baptist, but all churches were very much the same, weren't they? The same Bible, the same Jesus, the same hymns. Even some of the strangers had sung “Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone?” with the church members.

Vergie knew by heart Bible stories from the Old and New Testaments, and she could recite verse after verse of scripture, especially the most important one in Mark: “And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick; and why. The verses were the whole Bible, she had been taught. They told what true believers would be able to do to show they had faith. Nothing they will recover.” These were the verses the strangers were now quoting and commenting on with such amazement. Vergie couldn't understand why. The verses were the whole Bible, she had been taught. They told what true believers would be able to do to show they had faith. Nothing else held much water.

At 14, Vergie was fall for a girl of the mountains already half-way to six feet. Her light brown hair freshly washed in spring water, fell loosely to her shoulders.

Smoothing a stubborn wrinkle out of the plain white skirt she had just put on, Vergie thought about these religious teachings, She paused to decide whether to pinch her cheeks a little, and then, choosing against it because her mother and Cletis would not approve, went out on the porch and into the dusk.

Dusk in West Virginia is the most beautiful time of day, and dusk is longer there because the mountains and the trees play games with the sun. As the sun first slips behind the topmost peak of the highest mountain, night shadows and slight breezes rush into the valley, only to be sent back into hiding as the sun, sliding farther to the west, scoots out of the way of the mountain. Sunlight dances in the lanes and paths that, minutes before were crowded with the dim cooling shadows and breezes. Before the sun moves behind the mountain peak, a giant oak, erect and spreading, filters the sunlight and shatters it into millions of sparkling arrows. Then, the sun, again blocked by an ominous hill, disappears, leaving only the deepening oranges of the sky to play tag with the returning shadows, now heavier, and the descending breezes, now cooler. Yet once again, the sun peeks between the hills, embracing all with warmth and light, and, then, squeezing through a massive spruce, falls into the great mountain mass in the west, pronouncing its benediction with oranges and purples and blue-grays. Then--night.

Vergie walked through the night toward the church. Turning a bend in the road which brought her in full view of the building, still almost a quarter a mile ahead, she stopped, heart in throat. From that point, the church was on fire, but, as her senses returned, the girl realized that not fire but light, the brightest she had ever seen, was bursting out of every window and door and shimmering from beneath some of the boards. Other of the mountain folk would have thought this brilliance to be some sort of celestial light, but not Vergie. She guessed it was probably the strangers with their television machines.

The church was packed with people and lights. For a moment, Vergie could not see anything, and when her eyes grew accustomed to the brightness of the room, she noticed that more strangers than ever before were there, many of them seated in the hand-hewn oaken pews, others standing at the back of the church. Constant chatter and the sound of metal clanging against metal rose above Pap Talbott's music from the dulcimer. Edging her way nearer the front of the room, Vergie began to feel the pitch of excitement in the air. Sister Rupert, at ninety-three the oldest woman in the valley and the church, screeched, “Oh, JESUS!” in a piercing voice, while her niece and two other women answered her with “Amen, Amen.” Over in the corner, someone--Vergie couldn't see who because one of the huge television lamps was set up in the same corner--was intoning scripture in a dull, gruff voice. The temperature in the room was higher than it had been earlier in the day, and, to add to the confusion, though no one seemed particularly to notice, a frightened barn swallow was fluttering around in the east corner of the ceiling.

Below, in two wooden boxes covered with ordinary wire screen, lay three snakes--two copperheads and a rattler. Curled together in an intricate twist, the copperheads moved only slightly, their rusty-brown and black-red forms blending into the interior of the box. These were local snakes taken from the rocky hillside of the McBee farm and had been used several times before in services. When they were not in the church, the reptiles were kept and tended by Cletis Chidester in the large snake den he had constructed.

The rattler, four and a half feet long, slithered unsteadily about in its confinement, the slender forks of tongue occasionally darting into the air. Its colors, less prominent than the copper-heads' in this light, showed brown and tan folding into black and white in the shingled segment of the tail. A curious odor, much like that of a green watermelon just cut open, lingered over the rattler's box.

Vergie drew near and peered into both boxes. She thought she recognized the copperheads, remembering half-consciously that one of them must have been the snake her mother had handled in the picture in the paper. The rattler, however, was a new one; at least to Vergie's memory, it had never been used before.

A hot-cold shiver cascaded in tiny rivulets all over Vergie's back as she gazed at the snake. It was a strange, new and delightful sensation for the fourteen year-old girl causing her to tremble for several seconds. Fleetingly, she felt again the queasiness she had had the night before when Cletis had shown her his prized snake.

“Oh, bless sweet Jesus!” shouted Sister Rupert in a thin falsetto.

“Sweet, sweet Jesus” came in echo from all parts of the room as Pap Talbott played “There is a Fountain.” Vergie could hear the words she had known all her life:

There is a fountain filled with blood

Drawn from Immanuel's veins,

And sinners plunged beneath that flood

Lose all their guilty stains.

Her eyes and mind were glued on the snake, but she wasn't singing. An almost pathetic shriek broke forth from Vergie's mother as the woman dropped to her knees, threw back her head and swayed in time to the music, her hands clasped to her ivory-white neck. The television lights seemed to blaze even more brightly as Mrs. Rollins uttered in a clear and distinct voice unclear and indistinct words, a garble which slipped out with ease and melodious infection but which could be understood by no one. Mumbles and prayers sounded throughout the room, punctuated frequently with staccato “Amens” Vergie, her face flushed from the heat of the room and the warmth of such new and nerve-tingling emotions felt her pulse throbbing in her temples and neck. She knelt in prayer.

A door to the right behind Vergie opened and a stocky man of medium height walked out. He wore a black double-breasted suit with wide ivory pin stripes, some of which had faded away. His ample tie was red with swirls of black apostrophe marks. His black shoes, immaculately polished, were V-tipped and squeaked like an unoiled hinge when he walked. Stepping behind a plain walnut-stained podium, he lifted his arms and head, and he spoke.

“Tonight we are gathered to praise and honorfy Jesus. Bless his holy name. He has sent us to witness for the revivalization of the faith. Praise Him! Honor Him! He has promised not to depart from them that believes and them that does all things in his name. And we do now with speechifying' and testifyin' uphold the most great and diabolical saver of our souls. HALLELULUYAH! He has told us our faith can move Crabtrees Mountain. Oh, Jeeeesus, may it move for you. Let them rocks crack and them trees split and them waters on Crabtrees and Blackbrier Hill be puny-er than these here gathered. MOVE MOUNTAINS! Amen! CRACK ROCKS! Oh, precious-est JESUS!!”

Cletis clutched the sides of the podium. His head swiveled around his neck like a ball bearing in a roller skate. His eyes were closed under an unfurrowed forehead. Vergie, still kneeling, swayed rhythmically back and forth. Etta, her eyes wide open and looking upward, flung out her arms and hands at 180 degree angles from her body. Then she brought them together as though she were going to applaud, but, just short of their touching, she jerked them apart again. Some members of the congregation clapped in tiny staccato bursts, three or four rat-a-tat-tats accompanying Cletis's words. The strangers stared.

“When the roll is called up yonder, the mountain movers who has had faith'll hear their names spelled out by none other than sweet Jesus. Oh, spell out and praise his holy name. It is well, it is well, it is well with your soul. HALLELUJAH! You have throwed off your sins like a snake casts off their skins. Sin and skin, ain't they the sameness in the Lord's eyelets? Be rid of the ruination of your sins. Him that is saved from sin, her that is saved from sin can withstand evil in the land and can cast out the devil in the precious name of Jesus. Glory, glory, glory to the Lord Jesus!! HALLELLUULLULUYAH!AMEN!AMEN! Them that still sins, them that still apostasizes will this night be touching the hot hinges of hell. They feel the burning in their vitals. They feel the fires at their toes. Don't you feel it., sinner? SINNER! Don't you feel it? And, crystal follower of Jesus, don't you feel the flames near them? Come to the Saviour now. Oh, Jesus, render speeches to their hard hearts. And we will rejoice. Us ninety and nine safely here. Hep us to find the one hunderth. Hep us reach them. Please, oh precious Jesus. Please, please, please, please.”

“Please, please, please, please” rang through the church as dozens of people picked up the refrain. Even two or three strangers, caught by the frenzy of the moment, mouthed the chant. Sweat cascaded down faces, yet not a drop of perspiration appeared on Cletis Chidester's face. As he continued to speak, he opened his eyes, pulled slightly away from the podium and used his right hand to point to some of the people in the congregation.

“Are you saved, brother? Are you one of Christ's babes, sister? And, you, you and you. Do you know the saving salvation of Jesus Christ? If you do, if you are the Lord's own, you can do all things in his name. Them that believes that, say 'Hallelujah Amen.' Them that believes will prove it by kissing the serpent. The true believer will drink poison. They will do it in the name of God and Jesus and JesusGod. I believe, says the drinker of poison. I believe, says the handler of snakes.”

A tumultuous chorus burst upon the church. “HALLELUUUUUUJAH! AMEN! HAL-LAAAAYYYY-LUUUUULUUUUU-YUHAAAYYYYMENNNNN!!!!” Heads jerked, bodies toppled to the floor, a woman screamed at the highest decibel ranges of the human voice.

“Our Jesus has said that them what believes shall have these signs, 'They will cast put demons.' Oh, what demons has departed. Cast them out now. NOW!! NOW!! In the name of Jesus--OUT!! OUT!! Get that demon outen your soul, brother. OUT!! There hit goes. Flying out. Out of your body, your soul. We are casting out the demons that afflicts you. Out! Watch now, sister, the demon eats away at you. Your salvation is eat away. In the name of Jesus, cast out, CAST OUT!!”

Hearing those words from where she stood in front of the podium, Vergie slid back the protective screen on the wooden cage and reached for the rattlesnake. Gliding her fingers towards its scaly undersides, she drew it out with slow and careful movements and then even more slowly raised both arms upward. The snake became a giant figure-eight bracelet on her arm. “Sweet Jesus,” someone whispered; the hymn hushed to a musical tremor.

The strangers stood, open-mouthed, with foreheads glistening with sweat; they watched Vergie who was now weaving back and forth, back and forth. The snake glided over her right shoulder, behind her neck and toward her now slightly falling left arm. When the snake was secure in her left hand, Vergie rubbed it, lovingly stroking its back with measured movements. Slowly the girl fell to her knees, lowering her arms so that the snake was curled around her neck and arm.

Vergie's breath was short now, her eyes wide and rolling. She felt faint but kept control of herself. The lights hurt her eyes, and she closed them. She could feel the snake trembling slightly, then writhing and undulating. Suddenly there was an odor like that of a wet dog, and the snake, unnoticed by all, flicked out two fangs, swollen now with poison, and planted them in Vergie's neck.

“Oh, sweet Jesus,” she moaned.

“Amen,” came the response. “Amen.”

The amens faded away almost as the final chord of music was played. A solemn stillness drifted over the church, Bruised only by the whirr and click of the outsiders' cameras. Then one of the crewman, sensing what might have happened, muttered, “Oh, my God.”

Vergie's mother, rising from her knees, stood transfixed at the end of the pew. Crooning in a hoarse whisper, she said, “Get up, child. Get up in the faith. You are the Lord's own precious baby. Now, get up!”

As if by signal Old Pap Talbott strummed the dulcimer again. Stroking her hair with both hands, Etta began singing. “It is well, it is well, it is well with my soul.” Then with near shout, she said, “Thank you, Jesus. Oh, most sweet precious Jesus, I do thank you.”

CHAPTER 2

Silence. It was as though Vergie and the snake had robbed the room of its life. The hymn drifted into the barest whisper, then ceased completely, the hush of music, though, seeming reluctant to leave the room. The television camera, just seconds earlier the source of whirrs, grinds and hums, went mute. The glaring arc light blazed intensely.

Almost everyone looked at Vergie who lay slumped back against the small wooden box in which the other snakes twisted and curled about one another, their puffiness showing that they sensed danger. In the congregation, some heads were raised heavenward while others were lowered in prayer. Few were looking at Etta Rollins who had sat down, back-bone straight. A bluish-purple vein bulged slightly near her right forehead, and, in her lean neck, her pulse beat marked the seconds as accurately as a soundless clock. Others sat more naturally. Sister Ida Pattison may even have been dozing, except that no labored sleep sounds accompanied the heave of her large bosom. Rising and falling, rising and falling, its hypnotic calmed her daughter and grandson who sat on either side of her. Cletis remained sculpted in the pulpit.

Even the television men and the strangers were mesmerized. Men who were building careers on the drama of crisis and the unexpected could not act to capture one of the more bizarre stories of a lifetime; they stood dumbstruck. Here were men who had smelled and tasted war and famine, ducked the bullets of gangsters, filmed fire and flood, seen the bodies of scores of bloated, putrid corpses. These men stood anesthetized. Fear nibbled at their faces, the lines from their eyes and through their foreheads sharpening in the bright light.

Almost the only movement in the room was the fluttering of the moths and a few gnat-sized bugs around the television light. Gliding and spinning in tiny circles, they darted closer and closer to the halo of the spotlight only to be repelled by the intense heat. Several had sought refuge on the cobwebbed ceiling their beige wings outspread like tiny fans. None, it seemed, was willing to come near the congregation nor the snakes.

The rattler which had bitten Vergie lay entwined with her. It was still draped around her neck, extending in half a figure eight about her right arms and dangling from her left. Its head drooped slightly over the shoulder just an inch or two below the spot in the child's neck where its venom had found such a tender depository. A tumor-like puffiness Swelled on her neck, although in the position Vergie lay no one could see the Swelling; those closest to her though, noticed the child did not more.

For several minutes nothing changed. Most of the people in the church half expected Vergie to rise up again, throw her arms high above her, undulate with the snake, and, with a simple prayer, let the creature slide back into its box. Few, if any, thought she might be dead. Others believed she had fallen under the sway of the Holy Spirit and was in a raptured state. The “peace passing all understanding” had blessed the girl with a radiance which, if those now surrounded with it would wait with patience, they could also possess. Faith to them was a matter of simple religion; it had nothing to do with theology. Dogma, creed and tenets were alien concepts to them. Believing as little children in things scriptural, they embraced a sense of righteousness that was as uncluttered as their lives. If Vergie were dead, then it was God's will; the child's faith had not been strong enough. No other explanation could be possible. Had she truly believed, that belief shaping her faith, then she would have been blameless before God and no harm could have come to her.

Then the plaintive notes of Sister Rupert's soprano diffused the silence. Softly, almost imperceptibly at first, she sang,

“There is a fountain filled with blood

Drawn from Immanuel's veins....”

Pap Talbott eased in with the dulcimer::

“And sinners plunged beneath that flood

Lose all their guilty stains....”

Stronger voices chorused:

“Lose all their guilty stains,

Lose all their guilty stains,

And sinners plunged beneath that...”

“Llama bemorca jellellla camashona...”

“...their guilty stains...”

“...akanicos timashalon pelloma skelosseckle rechomallch.” Gushing and clattering voices filled the room, overpowering the music. Pap Talbott was still strumming the dulcimer, yet not a single note could be heard. Those singing were alternating with the speaking in tongues; they finally abandoned the hymn altogether. Nor were they talking to one another. Many had their eyes closed while two or three people had their hands over their ears. The voices rose, amplifying and intensifying until the moths on the ceiling began sputtering about. Although it was nearing ten-thirty, no cool mountain breeze had crept into the room. The heat from the television lamp seemed to rise with the voices. Perspiration bled on nearly every forehead and dampened every back. The smell of lye soap, the mountaineer's only deodorant, spiked the air, mixing with the perfumed fragrances of the city people. Within the pine boxes, one of the snakes, its loose horny shells tightening, sent a shrill alarm into the night, but in the cacophany of the moment only Cletis Chidester heard it. He knew that if the snake got out of the box, it would strike immediately.

Then, like a giant finger snapping to get everyone's attention, the television light popped and burst. The sanctuary, shrinking in the loss of so much illumination, appeared far smaller than its 60' x 100' size. Every space not filled with people or television equipment was stuffed with heat. Abruptly, everyone was aware of its heaviness. Though such mugginess usually sedates, here it seemed to be agitating the people. The camera men whipped into action. Talking loudly to each other, they scurried about to replace the light bulb and get their equipment working again. The voices of the worshipers, babbling and crooning, drifted away and ceased. Three or four of the women picked up the Kidmore Funeral Home cardboard fans depicting Christ on the Mount of Olives and began fanning themselves, creating tiny bursts of air that could not move strands of hair matted on their wet foreheads.

Sitting on the front row, Etta knew that her daughter was dead. She herself had been mistress of snakes too long not to sense what had happened. But more than that she was Vergie's mother. It was she, who in infancy's sweetest moments, had placed her hands under that neck which now had distended and discolored. It was she who had taken the child to church and placed her, at the age of two months, in a white pine cradle not a yard away from the snakes in their crates. It was Etta who had made sure the child never feared any of God's creatures, critters as she and the local people called them. Spiders, roaches, mice, bats had never been Vergie's enemies; in some ways they had been her Introduction to snakes. Now, as 14 years earlier; she lay again in the front of the church. This time, however, instead of squirming with life, the child was dead. The mother in Etta knew it.

But the mother in Etta had been consumed by God who took precedence over all earthly things, over husband and children, over goods, over yearnings, over self. Fashioned by him in perfection, he was Etta's supreme purity, cleansing her from within. For years the woman had had an all-consuming struggle in trying to understand who or what God was. She was not to be satisfied until she had settled upon an image to which she could attach her belief and attempt to explain it to others, particularly to her husband and other non-believers and scoffers. God was of course infinitely larger than she, yet he was contained within her. She thought of him as an invisible balloon-like object being inflated; had she ever seen or heard of a dirigible, she might have used that object in trying to describe God. She knew that she felt maker filled a kind of purified air every time she did something for God or in his name. The soul, then, suffused her with a spiritual buoyancy. Sometimes, even, she felt God bursting inside her.

She was feeling that now. The rush of the power of God within her tranguilized her physical being. The heart's great pain deadened, she let its numbness settle within her as she felt her soul's expansion. It erupted from the knowledge, also deep within, that to God's praise had she reared her child; to his honor had she taught her the Commandments; and to his glory did she now surrender the child to him. But then Vergie had always belonged to God. On the day the girl was born, Etta had declared that Vergie was the Lord's. Such an assertion, though, was the start of a 14-year battle with Hiram, her husband. Their battle had waged so long and furiously that he had ultimately accused Etta of being so possessed that she thought of God as her husband.

While all of these thoughts were surging through Etta's mind, she was unaware of the stirring in the congregation. Nearly everyone was anxious, yet fearful to go to Vergie, but all, for their own reasons, were awaiting some further response from Etta. Two of the visitors had edged their way into an aisle where, after a glance at Vergie, they fled the church. The members, showing their loyalty and respect to their leader, Etta, were waiting for her to take charge. Cletis, too, for once was deferring to Etta; even though his eyes were closed, his ears were open to every movement and sound in the room. Silently, he was cursing the broken television light, for the filming had ceased. The television crew worked quickly but kept looking at Vergie. Then, with a snap and a clunk, the television light had flared. Immediately, the church changed from a still-life tableaux into animation.

With the blaze of illumination filling the room, Etta, her back still tomato-stake straight, rose and walked the few steps to the frozen figure of her daughter. With deft movements almost so rapid as to go unseen by many, she bent down, placed her left hand behind Vergie's neck and with her right, grasped the snake. Lifting it from around the youngster, she pulled Vergie against the podium and then, straightening back up, she used her freed hand to stroke the creature. For about a minute the woman rhythmically petted the rattler and then took a firm hold around it an inch from its tail. As she held both arms straight up, the snake dangled in a U-shape, its only movement in concert with Etta's. It showed no twitching or jerking as the woman stopped, undid the catch on the side of the crate with her foot and let the snake slide out of her hands. With a slight rasp, the rattler poured itself into the box. With the return of the rattler to its cage, the two copperheads were less skitterish.

Cletis Chidester stepped down from the pulpit just as Sister Lovey Ridenour moved quickly from her seat to greet Etta with the holy kiss. Lovey, placing her hands on Etta's shoulder, kept her at a short distance as she skimmed the woman's lips with her own. Cletis, however, drew Etta close to him and gave her a firmer and longer kiss. Taking their cue from these three, the church members did likewise. Among them, kisses were exchanged, some given with fervor and passion, and some, though very few in number, with restraint and even a bit of timidity. The intimacies were exchanged while people slowly moved out of their seats and into the aisles to make their way toward Etta who stood in front of Vergie. All seemed intent on kissing the woman. When they had done so, Etta turned, and once more bending down, kissed her daughter. So too did most of her fellow church members, one at a time after which they formed a circle around the mother and child.

Suddenly, from the back of the church, one of the strangers rushed forth walling, “My God, are you people crazy?”

With arms flailing over her head as though pushing the heavy air out of her way, she broke through the circle surrounding Etta and Vergie. Clutching Etta by the shoulders, the woman screeched, “Your child needs you! That child needs you! That girl needs help!”

Loosening her hold on Etta, the woman stooped, reaching toward Vergie. “Poor, poor baby.”

In a flash, Etta threw her arms around the woman and jerked her away from the child. Both lost their balance and started to fall, but they were caught by the intertwining hands of part of the circle which had not broken.

“Get this witch out of this church,” Etta yelled, one finger on the right hand pointing to the woman and another finger of the left hand shaking at Cletis.

The stranger broke out of the circle and ran toward the back of the church where a man met her in the aisle. He put his arm over her shoulder and led her to the door. At the threshold, she broke away from him and turned to look at the congregation, some of whom with their eyes had followed her to the rear. Clenching her fists at her sides, she screamed, “God doesn't hold with such goings-on. He will CURSE all of you!” She leaped out of the church door. Outside, she moaned like a wounded animal. Then shrieking at the top of her voice, she trumpeted, “All of you will burn in everlasting hell for this!”

CHAPTER 3

Etta, unfazed by her encounter with the outsider, raised her hand as though in benediction. As she did, those gathered in the circle began to sing:

God be with you till we meet again

By his counsels guide, uphold you

In his arms securely fold you,

God be with you till we meet again.

Turning, Etta walked over to her child. As she stretched to take hold of Vergie, she was joined by four men, each of whom, after the fashion of an honor guard, took his place around the body. Etta pushed back the hair from her daughter's eyes and then stood up; that seemed to be a signal for the men to act. The two at Vergie's head joined both of their hands to one another's wrists, thus forming a kind of litter. The men at her feet did likewise. Positioning themselves so that they could slip their yoked hands under Vergie, they lifted her up with ease. Etta stepped forward and started up the aisle with a confident step. The quartet of men bearing the girl's body followed her. Falling into a casual procession, the other church members, led by Cletis Chidester, came after them singing, now in hushed voices, “God be with you till we meet again,” as all of them went out into the warm July night.

Hiram Rollins leaned against a post on his front porch enjoying the silence which followed the outbursts of music and shouts from the church a quarter a mile away. He stood two inches less than six feet tall. His chestnut hair was the color so often seen on people in the county. The surprising element in his appearance was the color--or rather the colors--of his eyes. If ten people who knew him well were asked what color eyes Hiram had, of those who would remember at all, half would say green and half gray. And indeed, whether caused by the light or time of day or even by some genetic trick, Hiram's eyes were green or gray. His cheekbones rose high on his face, the skin beneath them darkened by the shadow of a quick-growing beard, despite daily shaving with a Stropped razor. It contrasted sharply with his white teeth. Had he been of the generations of mountaineers who sported beards, as were many of his ancestors, he would have a luxuriant one. But such a beard would have covered the delicate crinkles at the corners of his mouth and just under his nose.

His face did not have the elongated stare so often seen on the faces of other mountain men. In that he differed from most of the people he knew. It was as though he felt with his face; it always betrayed or confirmed what he was feeling. Whatever the emotion, Hiram couldn't hide it.

He smiled now as he remembered how he felt when Vergie was born. He exploded with so much jubilation that he acted as though he had drunk a barrel of cider to which wild grapes had been added. His friends at the mine told him he looked like the horse that had had the hollows of his eyes blowed up. Some of the womenfolks came round as much to see the look on His face as they did to see the new baby.

Whatever the girl did through the years could be revealed by her father's face. When she had diphtheria, her every strained breath seemed to etch lines in Hiram's forehead. His overnight aging reversed itself the day Vergie, weak but recovered, climbed out of bed. When their daughter won a spelling bee in the third grade, Etta told her husband that if his smile got any bigger his lips were going to meet his eyes.

Hiram wondered why people, especially men, didn't talk about how they felt. When the men you work with and drink with are crushed without warning beneath tons of coal, dirt, wood and water, why can't you talk to others about the mule-kick of sadness and fear in your gut? He tried once asking a couple of the fellows he was drinking with to tell him what they felt like when they heard of another accident in the mines. They would not answer him.

Shifting his weight from one foot to the other while keeping his shoulder to the porch post, Hiram thought about how he felt the first time he saw Etta. He had never imagined you could be kneaded by so many tingles, bumps, knots and shivers at the same time in so many places in your body. He had always known her family, but for years Etta was just another Screening mouth in a head stuck somewhere amid flailing arms and legs. Then, one September day, a near-woman emerged with more body than arms and legs. She had the softest, prettiest face surrounded by the silkiest russet brown hair he had ever seen. Once her brown eyes looked in his direction, the hairs danced on Hiram's head. When, months later, he tried to tell Etta how he felt about her, she told him--and not jokingly--that he was “plumb bereft.”

Vergie however didn't ignore him, and Vergie didn't think he was touched. Maybe, he reckoned now, she understood her father because she had the same feelings he did. Many times over the years, he had held her in his arms while she sobbed over finding a dead rabbit or an injured robin. At other times, her face would shine in delight when Lovey Ridenour would sing to her or let her play with a china doll. Nor could Vergie hide from her father her disgust, perhaps even fear, of Cletis Chidester. Hiram had noticed how the blue in her eyes frosted whenever the preacher came around.

Hiram could scarcely wait until Vergie was a year or two older. If he could express his feelings to anyone, it would be to his daughter. He imagined they might sit on this very front porch until late in the night just talking and knowing what the other was saying. Ah, what satisfaction the very thought gave him.

Hiram stood there, his found shoulders curving under the cloth of the white shirt he always wore. He was lean but not gaunt. His waist had begun to puff slightly but not enough to strain at the belt he had worn for twenty years. His muscles, solid and powerful, complemented his cord-like arms.

He smoked rolled cigarettes, usually with the thumb and forefinger of his left hand; the other three fingers had been smashed eighteen years earlier when a coal car, fully loaded, had run over his hand in the mine. His unself-consciousness about using the hand for smoking carried over into all that he did, whether talking to Doc Horner about medicine or swearing at someone who needed swearing at. When Vergie was a baby, Hiram could lift her off the ground as she clutched the thumb and only finger on his injured hand.

Hiram was one of those persons naturally outfitted to meet life head on. Whatever came his way, he regarded as a simple fact of life. Looking out now into the dark July night, he thought of the time when he was five years old and fire destroyed his uncle's barn. Hiram heard his father and uncle talking afterward about how fire, like people, had two sides to its nature. The few times it got out of hand couldn't erase the great benefits of it. The men literally rolled up their sleeves, stretched out their arms to the task that awaited them and, with the help of neighbors, rebuilt the barn. Seeing them so intense about their work, the little boy proposed to help by holding nails. The offer was soberly accepted. Before long, the new barn, larger and sturdier than the previous one, stood on the land. He never heard another word about the fire.

In the distance the mournful notes of an owl faded into the silence it had broken, reminding Hiram of the night his father was carried home dead. He shivered. The elder Rollins had been killed when the mine he was working in caved in. His mother, heavy-hearted with grief, said she had always known the chances of her husband's death were far greater in the mine than if he had been a farmer like his brother. She then assailed her anguish by working two extra hours a day gardening and canning so that she could provide for her five children. Hiram knew she ached in desolation, but he watched her grow stronger and stronger, nourished by her own determination. He didn't watch from afar, though; the 15 year-old took his father's place in the mine. His mother didn't want him to, but she knew he had to. Hiram knew it, also. Life's perilousness was merely life's night side. Wait patiently enough and daytime would return. Hiram certainly knew that to be true.

When, years later, the coal car crushed his fingers, Hiram, almost from the moment it happened, talked about how grateful he was that he hadn't lost his whole hand. Even though he occasionally cursed because he couldn't do something requiring the full use of both hands, he never felt sorry for himself or lamented the loss to the exclusion of anything else. What was there to bemoan from this man whose grandfather had “jumped his own tooth.” The old fellow had taken a cut nail, rested its beveled point against the ridge of the ailing tooth, just under the edge of the gum. Then, with a hammer strike, he knocked the tooth right out of his head.

Pulling a cigarette out of his pocket, Hiram thought of his mother and father together. They were not among the church-goers in the valley, though not a more “Christian” family could be found anywhere. Daily they polished the Golden Rule and lived the Sermon on the Mount, giving and forgiving out of a natural goodness of generations dwelling in harmony with the out-of-doors. The rhythm they had found in nature they captured and harnessed for their every-day relationships with people. They would leap to the aid of anyone in any kind of distress, but especially to people who had less than they did. His father once walked ten miles with a 50-pound bag of flour on his shoulders just so a woman sick with milk-fever would know where her next loaf of bread was coming from. His mother once made a passel of winter clothes for six children whose father had been jailed for moonshining.

Now as Hiram sat down in a wicker rocker to smoke his cigarette, he thought what good people his mother and father had been--without the need for church, without craving for all of the shouting and speaking in unknown tongues and snake teasing that went on in Etta's church.

Suddenly, the scraping and scuffling of feet along the road startled him. Then, the front gate creaked on its hinges. Footsteps, many of them, came closer and closer. Hiram looked out into the blackness.

“Etta! That you? Who's out there with you? What the hell is going on?”

“It's the Lord's people. We are coming home in the Lord's name,” answered Etta.

“It's always the Lord's people with you, woman, but I'll be damned if anybody but you and Vergie are a'comin' into this home. Vergie! It's time you were in bed. Come on in here now!”

“Vergie is already asleep. She's asleep in the Lord. She'll not be woke up by you,” said Etta.

“Jesus Christ, Etta I Why is every damn thing with you 'in the name of the Lord'? Can't you get one thing out of your mouth without a'bringin' the Lord or God or church in it? Give me one minute's peace.”

Cletis Chidester spoke. “There'll be no peace for you, Hiram Rollins, as long as you blaspheme and try to drag your wife down with you.”

“Oh, God, Chidester, I knowed you'd be with Etta. You're worse than that whole pack of female Jesus lovers. I reckon they're all out there with you, too. Vergie, tell me who's there. Vergie! Answer me!” Hiram stood up and tossed his cigarette off the porch; it looked like a firefly diving to the ground.

“Hiram,” said Etta. “I told you that Vergie is with God. She is talking to her Heavenly Father. She has no more use for her earthly one.”

“No more use! I'll show you what no more use is!” Hiram came to the top step. “I want all you shiftless people off'n my property right now. You've got a church to spout all your tripe in. You're not a'goin' to do it here on my property. I've told all of you before how I feel. Now get the goddamn hell out of here. And, Etta, you get in here and bring Vergie with you.”

Sister Lovey's voice was velvet after Hiram's outburst: “Remember, according to our faith, wives obey your husbands, and, Etta, you must obey yours.” She said this so quietly and so sincerely that Hiram was caught off guard.

“Lovey,” he said. “You're a good woman, always have been. How you ever got mixed up with these Bible-beaters I'll never know. But, damn it, why don't you go on home and take all of 'em with you?”

“Hiram, we will go. And we will pray for you. But we have to bring Vergie into the house. She can't walk. The snake bit her. What Etta says is true. The child is with Jesus.”

Something in the woman's tone broke through to Hiram. What he could not hear from his wife he heard and partially understood from Lovey. Jumping off the porch, he whimpered, “Vergie, where are you?” He looked helplessly about in the blackness.

“She is here, Hiram Rollins,” said one of the men carrying Vergie's head and shoulders.

The father, bumping into the outstretched form of his daughter, halted. In the dark he could see nothing. Throwing his hands wildly toward her, he grazed her dull, cold flesh, and, jolted, he reeled back. Vergie so cold? His Vergie? His girl-child?

“OH, MY CHRIST!” he bellowed. “VERGIE, VERGIE, VERGIE! OH! OOHHH! OOHHhhh...” He felt as though his remaining fingers were being ripped from him in one massive assault. And then...then...numbing heaviness. The weariness of 22 years in the coal mines settled in on him. His insides turned to ballast; his lungs and stomach became rocks. His arms and legs weighed too much for him to lift, and his brain was clogged with lumps of anguish.

Finally, with great effort, at first haltingly, then with more growing awareness he spoke. “Etta, you killed my daughter. You and Jesus. You and Jesus and these vipers. These Christ people. You all killed this girl, I don't need to ask what happened to her. Them snakes did it. YOU ALL did it. You killed her. In the name of Jesus. I know it. I know it. You preach and sing and talk Jesus. You say Jesus loves. You mean Jesus kills. Or maybe it's people like you bastards who use the name of Jesus to do what you damn want to. YOU KILLED VERGIE!!”

Ssswwhooosh. Ssswwhooosh. With both fists Hiram punched the black night. Ssswwhooosh. Through clinched teeth came gutteral growls. Ssswoosh. The man's fists again hit air. But space turned into flesh as his swing caught the side of the face of one of the litter bearers.

“Ooooaaaawhhh,” the man cried. He jerked his arms from the litter embrace to grab his throbbing chin. Vergie's leg fell to the ground. Her weight shifted in the direction of the abandoned corner. The three remaining men, caught off guard, could not compensate for the unexpected loss of balance.

Sssswhhhoooosh. Hiram's fists continued their thrusts.

Feet sidestepped and shuffled. Vergie slid to the ground.

“Dammit, Plug,” said one of the men. “Why the devil did you let go?”

“Me? I....” came the response.

Hiram, dropping his now weighted arms, took a step forward, caught his knee on the side of the litter and toppled to the ground. He moved his arm, tentatively at first. Then, touching the side of his child, he felt a thousand thorn prickles in his hand. He leaped to his feet.

“Out of here! Out of here! All you wretched bastards get out of here and never come back. Take that woman Etta with you! Hear me? All of you. GET OUT OF HERE!!!....Vergie, Vergie, my baby.” Her animal how! Pierced the night. It echoed across they valley.

No comforting arm reached out from the members of the congregation who, though having backed up, still stood listening to Hiram. Since it was dark, they could see only the barest outlines of movement. No one spoke. Then with a sigh that seemed to expel all the breath left in him, the father placed both of his arms under Vergie and lifted her from the litter which had borne her from the church. With a shift of his weight so that he could hold her closer to him, he turned and walked up the steps and into the house. The screen door stayed open behind him.

Without a word to anyone, Etta followed him. As she passed into the front room, she turned on a floor lamp which sent a wide slant of light into the yard where the church members were turning to go. Only the sound of feet could be heard as they shuffled away from the house.

Hiram took the child into the bedroom and laid her on the bed. The light from Etta's lamp crept behind them and crouched at the patches of greens, reds, blues and yellows of the guilt on Vergie's bed. The guilt had been made by the women of the church; each square was stitched with a different woman's name, in her handwriting. Vergie's buttocks lay directly over the glossy yellow sunburst ornamented with the words, “JESUS CHRIST KING OP KINGS.” Draped down the left side of the bed was the portion of the counterpane containing the red square marked “Etta Rollins.” Hiram, as though to restore warmth to the cold body of his daughter, put a light wool comforter over her and then sat on the edge of the bed.

For a long time he stared at the child. He narrowed his eyes, straining to see her through the horizontal slits that distorted his vision. He widened his eyes, at the same time pushing the skin on his forehead up toward his scalp. Vergie did not move. Hiram tilted his head to the left, then to the right. Still, the child did not move.

“Dead? No, not dead. Not this child. Not this child. No, not dead. Ohhhh, Vergie.” A sob stayed in his throat.

Etta, meanwhile, sat down in a chair in the front room, not more than a foot away from Hiram and Vergie. A slender woman, she had just enough flesh on her to dispel any suggestion of gauntness. Her skin was the color of egg whites. Her raven hair, twisted around the back of her head and draped down to her neck in a U-shape, contrasted with her white forehead. Her brown eyes were flecked with granules of blue. In certain kinds of light, as now, the blue cast an opaqueness to the eyes. In the sunlight, they took on the banding of agate. Etta's long, lean neck, in another time and place, would have been graced with strands of pearls. She, however, had never worn a single piece of jewelry except for her gold wedding band.

Sitting there, she seemed no different from the woman who, on any other evening, might have been reading the Bible or sewing; only now she was looking at the door of Vergie's room, not staring but simply looking. Both feet rested on the floor, and her right elbow, propped on the cushion of the chair, supported her arm which she held straight up, her hand cupped into a slight fist.

Hiram, seeing that arm and hand through the door frame, stared at them for a long time. Silence screamed at them. Finally, he spoke: “I'm an easy man. Always have been. I've tried to be a good one, probably because it just seemed easier for me. I go to work, work hard, make enough to live. A man can't ask for more than that. For a time, I wasn't sure I was a man, you a 'losin' them four children a fore they was borned and me a 'losin' them fingers in the mine. I thought something was wrong with me. The Vergie was borned. She wasn't sickly. She was good. She favored my ma's appearance. You know everyone thought that. Oh, my, she was such a girl baby.” Hiram paused, perhaps waiting for Etta to agree, but she did not say a word or give any indication that she had even heard what he was saying.

“Then you started with all that church Stuff for her. Takin' her down there ever chance you got, even when I said no. 'A' talkin' about things like sac-ree-fice and re-mission--words, meanings I don't even know. Tell me, Etta, do you know what they mean? Do you know how to explain them? Can they help this child now? No. You mixed her up with them God-lovers, and you all played with her life.” A sob caught in his throat.

“You wanted to give her to God. The way I understand things is God gave her to us. You twisted things around by wantin' to give her back. You fooled where you oughten to. Same as with them snakes. It isn't natural to be a'foolin' with them. You're just provokin' trouble. I should've killed them things ever' time I thought of it, ever' time. But that wouldn't have stopped you and the Chidester demon. Nothing would, woman. When it comes to your religion, you hold on worse than a tree stump that five mules can't pull up.

“You used to be an easy woman. You looked at things the way I did. But your religion ruined you, took away your easy parts. It made you misery to live with, hard to decipher. A child comes along like a little lamb in spring. And you start in on her. You give her Bible words before she can talk. Then, those church people start a 'talkin' devil voices to her. Half of 'em belongs in the state insane asylum down at waston beginnin' to think you do too, Etta. First you and your religion took away Vergie's child years. Now you take away her life, her life, her LIFE!”

While he spoke, Hiram held Vergie's right hand. Although he had begun with a tender touch, the more he talked the harder he squeezed. The bed gave a tiny squeak as he rocked slightly back and forth, his knee pressed against it.

From the front room, Etta spoke: “I make no excuses for my religion.”

“It makes excuses for itself,” said Hiram with more wisdom than he generally showed.

“God has spoke. He has made his will known for Vergie.” “You don't know what the hell you are talkin' about. No God kills a child.”

“The Kingdom of Heaven is made up of little children.”

“Well, where does that leave you. And all them others? Cletis Chidester is sixty-two years old. The only way he's a child is in his head, an idiot child. The same goes for all the rest of you. Why, Vergie had more sense than all of you put together.”

“Through Jesus we all become like little children,” intoned Etta.

“I don't want to hear that shif, woman. All you do is quote and repeat, quote and repeat, quote and repeat. Don't you have any words of your own?”

“I have words of my own, yes, but Christ's words are the bread of life.”

“Don't talk to me of life when my daughter lays dead. Dead because her own mother kilt her!”

Outside languid flashes of heat lightning stole across the sky. Yet nowhere could a rumble of thunder be heard. On the trees, leaves stirred and whispered. A night creature, a bat perhaps, swooped past Vergie's window twice, its wings brushing against the screen. In the distance the owl screeched. Hiram stood up sideways and edged out of the room, almost as though he did not want to turn his back on his child.

Stepping into the full light of the front room, he squinted his eyes and blinked. He stopped in front of Etta who continued to stare straight ahead. He looked down at her. What he saw was not his wife or a woman. He saw a demon. His eye was caught by a shadow reflected on the floor beside Etta. Life size, it was her darker twin, except for a Z-like jaggedness in her side caused by the position of the lamp shade over the light.

“A shadow. That's what she is. Just a shadow. That's what has happened to her. A shadow 'ould be easier to kill, I reckon.”

Then as a fresh stream of heat lightning shimmered, the shadow swiftly fled, then as swiftly returned. Etta sat unmoving. Hiram, his muscles tensing as he stood there, felt his hands growing powerful. “I could kill her right now. Kill her in the neck the way Vergie was kilt.” Like a magnet drawn to iron, his hands strained toward his wife's body. Wavelets of squeamishness moved through his stomach; warm, sticky air invaded his head. His temples ached. Suddenly, he kicked the bowed leg of the rocker, abruptly turned and went through the front door.

CHAPTER 4

Few people would ever guess that Cletis Chidester was two years into his sixties. Although he was only five feet, nine inches tall, he was, at least in his clothes, as brawny and burly looking as he had been for most of his adult life. His hairline, too, was unchanged from 40 years earlier. Though the blond had had turned gray, it had only darkened, thus scarcely altering his appearance. In a more sophisticated culture, he would have been much admired for his looks, but rarely did the people in the hollow give much thought to such things. Cletis, however, was an exception. He was not a stranger to his mirror. He looked into it often--and he liked what he saw. Now, in the daylight hours after taking Vergie home and then returning to, the church for the snakes so that he could put them back in their pens, Cletis, shaved and dressed, stood again in front of the mirror in his bedroom. His hands rested on the edge of a dresser.

“Cletis, you ought to thank God that he has blessed you with the three score years and two, and for the fine, good ways in which he has preserved you,” he said aloud. “Surely you are on your way to four score years. Then will you be even more favored of the Lord God.” He turned his head to the left and with his left hand stroked the bone structure of his jowls and chin; the skin across his neck was pulled tight. He observed it for a moment. “No dried prune neck for me, no bald head as most men my age have. God surely has chose me for wondrous things which he has not yet revealed to me. He has kept my body young for me to do more work for him.” Running his hands down the front of his body past his flat abdomen, he paused gingerly at his crotch, almost wincing in the memory of his unsuccessful attempt thirty years earlier at self-circumcision. “You are still more man than any man I know,” he mused.

His reverie was interrupted by the familiar greeting of Lovey Ridenour who was in his front yard. “Yoo hoo! Yoo hoo! Anyone t'home? Morning, Cletis.”

“Good morning, Sister Lovey,” called out Cletis as he instantly turned from the mirror and walked through the house to the door. On the porch he found Lovey sitting on the swing, her hands resting on a crumpled brown paper bag. She was dressed simply, as always: an ill-fashioned blue and white flecked dress, stockings rolled by their garters down to her ankles where they rested like rubber rings around Mason jars, and black orthopedic shoes. Lovey, in her mid-fifties, had not kept her shape of earlier years. Her bark brown hair streaked with gray was pulled back in a roll and pinned on her head in the style of so many middle-aged women of the region.

“How be you this morning, Cletis? I was concerned about you. I Wanted to Step her afore I go to Ettas. Her speech was as soft “as her calm, blue eyes.

“Lovey,” Cletis responded. “I am full of distressment over one so young as Etta's girl. We have lost power in the household of faith, let me tell you.” He eased himself into a dilapidated wicker chair covered with a few splotches of scaly green paint.

“Such a lovely child she was, always smilin' and singin'. I saw her nearly every day. A'swingin' her blackberry pail or a 'cutting' wildflowers of a'throwin' crumbs on the snow for the birds. Since so many children have growed and left, she was pretty near the only young'un in the houses about,” said Lovey.

“Oh, yes, a lovely child. But, of course, Sister Lovey, something must have been wrong with her. She must not have been able to throw off her sins, else she would not have been taken from us.”

“But, Cletis, perhaps she was too young to have been asked to lead a service. No one so young has ever done it.” Lovey gave the swing a little push by a quick kneading of her feet on the floor.

“I must ask you to lay hold to the claim that she was past the age of accountability. She was, also, following in the footsteps of her mother who has been received at the throne of Jesus almost as many times as I have. If Vergie had been without blemish, she would not this morning lay with the dead of the ages.”

“But it troubles me mightily that we did not prepare her more. Maybe we are accountable, also,” said Lovey, looking up the side of the hill where, protected on a tiny ridge, nestled the cemetery in which Vergie would be buried.

“Yes, we are accountable to see that the sins of others are not brought to bear upon the other members of the church. But in no way can we be beholden for the blackness in the hearts of others,” Cletis said.

“Do you really believe there was blackness in that child?” asked Lovey, somewhat startled.

“You know fully well, Lovey Ridenour, that we all come into the world with blackness. And that child had more than most with a man like Hiram Rollins as her father. Sister Etta practically has given her life to see that Vergie would have every possible chance to throw off the shackles put on her by her father.” His use raising and shaving. Cletis bolted out of the chair and walked to the porch railing which he grasped with his hands until his knuckles turned white.

It was a while before Lovey spoke, not because she felt intimidated or rebuked but because she was thinking about how she could respond to the man. Finally, she said, “Where does the forgiveness of the Lord come in, Cletis?”

“Forgiveness comes in passing the test which the Lord gives. I have passed that test. I am able to conquer the serpent. He who overcomes Satan in the disguise of the snake has been forgiven of the Lord.” He stood straight up and threw his head back his fair askew

“I don't understand. Why roust there be a test? Aren't some of the flock just forgiven? Isn't that called grace?” asked Lovey.

“Stop it, Sister! Questioning me is not seemly for it is also questioning the Lord!” Cletis squared his shoulders. “It is not for many men--and certainly, certainly no woman--to ask questions about the Lord's will. All shall be revealed in time as it has already been revealed to Vergie.”

Lovey, not wanting to be upset any more than she suddenly was, said nothing more. The swing had drifted to a stop. An orange and black butterfly sailed by.

Breaking the silence, Cletis spoke. “Arrangements shall have to be made, Lovey.”

“Yes, that's another reason the stopped by” the woman said. “I wanted to know which womenfolks would be best to go with me to get the child ready.”

“That is the kind of question you should be asking,” said Cletis, his voice taking on a semblance of softness again. “Tensey Poulton and Rachel Stirling would be, in my wisdom, the best choices. They get on well enough with Hiram Rollins, and they are Etta's followers.”

“Do you think the justice of the peace will be coming 'round?” asked Lovey.

“There is no reason in heaven or on earth for anybody other than the flock to be there, least of all the justice of the peace.”

“I expect Doc Horner to look at the child,” said Lovey.

“There is nothing to look at the child for. And don't you get any notion about sending for him, neither.” Cletis glared at the woman who was beginning to show some signs of nervousness. Her fingers drummed on the sides of the flimsy paper poke.

“Cletis, you know as well as I do that Vergie's death will be the talk of this valley. We have seen bitterness a'plenty because of our practices. Hardly nobody trusts us. And now that the child has died of snakebite, there will....”

“She did not die of snakebite,” interrupted Cletis. “She died of God's will. You know that, Sister Ridenour!”

“Just the same, we need to expect trouble,” said Lovey, pushing herself to the edge of the swing so that she could stand up.

“I, uh, we can handle any trouble that clouds over us. We are not without a sufficiency from the Lord, Sister. Now you best be off.” Cletis waved his left hand, fingers outspread, in a half circle. “Journeying mercies to you.”

“Goodbye, Cletis.”

Chidester watched Lovey walk through the yard, turn right past the gate and quickly move into the trail that would lead eventually to the Rollinses where she would help prepare Vergie's body for burial. Just then a shot shattered the calm morning. Lovey screamed. Cletis sprinted back into his house. Shots and screams resounded through the valley. And then...tomb-like silence.

“Cletis! Cletis! Cleee-tis!” Lovey yelled. Her voice bounced back to her in faint repetitions: “cletis. cletis. cleee-tis.”

Rushing back through the gate, she tried to look in every direction at once. She clasped to her heart the package she was clutching in her two hands. As she reached the bottom of the porch chairs, Cletis's head appeared in the lower half of the screen door. He was kneeling on the floor and peering out.

“What in hell is a'goin' on?” he asked, straightening up.

I was about to ask you the same thing. I thought you was a 'shootin' at me.” Lovey collapsed into the swing where she had sat earlier. “OOOhhhhh.”

“Don't be so damned impertinent, woman. Why would I shoot at you? I could turn that around and say you might a been hankerin' to shoot me.”

“Well, it was probably a body a 'huntin', though that shot 'peared to be awful close by.”

“Too damned close by, if you ask me.” Cletis passed the back of his hand over his forehead.

“In all the years I've lived in these hills I've never been a 'feared, Cletis. But right now, I'd be pleased to have you walk with me to Rachel's.”

“I spose it won't hurt me none to see you most of the way there a fore I go to the church to get the bell rung. Let's be on our way,” Cletis said as he started down the stairs.

Not a week had ever passed by in Lovey's life that she hadn't heard gunshot. Folks put food on their tables with gunshot. Boys torpedoed into manhood with gunshot. Women scared away imagined and unimagined threats. So Lovey didn't fear guns. She had even fired her share of them. Yet something about this early morning shot unnerved her. She couldn't explain it; her fears were as wild as the shot had been. She shivered and cast a thankful glance at Cletis walking beside her. Minutes later when he took the path to the church, she felt the earlier terror evaporate. Slivers of sunlight sliced through blue spruce and slid onto the trail, brown and spongy from fallen pine needles. Oak and maple branches, some of their leaves as large as a man's hands, hid the aquamarine of the morning sky. In the distance the raucous cry of the blue jay caused Lovey to lift her eyebrows, while the witchity/witchity/witchity of the yellow-throat soothed her. A squirrel darted in front of her, stopped, glanced attentively at her, turned in its tracks and scampered back into the low clumps of mountain laurel. “This is the kind of morning Vergie loved,” thought the woman. “And here I'm a'goin' to her house to lay her out. Oh, it just don't make sense to me.”

CHAPTER 5

When the procession carrying Vergie's body from the church had gone, they left behind the television crew and a dozen visitors to the service. Dazed, this handful of people could only stare at one another until Joe, one of the crewman, spoke almost hypnotically

“Did you all see that? Did you all see that?”

No one answered him.

Then, after another pause, a young woman, her face the color of cinders, her eyes distended, asked, “Was the girl dead?”

Several of her companions blurted out at once:

“Well, of course!”

“I'm not sure.”

“I couldn't see.”

“Maybe she was in a religious trance.”

The spell was broken. Speech had revived the onlookers, and they resumed something of their everyday selves. Two people sat down. Joe began winding a long electrical cord. Tim, his cohort, started down the aisle toward the crate of snakes at the front.

“Where the hell are you going,” asked Joe.

“Hey, watch your language. You're in church, pal,” replied Tim.

“You're not going near those mothers, are you?” Joe let the cord he was holding drop to the floor, causing the pale young woman to jump.

“Relax, friend, I'm just gonna take a look-see. No harm in that,” said Tim.

“No harm, my a...nkle. You don't kow what the hell those killers will do. I'd stay as far away from them as I could.”

“Then stay away--far away. But I'm going to get a closer look. And like I told you, watch your language.”

“It sure ain't the first time this place has heard a few hells,” Joe replied, a bit defensively.

Tim, his apprehension confined to a rapidly beating heart, peered down into the box holding the rattlers. He stood there a moment. “Jeez-us!” he exclaimed, a quivering shudder massaging his back. “Would you look at that?”

Everyone except Joe and the pale young woman edged up toward between them and whatever they might discover in the crate; their necks and heads, however, extended as far beyond Tim as was possible. Again, they spoke as one:

Oh, my word!”

“Mmmmmph!”

“Whaaaatttttgggghhugly!”

“Wow!!!”

Seven feet of copperhead lay in the cage. One of the snakes measured slightly over three feet long, while the other stretched to a powerful four feet. Together, they were a maze of curleygues and loops. Only someone who knew snakes well could see the two heads and two tails in that giant sausage of coppery-orange flesh. Dark brown crossbands, some looking like profiles of tiny-waisted women, marked the midline of the back. Between the bands, brown, almost black, spots added a distinct focal point. The scales of the snakes reflected enough of the light in the church to give a dull lustre to their bodies. They scarcely moved.

In the second case, the timber rattler moved even less. Somewhat lighter in appearance than the copperheads, even though grayish black, the rattler was decorated with yellow stripes running horizontally to form the crossbands. That same yellow appeared vertically as a wide pin-striping. Black blotches stood out on the front and side of the body. The black tail narrowed to form the rattler. At the angle which the snake lay, its rattler looked like a pearl-studded handle on a gun. About 15 flattened segments of horn-like silkiness would, when anything annoyed the snakes, shake lustily and produce the “rattle,” more like a buzz with clicks. Lying there, the snake did not look as though it were one of the most malevolent of creatures.

As the people were exclaiming over the snakes, the lights dimmed, brightened, dimmed again and then went out. The inside of the church was as dark as a coal mine. Women and men screamed. Thumps and scrapes collided with each other.

“Bill, where are you?” A woman's voice penetrated the darkness.

Wood hit wood. Another scream. A crash. “Don't panic, Margaret, I'm here,” answered a trembling male voice. “Over here, over here”

From the back of the church a mettalic scraping joined the chorus of sounds.

“Ooooffff. Watch out, you idiot. Stop shoving me!” Someone tripped over one of the snake boxes and tumbled to the ground. Over the clatter rose the click of a rattle.

“Them snakes is loose! Them snakes is loose!” Hysteria formed every syllable.

The front pew, bearing the weight of several people scrambling over it, cracked, splintered and collapsed. More screams.

“A snake is on me! Get it off me! Get it offfff! HELP!” A woman fainted.

Just then, two streams of light crisscrossed the room. Moving back and forth, they revealed the chaos in the church. The pulpit lay on its side, knocked over when someone ran into it. The brown and white fragments of a broken crock intermingling with pieces of paper formed a mosaic on the platform. Raw spikes of wood stuck out from the shattered pew. Terror-eaten faces blinked into the invading light. People clung to each other. A man and a woman stood on the seats of two pews.

“Hey, HEY! What is a'goin' on here? Cletis, are you here?” A man's voice jumped from behind one of the lights.

Tim answered. “Uh, uh, the lights went out, and the snakes got loose.”

Feet shuffled across the floor as people, hearing the dreaded word, moved closer together.

The light flashed across the floor where the pulpit lay. Under the tilted wood was the box which held the copperheads. Its side crushed and its screen netting torn and split, the cage was empty

A deep, gravelly voice resounded through the church and over the pond mountain “What was in that box? Answer me. I'm the law here. Job “Lester's the name.”

“Snakes were in the box,” someone said.

“What kind of snakes?”

“We don't know. None of us know. Prob'ly rattlers. We heard 'em,” said Joe.

“Now you folks all get up on a pew. One or two to a pew. Watch where you step. I misdoubt any snakes 'ould be in here now. They was more afraid of you than you of them. But just to be certain safe, follow the light and get on the pew. Fatty, you shine your torch on the right side, and I'll take the left.”

A voice broke In. “There's someone layin' on the floor over here, a woman. Shine your light over here.”

With his flashlight Job followed the sound of the voice, caught a pointing finger and trailed it to the floor. There, with one leg folded under her, sprawled the pale young woman.

“I'm a'comin' over there. Stay there. I'll need help.” With the beam of light guiding him, Job walked over where the woman lay. Handing the flashlight to the man standing on the pew just beside him, the sheriff picked up the woman and carried her to the door.

After a few minutes, Job had revived the woman, tripped the electricity back on and soothed a few very troubled souls by assuring them the snakes were long gone.

“What were you folks a'doin' here anyhows?” Job asked, not unkindly.

Tim looked at Joe as though the latter would give a response. He did. “We're just winding up an evening's work. We were here to film the church service. These people,” he gave a sweeping nod of the head, “came to watch the service.”

“Folks 'round here don't take too kindly to outsiders. They sure don't like those cameras neither,” said Job.

Fatty spoke for the first time. “Where are the church folks anyhow?”

“By gum, none's here a'tall,” Job said as he looked about.

Joe spoke again. “They took the girl out of here.

From the back of the church where she leaned against the back door, the ashen young woman said, “She was...she was dead.”

“Dead? Shouted Job, looking first at the girl and then at Fatty.

“Well, we don't know that she was dead,” said Joe. “We just know she was awful still for a long time.”

“What happened to her? Where did they take her?” Job cast a knowing glance down at the broken box of snakes as if sensing what had occurred. Almost nothing happened in Salt Hollow without Job's immediate knowledge of it. Tonight, though, he and his assistant Fatty had been over in Greenbrier County delivering a cord of wood to Job's great-aunt. Returning now near midnight, they had passed the church and seen the lights streaming from the open windows. Then, before their eyes, the church went black. Of course they had stopped.

Tim answered Job. “We don't know what happened. The girl let one of the snakes slide all over her. Then she just sort of dropped down, slow and easy like.”

“Was it the girl Vergie?” asked Job.

“Don't know her name,” said Joe. “Her mother is some kind of a leader in the church or at least that's what someone said.”

“Has to be Vergie, don't you think, Fatty?” said Job.

“Has to be Vergie. Has to be,” replied Fatty.

“Then we best be on our way over to Etta's. Come on, Fatty. And you folks better be goin' where you're a'goin',” said Job turning around and going toward the side door. Fatty trailed after him.

A moment later, Job's truck could be heard clattering away.

“Who were they?” one of the men asked.

“Said they were the law,” said Tim. They had on some kind of uniforms, wouldn't you say?”

“A lot of guys down here dress that way. You know that,” said Joe.

“They wanted us to leave, but I gotta know what happened to that girl. What did he say her name was? Virginia?” asked Tim.

“No,” said the young woman. “I distinctly heard them say Vergie.”

“Yeah, Vergie, that's it. Must be short for Virginia. Maybe West Virginia,” said Joe. He picked up the electrical cord again.

“You aren't funny, man,” said Tim, starting back up the aisle toward Joe.

“Yeah? Well, tell you one thing. We gotta get on the road. Now. We got some damn good takes of almost the whole service. That'll tell us something. We don't want to press our luck staying around,” said Joe, handing Tim the cord.

“But I gotta know what happened to that girl. And her mother! How could a mother just sit there? What kind of a woman is she?” asked Tim. He finished packing the cord away in a metal container.

“Look, Tim, we're already overstaying our welcome. You know how we had to move the highlands and lowlands to even get in this church. We can't go prowling around looking for that girl.

We got a two-hour drive staring at us. And I'm bushed. Let's get moving.” Joe started toward the door with his camera.

“Hell, guess you're right,” replied Tim. “But I'd sure like to know what makes these people tick.” He turned to the remaining half-dozen visitors who were also moving toward the front door. As bewildered as Tim, they had been talking in low voices to one another. “You people need any directions out of these hills?” said Tim.

One of the men answered, “No, I think we can manage. Thanks.”

As they went out, the pale young woman, by now even more ghostly looking, said, “I just don't understand either. What kind of woman is that mother? What kind of people are, these?”

CHAPTER 6

Job and Fatty drove slowly to the Rollins' house. They could have walked the same footpath taken by the procession, but that would have meant leaving the truck behind. The exhaust from the battered pick-up saddled the muggy air; neither Job nor Fatty noticed it, though. Some of the stars of the July sky shone more brightly than the headlights of the dilapidated truck. Dim amber shafts of illumination wavered close to the ground for only two or three feet ahead of the vehicle. Heat lightning trembled now over the treetops. The two men sat silently during the ride.

At first glance they might have been taken for twins. Both were six feet tall, thin, with medium brown hair. Both were dressed in khaki trousers and short-sleeved khaki shirts. A closer look revealed two singular individuals, this sheriff Job Lester and his unofficial sub-deputy Fatty Strawderman.

Job was 30 years old, married, the father of three children. He was almost aristocratic looking, so fine and delicate was the bone structure of his face, the shape of his forehead and the perfectly proportioned sleek nose. His brown eyes looked as if they had been transplanted from one of the fawns which romped about the hillsides. He had lived in the hollow all of his life except for four years he had spent in the army. Since he had seen duty as a military policeman, he had been elected sheriff almost as soon as he had been discharged from the service. His was a no-hour or a 24-hour-a-day job, since he scarcely had any work to do except look for a wandering cow or hide the latest supply of moonshine from one of the over-zealous juice heads in the county. Sometimes he would sit in his little cubicle next to the two-celled jail and read outdated newspapers; sometimes he would stay at home whittling and carving walking sticks which he made and sporadically sold in the general store. Whatever he did, he did with dogged intensity and with warmth and enthusiasm. He wanted nothing more than for everything to be tranquil and for everyone to be amicable.

Fatty strawderman, because of his height, weight and khaki clothes, did favor Lester in appearance. But that was with a hurried glimpse with the two of them together. The name “Fatty” had nothing to do with his figure. Not a driblet of fat could be found anywhere on the youth. In an old man, he would have looked skeletal; in a 25 year-old, as fatty was, he was just spindle-shanked. Folks about said he was so thin he could walk between raindrops without getting wet; his grandmother said he was as thin as six o'clock. Where he got his name was a mystery, but Fatty preferred it to his real name of Hosmer. He lived with his mother who uncomplainingly housed and fed him. He wasn't retarded, nor was he the proverbial village idiot. He was just a very lazy human being. Except when it came to Job. Fatty idolized the sheriff, following him whenever he could, fetching coffee and beer for him or, on occasion, wonder of wonders, turning a hand to clean the jail or change the oil in Job's truck. He could even rouse himself out of bed early or late to be with the sheriff. Job welcomed Fatty's company, even picking him up at his house to go out on an infrequent call.

While Fatty now dozed, his chin resting on his breastbone, Job was thinking. If Vergie is dead, it's from snakebite. That poor child. God! And Doc Horner will declare war on the church. He's feared something like this would happen. I can't believe it! Doc knows the Bible, but he knows it don't sanction this. More than once he's threatened to report Cletis and Etta to the state health department. He's even talked about getting a court order to stop the church from messing with snakes. It's Doc who has convinced me that these folks aren't just playing with disaster. They are also maybe teasing God.

Job, lukewarm about the church because of some of the eye-openers he had had in the army, had stopped attending services. After hours and hours of talk with Doc over an occasional shot or two of white lightning, he had cleared his mind for the first time in years. Chidester blamed Doc for Job's defection; Doc basked in the delight of scoring a point for common sense. Job knew what Cletis feared most, though: Horner was the doctor for most of the church members. The preacher knew that Horner would seize every chance he could to try to wean them away from what he believed would be their destruction. And now look at Vergie. My God!

As they neared the Rollins house, Job stepped on the brake, and the truck bumped to a halt. Fatty awoke with a tiny crooning sound. “Are we there yet?” he said.

“Yup, we're there,” said Job, reaching out of the window to pull the handle of the truck so that he could get out. From up in the hills, a dog barked. A sheet of lightning flashed as both doors of the truck clattered shut.

A single light was on in the living room. Its gleam pointed away from the house as though some kind of line of demarcation had been set up. Job had a passing thought that to cross the line would be to pass into a hostile region. That, of course, would not deter Job. But something else did stop him for a moment. He stopped and turned his head to listen. From the left of the house came an eerie subdued sound. Distracted somewhat by the light, the Sheriff adjusted to the dark by cupping his right hand over the side of his eye to block the window and its light stream. What he saw was blue-blackness against black. Whispering to Fatty to stay right where he was and not move, Job turned and tip-toed toward the blue-blackness. He moved cautiously.

When he had walked about five yards, he heard a muffled sound, a droning-like moan. His ears strained. He thought it was; thunder. But, then, as he drew nearer, he could hear a clipped rhythmical stopping and starting. Job stood still. Since he had not brought a flashlight with him, he waited for another flare of heat lightning, hoping that would give him a glimpse of what awaited him in the dark. He felt sure it was not an animal, yet he was not convinced it was a human. The lightning flashed; it was too far in the distance, though, for Job to be able to see anything. Reverberating through the valley came the first night's volleys of thunder. Deep, rich, full bass notes filled Salt Hollow. Perhaps somewhat assured by the force of the thunder, the sheriff spoke, “Who is out there? Who are you?” Mo response came.

Again, Job asked, “Is there anyone there?” If it is an animal, he thought, it would have run by now.

Then, a faint, weary voice said, “That you. Job Lester?”

“This,” said Job. And because he did not recognize the voice of one he had known all his life, he asked once more, “Who is it?”

“It's me, Hiram, Job,” came the disconsolate reply.

“Hiram! What...what is it?” said Job. Patty moved toward the voices when he heard Hiram identify himself. Together, he and Job walked into the darkness toward Hiram. Blinking lightning checkered the sky.

As Job and Fatty crept closer to Hiram, Job put out his arm to slow Fatty's walk. “Hiram, where's Vergie? Is she all right?”

“I don't know. I don't...No, no. They brung her home. I put her on the bed. No. No. She's not all right,” whispered Hiram.

“Where's Etta” said Job.

Hiram gave no response. A twig snapped as Fatty shifted his weight from one foot to another.

“Hiram, where's Etta” Job asked sharply. His breathing quickened. The soles of his feet dampened. “You haven't done anything to....” He didn't finish the sentence aloud but did conclude it in his mind: “...hurt Etta, did you?” Job knew that Hiram would be the last person in the world to harm anyone, but then if your only child was killed you might go off the deep end just like that. Job recalled all the hot debates he had had in the army about killing. Someone would always say they could never kill another human. Then someone else would ask, “What if your wife was being raped and the only way you could save her was kill her attacker?” Now, substitute words flew into the question in Job's mind: “What if your only daughter was dead because her own mother had set her on the path of destruction?” Job broke into his own thoughts with “Hiram! Where is Etta?” He reached out toward Hiram but, misjudging just where the latter was standing, missed taking hold of him.

“Etta? Why, she's in the house, isn't she?” asked Hiram. A jagged bolt of lightning galloped through the sky. The rumble of thunder echoed with a metallic edge.

“Well, why don't we go and see?” said Job. “Come on, Hi, we'll go and see.” In reaching out this time, he touched Hiram's shoulder. Clasping him firmly over a gnarled bone, Job turned him in the direction of his house. “Fatty, you coming?”

The three men passed by the shaft of light filtering through the window. Job noticed the window was closed. That's funny, he thought, for a window to be shut on a night as hot as this one. As they rounded the corner of the house and walked toward the front steps, the rectangle of light coining onto the porch evaporated. Etta had closed the door. Job hesitated for a moment, debating with himself whether to knock or walk right in. Since Hiram was with them, he didn't think it unseemly not standing on manners. A clap of thunder knocked for him as Job turned the doorknobs. It moved, but the door did not.

Hiram, guessing what was happening, said, “It's not locked. We don't have locks on our doors.”

“Nobody in Salt Hollow has locks, Hi. Maybe the door blew shut and stuck. Here, let me give it a little of my weight,” said Job. He grasped the knob with both hands, packed his hip, thigh and upper leg against the door, and with his knee and shoulder jabbed at the door. It hesitated. Then, like an arrow shot from a bow, it burst open crashing against the side wall. Several small pieces of splintered wood went flying across the room. Fragments of caning dangled from the wood. The ladder-back chair which Etta had jammed under the doorknob was now only kindling.

The three men paused at the threshold facing Etta who stood in the door frame of Vergie's room. Her face was expressionless, though her eyes seemed pulled halfway down her face because of the dark quarter moons under them. Accordion folds of wrinkles covered the mid-section of her dress; her hands were locked together at her waist.

“Woman, what are you doing?” said Hiram in a soft, even voice. “In the name of God, what are you doing?” He lurched into the house. Job and Fatty followed.

“All I do I do in God's name,” said Etta.

Job opened his mouth to speak, but his first syllables were deadened in a harsh crack of lightning and an instantaneous crescendo of violent thunder, “...anything we can do...”

Hiram stood in front of Etta. “Move aside, Etta Rollins. I am going in to Vergie.”

Etta unlocked her hands and fanned out her arras to both sides of the door frame. She said nothing. Hiram stood staring at her.

Job spoke. “Now, Etta, I've got to see the child. She may need help.”

“Her help is in the Lord who made heaven and earth,” said Etta. “You can be of no help to her, Job.”

“Why don't you move aside and let us see for ourselves?” said Job.

“If she don't move,” said Hiram, “she....” His words were cut off by the fierce crackling of several slices of lightning and the echoing cannonades of thunder. The lights flickered, dimmed and then went out. Sheets of lightning cast a saffron glow to the world about the tiny frame house.

In the blackout any one of the three men could have thrust Etta aside, but each, for his own reasons, was reluctant to touch her. Job took charge. “Hiram, where do you keep your kerosene lamps?”

“I'll fetch one,” said Hiram.

“And, Fatty, mebbe you'd better take the truck and fetch the large battery torch. I was a'fixin' to use the headlight on the truck, but them lights is no good as it is. And I expect you'd better stop by and get Doc Horner.”

Etta's voice gored the night. “Will Horner will not set foot in this house! He is the missionary of the devil. He will not set foot in my house!”

At this outburst, Hiram, who was groping in the dark to judge where the wick was on the kerosene lamp, said, “Bring the doctor here. Vergie needs him.”

As though permission had been granted, Fatty went out to the truck. When he was on the porch and as Hiram lit the lamp, Etta screamed again, “He will not set foot in my house!”

Hiram straightened his shoulders and spoke. “Etta, this is my house, Vergie is my daughter, and you are my wife. There will be no more talk of who comes here. Now, get yourself outen that door. Move!”

Job walked over to the chair Etta had been sitting in an hour earlier. Easing down into the seat, he rested his arms on the sides. He stretched out his lanky legs and crossed them at the ankles. “Etta,” he said. “Let me look at the child. Mebbe she does need some help.”

“She don't need help from them what's left the church. We leave you alone. Now you leave us alone,” said the woman. A tremor of thunder in the distance rumbled against the foundations of the house.

Hiram, still face to face with his wife, said, “Job is here to help. You know that. You've knowed him all his life. Vergie played with his young'uns. You quilted with his woman. They're kin, wife, they're kin. Let him pass into the room. He can help our daughter.”

“Hiram's right, Etta. And, besides, I'm the law. I've got to look at Vergie.”

The appeals of blood, friendship and law had no effect on Etta. In the unsettling light of the kerosene lamp, her face was like a piece of muslin not yet cut into a pattern or sewn into a garment. Yet inside her fluttered the tiniest quiver of anxiety. Such charity as these menfolks were showing belonged in church people, though she hadn't always seen it there. To find it in the unchurched, even when one of them was her husband, made her uneasy. The feeling quickly evaporated as she continued her defiance. “I understand the law of God. His will and the law be the same by us. Your law makes mockery of God's because you left the fold, Job Lester. It's not for any of the followers to be beholden to your quotations of the law of the flesh,” said Etta.

A wisp of sleek black hair sprang loose from the top of her head and drooped down her face. An almost imperceptible grumble of thunder exited the hills.

“Well, Etta, I'm sorry you grudge me my job.” Job stood up and looked at Hiram. “I guess, Hi, we're a'fixin' to have to go in that room, real gentle like.”

As if the men had rehearsed their actions, they moved to Etta, each one firmly gripping her arm at the wrist and the elbow. Pulling and pushing at her, they jostled her out of the doorway. Her body had tightened into a wire, and her resistance was formidable. But her physical strength ebbed in the face of the combined power of her husband and the sheriff. A foot away from the door, with a violent jerk she flung off the hold of the two men just as they released their grip.

“VIPERS!” she rasped.

Hiram and Job both ignored this outburst, in part because it was so short-lived but more so because they were intent on getting to Vergie. Hiram led the way, the light from the kerosene lamp he was carrying raising objects and shapes out of the darkness. He set the lamp on Vergie's small dresser which was covered with a star doily the child had crocheted several years ago. The yellow glow stretched to fill the corners of the room, but it fell far short of most of the corners and all of the upper walls and ceiling. The footboard of Vergie's bed cut off the light halfway down her body; her head, neck and upper torso glowed with incandescence. Hiram slumped beside the bed with his weight resting mostly on his right hip. His left leg crossed over the right one just below the knees and rested there. With both hands he took hold of Vergie's right arm and hand. He raised her arm. Even before he saw the child, Job knew that Vergie was dead.

The room had collected the smell of death. The dank, stale odor of something like damp cardboard flirted with his nostrils. Job noticed how mush Vergie's neck had swollen. The distention was so great that the neck appeared to be more a part of her shoulders than a separate appendage. The first thing that struck Job was that the child looked like the no-neck fat midget (whose other oddities could be viewed--for the price of admission--only behind a curtain) who had performed with the carnival at Lewisburg last year. The next thing was her age. Vergie looked older than her mother. While her skin was smooth to the touch, to the eye it appeared drawn, even puckered. But perhaps light and shadow were playing tricks. Or maybe the slight downward angle of her lips made her look as though she had false teeth. Job took Vergie's hand; it was as cold as spring water.

Suddenly he was aware of Hiram's kneeling beside the body of his child. Job could not move. He could not speak. He felt as though paste had been poured into his brain and bloodstream. Only his eyes seemed capable of movement. He dimly sensed they were fluttering and stinging, observing something but comprehending little. He stood for several moments, almost in a trance. A stab of icy pain shot through his head. Vergie could be one of his daughters. I could be in Hi's place, he thought. Oh, God. Job stroked his chin and cleared his throat. The scratchiness of his beard and the gruffness of his voice helped him gain control.

Hiram sighed. In coming back into Vergie's bedroom, he had entered into the reality of the loss of his child. Yes, she was dead. And, yes, Etta was to blame. That damned church was to blame. Or maybe God was to blame. He might be, but as Hi articulated to himself, that's not to my understanding. “I will deal with them that I can see and touch and know are blameful. They may act in God's name, but God can't be punished. They can call on the name of God, but God can't cover up their actions. They give ear to Cletis Chidester, not to God. If Cletis says wash my feet, that's what they do. If he says Wash my ass, I guess they'd do that, too.” He kissed Vergie's hand and placed it gently on her stomach. “Child, child, daughter-child,” he said.

“What...what did you say?” asked Job, shaken out of his own thoughts by Hiram's words. He started to reach across the bed to put his hand on Vergie but quickly decided against it, why he didn't know.

“Vergie is dead. Job,” said Hiram.

“Yes, Hi, I know. I, I didn't think you knew, though.”

“I knowed, but I didn't want to.”

“Life is awful hard most of the time, Hi,” said Job.

“It don't always have to be. Sometimes it gets pushed in the wrong way.”

“You're meanin' something I don't understand.”

“I don't understand neither, but I'm meanin' the tom-foolishness of them God twisters,” said Hiram.

“You mean Cletis and his crowd? And Etta? Do you mean Etta, too?”

“She's the worst. Not fitten to be a mother since religion got a bolt of her.”

“You know I don't hold any truck with them folks now, Hi,” said Job. “Cletis is addled, but I can't say anything like that 'bout Etta.”

“The whole goddam bunch is crazier than a tree dog sparkin' a bear in a laurel slick. They're God crazy. That's the biggest craziness, ain't it? It's a killing craziness. They killed my child, Job. They killed Vergie.” Hiram bent over toward the girl, taking hold of her right shoulder with his left hand. He rested his check on hers as he stood bending over from the waist.

Job stood there, again hesitating. He wanted to put a hand on his friend's shoulder. Words he could share; gestures he could not. A cricket, probably somewhere in the house, chirruped in quarter-notes. Job took a blue handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped his face with circular movements. The backs of his hands were covered with droplets of sweat. “Whew, it's hot in here,” he said, more to himself than to Hiram who was still holding Vergie. Then, Job noticed the window on the other side of the room was closed. “I guess Etta was a'fixin' to bar us plumb out,” he mused while walking the few steps to the window. He raised it with ease.

Cool pine-scented air slipped into the room. “If only it could revive Vergie,” thought Job. When Hiram felt the air on the back of his neck, he raised his head and glanced in the direction of the window. Job nodded. Then he turned and stepped into the living room, leaving Hiram to his vigil.

Etta was sitting in a chair similar to the one which had been shattered when Job forced the front door open. She had placed it between the door and the still-closed window. Job walked over to her.

“Etta,” he said. “Let's get some fresh air in here like I just done in the child's bedroom.” He lifted the window and the iron pulley weight clunked and thudded against the frame. The breeze rushed in to meet itself coming from the bedroom window. Etta said nothing. She sat as she had earlier--straight, stiff, staring. The breeze cavorted around the bottom of her dress.

“Etta, why don't you lay down?” said Job leaning against the side of the wall. She did not respond.

He tried again. “Then Mebbe you can tell me what happened down at the church tonight.” Etta blinked but still said nothing.

The house was as silent as the grave which was soon to receive Vergie.

“Etta! What's the matter with you?” And then in an undertone to himself, he said, “I wonder where Fatty and the Doc is.” He turned to look out of the window as though to speed Fatty's return. As he did so, Etta stood up. Walking deliberately, she crossed to a closet, opened its door and began rummaging around. Job watched the rapid movements of her arms as they thrashed about. Swishes, rattles and rustles blended together. When Etta backed out of the closet, she clutched in her hands Hiram's old 10-gauge double-barrelled shotgun.

“For God's sake, Etta, what are you about?” he said.

“I tole you Will Horner is not a'comin' in this house. He is an infestation. I will not abide his presence here.”

Hiram appeared in the doorway between the bedroom and the living room. “Job, this woman is pure crazy. She wouldn't no more know how to shoot that gun than skin a woods pussy.”

“You don't know what she knows how to do iffen she puts her mind to it. Now, Etta, let me have that gun.” He thrust his right hand toward her.

With a staunch determination which was the legacy of generations of hill people, Etta turned the gun around and pointed it toward the front door. She tucked the butt of the weapon under her right armpit and entwined her finger in the trigger. With a tiny bounce, she adjusted the gun's weight and bulk to her body. One foot extended beyond the other, and her knees were slightly bent. Observing her stance, Hiram chuckled. “It ain't loaded, and you sure as Christmas don't know how to load it. And this is one time the Lord won't provide.”

Job couldn't manage even a smile. “Etta,” he said. “You're so tired you don't know what you're a'doin'. That gun's too heavy for you. Let me have it.” He took a step toward her. Etta's muscles tightened. Her neck looked as though it were made of steel. Since she herself knew that what her husband had said was so, she could not threaten Job or Will or anybody. But she held on to the gun. She was not going to yield. If she couldn't shoot or even threaten to shoot, she would at least hold her ground.

Hiram spoke. “What do you think, sheriff, of a woman leader of the church a'settin' out to kill? Ain't there a commandment about that?”

“Etta's not a'goin' to kill anyone,” said Job. “She don't have it in her.”

“No, I don't rightly 'spect that she does. But I don't know. She's changed so much. The Bible might say not to kill, but if Old Chidester 'lowed it's all right, Etta would kill,” said Hiram.

“I reckon she's just my streyfied about all that's took place tonight, Hi. She needs sleep. It's nigh onto dawn.”

Etta's forehead quivered slightly and three lines settled in just above her eyebrows. She continued to hold onto the shotgun as she spoke. “No, Job Lester, I hain't mystreyfied. I'm a'seeing' God's will a'movin' in my life. Some has had visions, and some has had visitations. But all I've knowed for myself is the descent of the Holy Spirit when I speak in tongues and handle the snakes. I feel God. I feel God in my whole body. Like having' a backache. I for sartin know it's there. I can't see it. I can't point it. I can't show it to nobody. But I can feel it. God's like that. He's in my innards. Iffen he wants my Vergie, it is His will. I feel that. I know that. He wanted old Abraham's boy. He wanted Vergie.”

Both Job and Hiram were a bit taken aback with what Etta said. It was almost a sermon for her, so given had she been up to this point in speaking in terse and laconic sentences. The men looked at each other.

Etta continued: “About killin', the Bible sets examples. Maybe Vergie is like Isaac. Old Abraham was a'fixin' to slay him on the altar. God commanded it. Iffen he commanded me to kill, even kill Vergie, I would obey His commandment. And iffen he tole me to kill the backslider, I'd surely do it.”

“Keep such lollygaggin' foolishness to yourself, Etta Rollins,” said her husband.

“God don't ask for killin',” said Job. “He asks for peace in our time.”

The sentence was barely completed when the clunks and clangs of the sheriff's pickup truck could be heard chugging up the road. Hiram and Job started for the door. As Hiram sidled past his wife, he grabbed the gun out of her hands and took it with him. Startled, she fell back against the wall with a thud. She waited a few seconds and then wiped her hands on the sides of her dress. She steadied herself and turned toward the back of the house. Casting a glance in the direction of Vergie's bedroom, she paused a moment but then walked toward her own room.

With the same lack of speed he had traveled all night, Fatty parked the truck, turned off the headlights and, opening the door, dropped down to the ground. No one else was in the truck. Fatty reached back inside the cab to retrieve the two flashlights he had picked up in town. Hiram and Job reached him as he was turning around.

“Fatty! Where is Doc Horner?” asked Job.

“Don't know for sure. Gone to some medical meeting over to the Greenbrier. Note on his door.”

“Well, when's he a'comin' back?” said Job.

“Sometime tomorrow.” Fatty handed the sheriff the two flashlights. To his momentary satisfaction, Job saw that both were working. He cast a strong beam of light into the trees.

“Tomorrow from what day? Yesterday meaning Wednesday or tomorrow from today? Thursday?” said Job.

“Don't rightly know. I guess, though, tomorrow from yesterday. Today, then,” said Fatty.

Hiram spoke. “Probly be back today, Job. He'd have put the note' there afore dark.”

“Yup, guess you're right on the dot,” said Job.

“How's Vergie,” said Patty, directing his question to Job but casting? an apprehensive glance toward Hiram.

“Vergie's dead, son,” replied Hiram.

Fatty said nothing, and in the dark the other men could not see the look on the young man's face. The silence was not a strained one; it was binding. Finally, Job spoke: “Patty, I want you to take the truck and go on home. I'm a'stayin' here the night or what's left of it. I'll write a note for you to put on Doc's door on your way home. Then come back here in the morning light to fetch me.” He paused. “You got all that?”

“Yup,” said Fatty.

“Now hold this torch on my hands whilst I write the note,” Job said, extending one of the flashlights to Patty who groped in circles until he touched it. The sheriff took a tiny green note pad and pencil stub out of his shirt pocket. Cupping the pad in his hand, he wrote a brief note asking Doc to come to Hiram's place as soon as he got back. He didn't say anything else; he knew if Doc saw anybody in the hollow before he got the note Horner would know plenty. He handed the piece of paper to Fatty who left without another word.

“Job,” said Hiram. “You should of went with him. There's nothing you can do here now.”

“Hi, I'm not a 'leaving'. C'mon, let's go in. We'll set watch over Vergie. It ain't fitten that she be left alone like this.”

“Well, her ma ain't settin' there, you can bet,” said Hiram. The two men walked up the steps onto the porch and into the house. Hiram used the gun he was holding as a walking stick, its thud on the wooden floor punctuating the night's stillness. Inside, he opened the closet and put the weapon back. Then he and Job, both noticing Etta was not in the living room, went in to Vergie.

The long night was nearly over. The rain which so long had threatened never came. Peace reigned. The black sky turned to gray to blue-gray. Morning stars blinked and shimmered. Then, with the lightening of the sky, they disappeared. The first high-pitched doodle-doos of roosters sounded, faintly, then confidently, far away and then close by. Trills and peeps, oboe and flute sounds, swelled with the glare of the eastern horizon. The last dark erratic swoop of bat faded from view. Patches of ground fog, mirroring the light, slept innocently in meadows and fields. Dew beads draped on grass and bush. The dry musical whisper of the wind in the tops of pine trees rose and fell like the breathing of a giant infant. Hiram, sitting beside Vergie's bed, heard the breezes and wished they could restore his child to life. For the first time in 14 years, Vergie would not greet the morning sun. She was dead. Hiram swallowed and swallowed, but he could not move the obstruction in his throat. He felt as though his Adam's apple was growing larger by the moment and' choking him. A sob vibrated in that throat and, finding no outlet, jerked upward until it became a reedy whine in his nostrils.

CHAPTER 7

After leaving Cletis and recovering from the jolt of feeling shot at, Lovey Ridenour made her way to the houses of Tensey Poulton and Rachel Stirling to ask them to go with her to help prepare Vergie's body for burial. To all of these women, the laying out of the dead was as natural as caring for babies, the sick and the elderly--or even for themselves; it was regarded as much an activity of life as feeding or mending. Each woman went about the task much as she would in making apple butter or filling a salt gourd. Yet each always worked with the sense of defenselessness which steals upon the spirit when death has cemented the body. Death may be peace or rest, but to women who bathe, comb and dress a body, death is a hard and cold blight tinged with the promise of decay and rot. For Lovey and her two neighbors, though, what was uncertain and chilling in the reality of death was dissolved by the certainty of their faith. Waking comes after sleep. Spring bursts after winter. Morning glows after night. These were life's promises, always fulfilled. And those of their religion were even surer ones. Jesus had triumphed over death, so resurrection from the dead was awaiting all those who died in the Lord. Yet, as these three women knew, the reality of cold, unbending flesh was the here and now, no matter what triumphs the future might hold. Such feelings and thoughts, in greater or lesser degrees, hovered about the women as they approached the Rollins house.

The wooden structure, shaped like an upside down L, was built at the foot of a pine-covered hill. What little back yard there was swelled gracefully into the mound that rose about 60 feet directly behind the house. On both sides of the dwelling were plots of flat ground. On the right, where the full sun spent most of the afternoon, was a vegetable garden, the rows of corn and staked tomatoes standing like sentinels of nature. Potato and cucumber vines entwined their green tendrils all over the ground like emerald veins and arteries. On the left was a flower garden, its bright colors splashing up to the edges of the wooded areas. Pink, red and white four o'clocks hung daintily and limply on their stalks; they would trumpet forth by late afternoon. White and purple, almost black, petunias were bold commas and apostrophes on their green spindles; a few brown blossoms sagged in crumpled sogginess on those same stems, a damp, suffocating acridness mixed in with the delicate scents of the nearby portulaca.

Most of the house was built close to the ground, except for the front room and the portion of the house just outside it. They were constructed out over a dip in the land and supported by eight log posts. The porch, running the entire length of the front of the house, followed the upside down L so that it provided as much living space in the warm months as the house itself gave year around. Five solid steps arched from the ground to the porch at its midway point. To the far right of the porch squatted an old ice box and a Maytag roller washing machine. Their enamel was pock-marked with rust to which adhered flecks of pine needles. On the wall hung five washtubs and pails of various sizes; a corrugated wash board, its brand name unreadable because of years of immersion in water swirling with lye soap, tilted on a wooden peg. Its brass rivulets glistened in the morning sun. Three wooden barrels, obese and weathered triplets, hunkered at one corner of the porch. A tin roof which followed the lines of the house bent protectively over the porch. The area just outside of the living room had a waist-high railing made out of two by fours and nailed with an expert's sense of proportion around the three exposed sides. Two windows of four large panes each contrasted with the gray rectangle of the screen door. On the front porch two wicker rocker chairs, a straight back Chair, a child's chair made out of an orange crate, and a wooden foot stool provided “setting' spell” opportunities. With the exception of the window frames and the front door which had once been painted white but were now blistered and peeling, all the wood of the porch and the house was water-stained and blotched from exposure to the weather. Around the front of the property was a fence of chicken wire nailed to logs. The vegetable patch, too, was enmeshed in fencing so that deer and other wild animals would not nibble and gnaw at the plants.

A man was standing on the porch, one leg hiked up to rest on the railing; his right elbow was propped up on the knee of his leg.

“Lord a'mercy,” said Rachel. “Ain't that Job Lester?”

“It rightly is,” replied Tensey.

“I knowed he'd be here sooner or later. He just had to be, don't you know?” said Lovey.

I reckon he's here with all the questions he can think of 'twixt here and Kentuck,” said Rachel.

“I 'spect so,” said Lovey, shifting from one hand to the other the paper bag she was carrying.

“What in the world do you have in that poke, Lovey?” asked Rachel.

“Nothin' to be worryin' your mind about, so put it at ease,” came Lovey's response.

“Well, it do beat all,” said Rachel.

Seeing the women, Job hailed them. “Mornin', ladies. Mornin', Miz Stirling, Lovey, Aunt Tensey.” Tensey Poulton was indeed Job's aunt by marriage. Each of the women greeted the sheriff.

“How's Hiram?” asked Lovey.

“Puny-like with sorrow,” said Job. Slowly he shook his head.

“The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Hi don't understand the ways of the Lord as some does,” Lovey said.

“The Lord might have had some help in this case,” said Job.

Tensey's voice was stern with rebuke. “That's blasphemy, nephew, pure blasphemy.”

“Everything ain't so cut and dried when it comes to the Lord, you know, Aunt Tensey,” Job said.

“Hesh, you two. We've got a heap o' work to do,” said Lovey. “Let's be about it.” She led the way into the house.

Though cooling breezes had drifted through the house in the few hours since Job had opened the windows, a heavy clump of stale air filled the house. Lovey looked around. The door to Etta's room was closed, and no sounds could be heard within. The women exchanged glances as Job stepped ahead of them to the door of Vergie's room.

“Hi,” he said softly. “Hi, the women are here for the laying out. Why don't you come out and see them. Hi?”

The bed creaked as part of its burden was lifted from it. Hiram, rubbing the shoulder which had so long rested beside Vergie, shuffled out of the room. His usually thin face was rounded with puffiness and the lower half outlined in the stubble of his still dark beard.

“Oh, Lovey, here you are,” he said. “And Tensey and Rachel. Welcome.” He touched the arm of Rachel who was standing closest to him.

“Hiram, oh Hiram we grieve for you,” said Lovey.

“My Vergie, my Vergie, dead, dead and gone,” Hiram mumbled.

Lovey started to speak but quickly caught herself. She sensed that she had best not speak of the Lord's will just now. Vergie was indeed dead. That was fact enough. The whys the man had to find out for himself and deal with later. What she spoke instead was practical and realistic. “Have you men had any vittles this morning?”

Hiram, who had not given any thought at all to food, slowly shook his head. Job, on the other hand, was hungry, and he said so.

Lovey took charge. “Rachel, you stir up some breakfast, and, Tensey, you go in arid set with Vergie. She shouldn't be left alone. Hiram, I allow you need to fix yourself up a bit. And I'll go and fetch Etta outen her room.”

Since Lovey had not included Job in her directive, he volunteered. “Miz Stirling, I'll get you a fire a'goin',” he said as Rachel moved toward the kitchen.

“I'll hep you a'fore I get washed up,” said Hiram to Job.

The men went outside while Rachel busied herself about the store and Tensey went into Vergie's room.

Lovey hesitated for a moment. Then she rapped lightly on the door of Etta's room. No answer. No sound. “Etta,” she called. “Etta, I'm coming in.” Again there was no response. Turning the door knob, Lovey opened the door and entered the room.

Inside, it was even stuffier than the rest of the house, for both the windows and the door had been closed for hours. Etta was lying on her bed, still wearing her clothes and shoes. With her arms folded over the bosom and her eyes closed, she appeared to be sleeping. Lovey's own heart stopped for a moment while she peered to see if she could see a rise and fall of breathing.

“Etta. Etta. It's Lovey.” She walked over to the bed and touched her friend.

As Lovey's fingers brushed over Etta's warm, smooth cheek, Etta spoke: “You've come for the laying out, Lovey?”

“Yes, Etty, we have. Rachel and Tensey, they're here, too.”

“Is Job still here?” asked Etta.

“Yes, he is.”

“They sent for Will Horner, so I 'low he'll be prowlin' in here any minute now.”

“I don't see no way of keepin' him out.”

Etta did not tell Lovey that she had tried to do just that with Hiram's shotgun. Lovey would never understand. Only Cletis would.

“I been a'studyin', Lovey, 'bout Vergie. I been a'thinkin' that she's like Isaac. She's laid on the altar the way Isaac was. 'Cept in this case God took her as a sacrifice. My all was on the altar.”

“But, Etta, in the scripture, Abraham was commanded by the Lord to slay Isaac. God didn't give you such a command,” said Lovey. She shifted the bag she was carrying from one arm to the other.

“Ain't his will a commandment?” Etta asked sharply.

“I don't reckon so. The way I see it is the Ten Commandments are rules for all of us. Special commandments come from God. Like to Abraham. Or to Noah. Or if the Holy Spirit speaks. But I don't know of anyone personal who has been commanded. Not even Cletis.”

“Iffen anyone has been commanded, it'd be Cletis,” and Etta. “And it is inital Cletis. He told me.”

“What did he tell you?”

“He give a parable that wasn't in the Scripture. It went something like Adam and Eve's sacrifice. Male and female created he them. The man was bigger in ever way, 'specially in the privates. Breasts don't count.”

“Etta! You have lost your senses! What was you a 'talking to him about such things for anyhow?”

“These're things in the faith you wouldn't have understandin' of.”

“I have enough understandin' to know no preacher should be talkin' to a woman about them. But since you've brought it up, how'd the parable go?”

“You'll need to ask Cletis that. He said it couldn't be revealed unless through the spirit.”

Lovey was chagrined. “Hhhmmppph. Sometimes he just don't make sense of things, and you're gettin' worse about him. I guess that's neither here nor there at a time like this.” She paused. “Etta, don't you feel for Vergie? Do you feel deep down that your daughter is dead?”

“Feelin' has nothing to do with the Lord's will. It's knowin', knowin'. You know what's right. You live what's right. Feelin' don't enter it. It's knowin'. The fear of the Lord is the beginning' of knowin'. You know. You just know. I took care of Vergie for as long as God wanted me to. That's his will. I abide by it.”

“The dear, sweet gal is gone, Etty. Your young'un, your daughter. You're a mother, ain't you?” said Lovey. She walked over to the window. “My lungs is needing' some breathing'. Leave me open this here window.” Without waiting for Etta's response, she threw up the sash.

Etta raised herself to a rigid sitting position. Then easing her legs off the bed and on to the floor she sat with her back to Lovey.

“For God's sake, Sister, don't you feel *anything*?” asked Lovey, tears filling her eyes.

“Lovey, it's for God's sake I must not feel anything for the child. What feeling we have must be for God.” Etta's back slumped a bit as though support at her waist had given way.

“But God made the child. She's created in his image. If you love her, you love God, don't you?”

“It ain't the same. It just ain't the same. I can't reason why, but it ain't.” Etta wished that Cletis were here because he had all the answers for questions of the faith. He always said that Lovey asked too many questions for a woman.

The scent of newly brewed coffee and the sharper hints of frying ham drifted under the door. Muted sounds of life--the clang of an iron pot, the thump of a wooden log, the sneeze of someone in the house--mingled with the scents.

“Etty, Hiram don't understand what you have smarts of. He'll be a' felling' for Vergie in the way you don't reckon. I 'spect he needs help this day.”

“If he was a believer, he'd have knowledge a'plenty. He stands in danger of hell's fire. He bears his burdens alone iffen he won't come to Jesus,” said Etta.

“Well, there's a cross for everyone,” was Lovey's reply. And, she said to herself, you may be Hiram's. “Get yourself ready for the day, Sister. It's to be a long one.”

In the kitchen, Rachel had breakfast on the table where Hiram and Job sat eating sweet corn griddle cakes, fried green tomatoes, fried ham-meat, salt rising' bread, mush biscuits, persimmon marmalade and pickled watermelon rind. A pot of coffee and another of sassafras tea steamed on the back of the stove. Rachel stood over the men, ready to serve up another helping the moment their plates emptied. When Lovey came into the room, all three looked at her. On Hiram's face was a look of anxious expectation. Lovey answered his unasked question as she said to Rachel, “Etta's a'fixin to come out, so she'll be a' wanting' something to eat.”

“There's a gracious plenty here,” said Hiram. “I didn't allow as how I could eat, but Rachel knows persuasion.”

“You need the food, Hi,” said Job.

Just then the deep, low clangor of a church bell rolled across the valley. Bonnnggg. Hiram laid down his fork and knife. Bonnng. Job held his coffee cup in mid-air. Bonnnggg. Rachel and Lovey looked at each other. Bonnng. Etta came out of her room and walked to the front door. Bonnngggg. In Vergie's room, Tensey knelt beside the bed. Bonng. All of them were counting silently, knowing that at the toll of fourteen the ringing would cease. Everyone in the valley within the sound of the bells also would be counting. Few would not have heard the news about Vergie; the bells would only confirm it. Bonnnggg. One toll for each year of the child's life. Only fourteen. Bonng.

The silence when the tolling ceased encumbered everyone in the small house. Job counted his own heartbeat in increments of fourteen, uneasy at the thought of being the first to speak or move. Hiram's face looked as though it had been dusted with flour. Once again, Lovey made the first move.

“Etta,” she said, moving to the front door. “Come, sit down and eat.” Placing both of her hands on Etta's shoulders, Lovey turned her around and led her to the table. Rachel dished up food on a plain white plate.

As Etta sat down, she did not acknowledge Hiram or Job; instead she said to Rachel, “It's a quare thing to see another woman in your own kitchen. But I'm obliged to you for whatever you've been a'doin.”

“We'll keep a'doin' as long as we have to, Sister,” said Rachel.

“Now, Etta, whilst you eat, we'll be a'laying' out Vergie. What garments do you want to put on her?” said Lovey.

“Her whitey dress that Docia made. I'll fetch it outen the clothes press,” said Etta, pushing her chair away from the table.

“Just you tell me which press, and I'll fetch it,” said Lovey.

Etta told her the dress was folded away in a box on the shelf of the closet in Vergie's room. As Lovey turned to leave the kitchen, loud voices from outside darted in and out of the house. Ragged snippets of an exchange between two men could be heard:

“...be damned if I put up with...”

“...question the inscrotumable ways of God...”

“...stupidity and ignorance will destroy...”

Everyone recognized the voices of Doc Horner and Cletis Chidester. Job and Hiram got up from the table to go outside. Etta stiffened. Lovey, again catching Rachel's eye, nodded in Etta's direction, as much to say “take care of her.” Rachel understood. Lovey walked out of the kitchen toward the child's bedroom.

Just as she passed the front door, one of the washtubs crashed to the porch floor followed by a heavy thunk. Intermingled with the sounds of tin meeting wood were the snarls and growls of men's voices.

“You are a menace to this valley. You're worse than any snake that slinks on its belly in the darkest rocks around,” Doc Horner screamed, his voice almost a megaphone.

Cletis and Doc, gripped in a wrestler's vise, were thrashing about on the porch floor. On their next roll, they toppled one of the barrels which thudded about aimlessly, then crashed into the child's orange-crate chair. It shattered into flimsy strips.

“No more a menace than you are being' half a doctor.” Cletis tried to extract one of his arms from Horner's lock. He grunted and grunted. At the same moment both men were aware of someone straddling them. It was Job.

“Now both of you get the hell on your feet. What kind of growed men are you supposed to be?” Job took hold of each's arm and, with their instant cooperation, separated them.

Cletis leaped to his feet, a look of intense hatred burning him like a fever. Horner lifted himself more slowly, brushing his clothes as he did so. Standing, he looked straight into the eyes of Hiram. Embarrassment flushed over him. Will extended his hand to Hiram. They shook, holding the clasp a moment or two longer than men usually did. Doc, sensing that, put his arm around Hiram's shoulder. Finally, he spoke: “Hi, I'm sorry, sorry, sorry.”

Hiram's head and then his whole body sagged.

Job, aching with restraint, broke in. “Glad you got here, Will.” And then turning to Chidester, he said, “Mornin' cletis.”

“Good morning, Sheriff. This is the day that the Lord hath made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.” Cletis stood straight.

“Oh, God, Chidester,” said Doc, disgust clouding over his face. “If you're going to be here, can't you at least keep your mouth shut. Save your words for the pulpit. There's a burden of grief laid on this house, and you talk about rejoicing. I swear to God I don't know what's the matter with you.” Doc made a fist with his right hand, shook it three or four times near his thigh and then relaxed the hand.

Despite the impromptu wrestling match he was just in, Will Horner had never hit anyone with a fist, but he knew that Cletis might have the honor of being the first. Doc was an inch over six feet, weighed more than a doctor should, with much of his excess poundage in his stomach where a soft mound of cushiony flesh sagged over a supporting two-inch wide leather belt encircling his waist. His sleek raven hair was fringed in silver, more of which glistened just after he had had a haircut, as he had the day before. His face, just beginning to show the roundedness that signals waning youth, was genial. Smiles found permanent lodging there; lines or creases had not. His manner, like his body, always suggested relaxation. Only rarely did he, as now, show signs of tension or stress. In his easy-goingness, though, a sense of purpose and determination radiated from him. Very sure of himself, he knew what he wanted and how to go about getting it. Had he chosen, he could have taught in the finest medical colleges in the country; his own profession had assured him of that and had dangled before him fellowships, appointments and positions. But he hadn't wanted any of it, and he returned to the hills. Since the closest doctor was 25 miles away across horseshoe-winding roads, will Horner had his life full day and night with the medical--and other--needs of his neighbors. He tolerated most things, except religious fanatics. He suffered fools not at all, his definition of fools being people who, knowing better, acted worse. To him, Cletis Chidester was the biggest fool he had ever encountered. That fool was now being greeted by Etta who had come onto the porch.

“Cletis, you're welcome here. Come and set a spell. I'll fetch you some coffee.”

“Thank'ee, Etta. But no coffee, where's the child?” said Cletis.

“She's being laid out. Lovey's brought Rachel and Tensey.” A half dozen sparrows glided to the ground outside the gate.

“When she is ready, I shall want to say a prayer over her,” said Cletis.

“You've already said enough, it seems to me, said Horner. “Too much!” He instantly regretted flatting out.

“I'll thank you not to say anything, will Horner,” snapped Etta.

Will, realizing once again where he was, did not respond, even though he wanted to.

Job, however, did speak: “Etta, you know Doc will have to look at Vergie just as soon as she's ready.”

“I don't know anything of the kind. Besides, he can't do nothing for her,” said Etta.

“Not now he can't, no. But the law says that all persons that die have to have certify in. said Job.

“The law of God don't say that, and this is a house of God, 'captain' some wouldn't have it that way.” Etta looked at Hiram as she spoke.

“The law of God and man can warm to each other,” said Doc. “That's what more of you people have to learn.”

“And some has to learn to keep their noses on their faces and out of affairs that don't concern them none,” said Etta.

Any further rise in emotional temperatures was delayed with the arrival of the first neighbors bringing food and condolences. Word about Vergie's death had spread through the community so that by the time the bells were rung for her, scarcely a person in the valley did not know Vergie Rollins had died. Mountain women, wearing their best dresses, black or a variation thereof, carried pots of creamed sour rabbit and smothered chicken, dishes of sweet corn pudding and leather britches beans, pans of blackberry cake and hasty mince pie; the menfolk, usually trailing a step or two behind their women whenever a funeral took place, toted jugs of rhubarb punch and elderberry wine. Among the children dressed in their white wedding/funeral clothes, the girls carried hastily-gathered bouquets of summer flowers: asters, roses, daisies and Queen Anne's lace. The boys, stiff and awkward, stuffed their hands in their pockets and looked with absorbing interest at the ground. The bearing of food, drink and flowers was the prelude to the balm of sympathy which poured out in words, hugs, kisses, handshakes and bonds of kinship. As Etta and Hiram were engulfed in this wave, the rancor between Cletis and Will subsided.

CHAPTER 8

Meanwhile, in Vergie's bedroom which overlooked part of the rambling front porch, the women had begun the ritual of the laying out of the dead. Mountain women who assisted with birth were the very ones who, years later as now with Lovey, officiated at death. The cycle was completed, presided over by women. Against the background of the voices outside, Lovey, Tensey and Rachel went about the business of preparing the child's body for burial. They spoke in low voices, pausing once in a while to cast half an ear on the passing dialogue outside the window.

Lovey and Tensey each had beside them gray and white-flecked enameled wash basins half filled with warm water. Lovey's basin rested on the bedside stand while Tensey's was on the floor. They shared a small bar of beige lye soap which Rachel had made; the wash cloths were rags of threadbare shirts. Earlier, Rachel had put a sheet under Vergie's body when she had undressed her. Now, both sides of the sheet were folded back over the child, making her look as though she had been slipped into an envelope. Rachel helped turn Vergie for the other two women.

Lovey spoke: “This should of been did last night. Rigger mort has stiffened in. The child is well nigh a fence post.”

“Hesh, Lovey. That's no way to speak of the poor dead child,” said Tensey.

“We couldn't of done it last night. Afore God, Hiram wouldn't of stood for it,” said Rachel.

“No, he wasn't ready to believe the child was dead. That's a heap of misery poured on a father all of a sudden,” said Lovey. She washed Vergie's left arm and hand.

“It's a heap o' misery poured on anybody. I just can't believe it yet. There's been them that's bit by the serpent and hasn't died, yet this child....” Tensey's voice trailed off.

“'Pears the child's faith wasn't strong enough yet. Mebbe she didn't understand what it was,” said Lovey. And then almost to herself she mumbled, “I don't know that I do.”

“I guess maybe she wasn't at the age of accountability yet. Or maybe she wasn't ready for the gift of the Holy Spirit,” said Tensey.

Both Lovey and Tensey had washed their way up from the feet on the right and left side of Vergie and had now come to the neck. Swollen, engorged, it looked like a piece of gnarled, rotting wood. A few splotches of purplish blue faded into the black mass of ravished skin. Both women did not want to touch the neck, yet both knew it should be washed. More than any other part of the body, it had been most soiled--by the most scorned of living things, cursed even by God. For that reason alone, it had to be cleansed, however much both women might be reluctant to lay their hands on so inviolate a spot. Rachel, as though knowing what her friends were thinking and feeling, picked up a comb and, placing her hand on Vergie's forehead, ran it through the child's tangled hair. It was taken as a signal for the other women to wash the neck, as though with all three pairs of hands in the region where evil had struck, no harm could come to any of them. Tensey wondered to herself whether they shouldn't find some stump water and wash the child's neck with it; she herself always used it for warts, moles and other skin problems. But she said nothing.

Indeed, the women were strangely quiet as they washed Vergie's face and neck. The voices outside were muted, with only an occasional articulate phrase or two being audible. The women moved with the grace of ballet dancers as they rhythmically dipped their cloths in the cloudy water and wrung them out with squeezes and twists. Rachel brushed both sides of the child's hair until the sheen of life was restored to it; Since Vergie had not been turned, Rachel could not comb or brush the hair on the back of the dead girl's head, so she continued, almost hypnotically, to catch individual strands of hair on brush bristles, lift them into the air and watch them drift back down to rest on the pillow. At another time Lovey might have looked disapprovingly at Rachel, but the former was buried in her own thoughts. Just before Lovey and Tensey put down their wash cloths, Rachel blinked and, realizing what she was doing, snapped back to reality by saying, “That soap smells bitey, don't it?”

“I was naming that to myself a time ago,” said Lovey. “Some sweetened store-bought soap would have been fitten to use, don't you know?”

“'Specially on such beauteous skin as this child has,” said Rachel, pulling back the folds of the sheet so the women could wash Vergie's mid-section.

In contrast to the repulsiveness of the neck, the remainder of Vergie's body was comely. Even though lifeless now for several hours, that body radiated a luster and shine. It was as though unspent energy lay vibrating just beneath the surface of the skin. The long sweep of her porcelain-like limbs appeared almost luminous outlined against the ecru sheet. An almost imperceptible tinge of blue pin-striped the arms and legs. Where the slight curvature of the knees mounded, no hint of knobs or bones could be seen. Nor was there a spot, blemish or birthmark anywhere. Only the dark brown downiness of the patch of pubic hair, her deeply sunken navel and the pink nipples of her still small breasts distracted from the loveliness of that skin. Her tapered waist yielded to the sculptured curves of her child-like hips.

The exposure of the child embarrassed the women. It was as much her beauty as her nakedness that made each of them uneasy. As though she could remove some of the awkwardness by placing part of the sheet around Vergie, Rachel tugged at the side of the cloth nearest her and draped it around Vergie's shoulder and left breast. Tensey opened her wash cloth to its full width and, placing her entire hand over it, eased it lightly over Vergie's abdomen. As in most things, Tensey and Rachel deferred to Lovey, expecting her now to perform the most intimate part of the laying out, the washing of the breasts and the pubic area. Without faltering, Lovey set about the ablution. With her damp cloth freshly wrung out, she quickly, almost reverentially, bathed each breast with a gentle massaging motion. Then, she spread a towel across the chest and patted the skin dry. Outside, more voices could be heard. More folks were arriving with sympathy and food.

“Do you think we should change the water?” asked Rachel.

“I don't rightly think so. We just have a little piece to go yet,” said Lovey.

“We are going to have to turn the child over, Lovey,” said Tensey.

“Of course we are, Sister. But this child is as clean as a raindrop in a well. A body could almost drink this water.”

“Why Lovey Ridenour! Search a thing to say!” Tensey was shocked.

“Now, Tensey, don't be getting on a galloping horse. I didn't mean nothing by it a'tall, only to say how pure the child is. I never knowed such a child as her. Of course, I wouldn't dream of drinking that water. If I was her mother, how some over though, I'd drink a full jug of whiskey. Deed I would.”

Her two friends looked at her as though she had burst a blood vessel.

Lovey straightened up and, with one hand on the small of her back, stretched. Somewhere one of her joints cracked. “Afore we turn her, let me cleanse her private parts.”

Lovey picked up her wash cloth with one hand and placed the other one just inside Vergie's knee. Tensey did the same. Then, ever so gently, the two women pulled on the knees to separate the girl's legs. When they were about a foot apart at the knees, the women gingerly bathed the inside of the thighs. Abruptly, Lovey stopped.

“Lord have mercy” she exclaimed. “Look there!”

She pointed to the upper part of Vergie's inner thigh. Rachel and Tensey bent forward to look. Two purplish-blue marks, much lighter than the colors in the neck, tinted the skin about five inches below Vergie's vagina. Had the smudges not been so delicate, they might have been mistaken for tattooed aster petals.

“Is that the pizen of the snake spreading through the body?” asked Tensey, her voice quivering slightly.

“It's pizen all right, but I mistrust it's the snake's,” replied Lovey.

Tensey looked up. “Why, what do you mean? What kind of pizen could it be? I don't understand.”

“I don't neither, but these ain't natural marks.” Lovey ran two of her fingers lightly over the imprint. Then, slowly she edged her fingers farther up inside the thigh.

Rachel hissed. “Lovey, what are you a'doin'? Stop right now! That ain't fitten!”

“Rachel's right, Lovey. Neither fitten nor proper, said Tensey.

“Well, we're about to warsh there, so's I can't see what difference it makes.”

“It makes a mountain of difference to me. It's hard enough on a body to be a'doin' this, let alone a'pryin' into...into...well, you know what,” said Rachel almost in tears.

“Hhhmmmppphhhh.” Lovey stood up straight.

“Maybe it's the mark of Cain,” said Rachel, pointing to one of the purple spots. “Even the child was a sinner.”

“Mebbe she hurt herself,” said Lovey in a strong voice. “Well, whatever 'tis, it's no matter to the child now. Nor to us, bless her heart.”

The woman rinsed out her cloth, swept it up the right thigh, across the pubic area with a swirling motion, and down the left thigh. Rachel followed with a towel. Then, Lovey laid her cloth down and wiped her hands with a downward motion on the sides of her apron.

“Now,” she said, “I'll hold Vergie on this side while the two of your ward her.”

Placing her hands on Vergie's shoulders and hips, Lovey tugged on the body until half of the girl's posterior was off the bed. Tensey and Rachel worked quickly, washing and drying. Just as the trio lowered Vergie to the bed, C-R-A-A-C-C-K. Clatter. Tingle.

The glass in the upper half of the window crashed to the floor. Rachel and Lovey screamed and threw their arms around each other. Tensey covered her mouth with the wash cloth she held.

“What, what was that?” someone said as the door opened and in rushed Hiram, Job, Fatty and two women. Several others crowded in the doorway, craning their necks to see what had happened.

Lovey's face was as white as the cornstarch she had spilled.

“They've shot us again.” Her voice quivered. She looked at Job.

“Again? They? What do you mean?” he said.

“This morning', earlier at Cletis's. There was a shot. A body tried to shoot at us. I just know so. Now it's happened again.” A murmur went through those gathered in the room.

A woman spoke. “One of you cover that child, hear now?”

From opposite sides of the bed, Lovey and Tensey grabbed at the sheet, each pulling it toward her. Realizing what was happening, they quickly folded the covering over Vergie. Hiram stood still, a dazed look glazing his face.

With his foot Job parted the fragments of broken glass on the floor. He gazed up at the window. “No doubt about it. Something' broke, this here glass. When you womenfolks is done in here, we'll look around closer. But we'll have a look outside. I don't reckon it was a bullet, so you ladies can settle yourselfs. More likely some of the young'uns got carried away. Them washtubs hanging' out there's a likely target. Now don't worry none.” Job opened his arm to shepherd the others out.

When everyone had left, Lovey said to herself more than to her companions, “What's to become of it? What's to become of it all? And where was this child's mother just now?”

The women finished their task by dusting Vergie's body with cornstarch. Then from a rickety clothes press behind her, Lovey took a white dress, plain except for a strip of eggshell-colored gros grain laced through the end of the long sleeves. Shaking the dress with two dull snapping sounds that reminded the women of the broken window, Lovey held it up, looked at it, then peered at Vergie. Without looking at her companions, she nodded toward the body on the bed and stepped over to it. Even with three women, putting the dress on Vergie was difficult. The most taxing part was getting the dress down her arms and over her head. At one point, Lovey feared they would have to slit the back and then stitch it up again. But, after pulling and tugging, lifting and turning, ever conscious of the neck and the stiffness of the body, they were able at last to clothe Vergie in the dress.

“I never asked afore now, but who's a'makin' the coffin?” said Rachel. She had just finished brushing Vergie's hair once more.

“Why, Uncle Pappy, I warrant,” said Lovey.

“Wonder why he haint been here to measure the child for it?” Rachel said.

“Because he's got the best eye in the world for sizing. He don't need to be here. He could make coffins for all of us with nary a measurement,” said Lovey.

“Hesh, Lovey, or you'll cast a spell on us a'talkln' loose-like about death,” said Tensey, shocked for the second time by her friend's words.

“If you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, you don't believe in spells, Sister,” said Lovey.

“Women, women. Remember the child,” said Rachel. “She is ready.”

The women paused, their lamentable task completed, to look at the body. Vergie was beautiful. Her auburn hair glistened as it curved about the contours of her face and then rested lightly against her neck. The hair and upturned collar of the dress hid the neck's disfiguration. Her small bosom rose slightly above the hands folded just over her tiny waist. A homespun blanket, timeworn in spots, covered her from the waist down. Against the bold patches of colors and the curleyques of the stitched names on the guilt on which she lay, Vergie looked as though she were sleeping in a meadow filled with wildflowers.

Gathering up their basins and cloths, the women started to leave the room. Lovey, though, stopped, turned around and bent to kiss Vergie. Then, from the bed table, she picked up the ragged paper bag she had put there earlier and went out.

CHAPTER 9

Earlier that morning, as Lovey left Cletis standing at a fork in the road near Rachel's house, he stood watching the path she had taken. Long after she passed from view, he gazed in her direction. He was not feeling as confident as he had before Lovey's arrival. Something disquieted him. It was not the shot; that had scarcely bothered him. Anyone seeing his face would have been able to sense the agitation, yet anyone knowing him would not have dared to ask what troubled him. Very few persons, the possible exception being Lovey, would have the temerity to ask Cletis personal questions, other than the perfunctory ones like “How are you?” or “What did you think of yesterday's hailstorm?” In all matters that counted, meaning those things of the spiritual life, he had the answers--or at least the reputation of having the answers. Rarely, though, would he supply answers to questions; most of the time he responded to a question with a question. It was his protection against being put on the spot. It was his shield against anyone's finding out what little he really did know. When he rehearsed what he could say with authority and confidence, he had no equal, certainly none among the people in the valley. Since he prepared his own scripts, for use in the church as well as outside it, he was able to take charge over people whose simplicity made them vulnerable to him.

His voice was his greatest asset. It had been since he was 13 years old. Literally overnight it had turned from a tentative huskiness to a man's full resonance. No transitional period of squeaks, cracks and embarrassed surprised for Cletis. Almost immediately, it had set him apart from everyone. Boys made fun of him, while adults hearing the unusual timbre of the voice, turned around to discover its source. Cletis made the best of it, particularly while he was still in school. Certainly he had remained in school longer than most boys his age because of his voice. His teacher in the one-room school would ask him occasionally to call the children to order since his powerful voice could be projected with ease over the din of the screeches and whoops of recess. Then, since she had remembered her own elocution classes in the Normal School, she had encouraged Cletis to declaim to her and his classmates many of the poems and stories they were reading. She had given him private instruction, in a very limited way, in some basic principles of oratory. But, like all the young men in the hills, he was needed to work and eventually had to drop out of school. What taste he had had, though, of standing before the class never-left him; he yearned for an audience which would respond to what he was saying to them. More than that, he wanted an audience to respond to him, to Cletis Chidester.

His voice matured very little during his teen years. It could not have, for there was scarcely anywhere for it to develop. By the age of 15, as even today, the voice resembled a double bassoon. Its range was extraordinary, the tones of individual syllables complementing each other in surprising ways. Cletis did not need to sing, so mellifluous and pleasant was the voice he used in everyday conversation and in the pulpit. Had he the opportunity, he might have been a great actor upon the world stage. But the harshness of life in the hills and its almost infinite limitations had shrunk Cletis's existence to a tiny, white-washed church in West Virginia. Its pulpit was his stage; its members his audience. He was its chief actor, producer, director and designer.

Farming or, more aptly, grubbing at farming was not for Cletis Chidester, no matter how necessary it might have been for him just to have food in his stomach. The earth's yield never matched man's collosal output. Thinned, exhausted, deprived of life-sustaining nutrients, the soil extracted more than just toil from the men who tilled it. What was supposed to be so life-giving was more life-taking. Generations of hill folk had spent their spirit as well as their labor, and as the rocky ground was handed down from fathers to sons, despair and discouragement were as much their legacy as was the deed to the property. Cletis's father, never strong after a childhood bout with tuberculosis, was defeated before even wrestling with the corn, hay and beans which he tried to grow working alongside his father. Both men had died within a year of each other; both had been crushed by the farm.

Cletis's Uncle Yoke, his father's only brother, took over. He was only as understanding as an ignorant hill farmer could be when it came to education, and he forced Cletis to quit school in the ninth grade. Learning, Yoke thought, was good for little ones and especially for girls, but a boy past 11 or 12 was only wasting time going to school. With three grown women and seven children to feed, the man needed help; with a strapping boy possessing a man's powerful voice under the family roof, that help was ripe for the taking. But Cletis had other ideas. No farm for him. His voice was going to take him out of the hills and into the world. He had not reckoned, though, with the immediate world of his uncle whose actions simply were no match for the boy's voice, however persuasive it might be in other circumstances.

When Cletis disobeyed Yoke's orders about not going back to school, he found himself face to face with his uncle who had followed him there one day. Standing in front of the class, Yoke quietly asked the teacher for her switch. Not knowing what else to do, she had complied.

In a calm voice, Yoke ordered Cletis to come up front. “Now, boy, when you're told to do somethin', you'll do it--and without, sech tom-foolishness. Bend over!”

Cletis did as he was bid, and he, the oldest and largest boy in the school, he whose voice had dominated his adolescent world, was whipped as hard as his lean, but strong uncle could thrash with his right hand. The other children watched, more in awe than in fear. Some of them winced when the switch whistled in its flight between lashes, yet Cletis never flinched. His face, red as a tomato from the blood rushing downward in his bent-over position, remained impassive. When Yoke told the boy to straighten up and get to work, Cletis jerked himself into an upright position, flashed his uncle a look of hatred and bolted out of the one-room building.

By the time Yoke himself left the school, Cletis was nearly out of sight on the path leading in the direction of the farm. He went directly there and set about digging potatoes. From that day, he never spoke to Yoke except in front of his mother, and his uncle never spoke to him except to give him orders.

For a little over a year, through another season of planting and one of harvesting, Cletis, sullen and defiant, worked unceasingly. He fashioned 11-feet long rails for fencing; he burnt brush and rolled logs to prepare the fields for planting corn; he built pits for the winter storage of apples and potatoes; he cut ripened corn and stacked it in shocks, 64 hills to a shock; he butchered hogs and split their bodies from tail to chin. Had the whipping not hung over the two of them, uncle and nephew, like a disease, the older man would have counted himself blessed with the perfect farmhand. Neighbors commented on the boy's industriousness, yet Yoke never acknowledged their words of praise. Even though everyone knew of the bad blood between the two, many thought Cletis had “learned his lesson” and was turning out to be cut in the same image as his grandpappy and father. His silence was taken as obedience, respect for his uncle's authority.

The silence for Cletis, though, was bitterly painful, for it meant that his dazzling voice was stilled. He could no longer see its effect on people; he could not feel the tug of magnetism when the two octaves of his voice floated in resonant cadences in the air around him. The curious thing, however, was that the silence was self-imposed. It had begun out of embarrassment and anger. Returning to the farm after being whipped, he at first dreaded facing his uncle, of looking into the eyes of the one who had humiliated him in front of his classmates. But, far worse than that, Yoke had stripped him of his position in the school. And the worst thing was that Cletis had had to stand before his uncle without uttering a syllable. That voice which had held his friends and peers spellbound had not spoken a single word in his own defense. It, as now, remained silent. A whipped pup would have whimpered and eventually come slinking to its master. But not Cletis. He was mute, except when obliged to respond to Yoke, sometimes in front of other members of his family, only rarely when he was alone with his uncle.

One day while they were stacking hay in the barn, Cletis standing on a raised platform about three feet above Yoke, his uncle said, “Clete, you been spending a lot of time in the woods, boy. Where d'you go?” Yoke snatched at a piece of straw that was stuck in his hair and tickling his right ear.

“Go for walks,” said Cletis after a while.

“Sure you ain't a'seein' some gal?” his uncle said, almost whimsically.

“Go for walks,” Cletis replied in an even lower voice than before. He heaved another bale of hay up to his uncle without looking at him.

“Now, you sure there ain't some little honey up or down the holler a'catchin' your eye?”

Cletis did not answer him. For a time they both remained quiet, passing the wire-tied bundles between them, pausing to wipe perspiration away or to remove a threatening wisp of hay from about the face. Yoke tried again.

“When I was your age, I was already a'sparkin' your Aunt Ercie. Ever time I could sneak away from here, I'd go a 'sniffin' after her. Her a a a 'lookin' the other way. She had a far off, next-county look in her green eyes. What color eyes you be a 'lookin' into, boy?”

Still Cletis said nothing. He had barely heard the sound of his uncle's voice; the works had made no impression. Had Cletis been looking at Yoke, he would have seen the hurt that veiled the simple man's eyes. Each time that Yoke made such overtures, Cletis acted in the same way. Stubborness, ornery stubborness, just like every man in this family, thought Yoke.

Cletis had indeed been spending time, all the time he could find, in the woods. On a couple of nights he had even slept there, what little sleep he had finally taken. Daily, his waking thoughts hovered over the little spot, about a mile from his house, where he had laid out a rectangular frame of old wood and covered it with pieces of rusting screen and mangled chicken wire. As ardently as other boys pursued girls, the way Yoke had with Ercie, Cletis was drawn to his primitive construction. For in it lay his ever-growing collection of snakes.

Black snakes, garden snakes, queen snakes, smooth earth snakes, copperheads and rattlers, twenty-three in all, Cletis had collected in less than a year's time. Separating each species by enclosing them in a corridor of their own within the pen, Cletis had fashioned a maze of rather striking proportions. If it had been viewed from the top of the highest surrounding trees, it would have resembled a cut-away view of a fun house at a carnival. Sometimes the snakes would appear as part of the wooden framework, yet whenever they moved, the entire pattern changed. So that he could feed them more easily, Cletis had cut tiny three-sided doors into each of the sections. By untying the twine, string or rag that held each door fastened to a piece of grape vine, he could drop food directly into a cordoned off area of the pen. Since the screen or wire was pulled tightly over each section and nailed to the upright boards forming the framework, the snakes could not slide from area to area. Nor could they get out of the pen. Cletis had lugged rocks and boulders to the area so that the reptiles would have places to hide as well as to sun themselves. Not that they would be able to get much sun since the clearing was so deep in the forest that only for a couple of hours a day did sunlight filter through the trees. The spruce trees standing about appeared diseased since all of the lower branches were dead, but this was nature's way of saving energy for the branches up high, branches which were lush and vibrant with green.

Cletis loathed snakes. He feared snakes. He had no understanding whatsoever of them. Yet he was drawn to them as maggots to carrion. As with nearly everyone, he was fascinated and repelled, hypnotized and horrified by the reptiles. He could almost feel sorry for them, these creatures without arms or legs; yet, in the same second, he wanted to smash them with a rock. Having always heard they never closed their eyes, he wanted to keep them under the closest survellance with his own his own eyes just to disprove the idea. He never did. Though he spent hours and hours in a near trance watching the snakes, keeping them in view for any length of time was difficult. Either they would disappear from sight into the rocks and timber Cletis had put in the pen or Cletis himself, bone-tired from his work and caressed by the sun, would nod, jerk, nod and fall into sleep. In a sense, the snakes outwitted him, for every time he watched, he fell asleep. The snakes kept their eternal vigil, eyes unblinking and unmoving. Later, with another series of jerks and nods, Cletis would awaken, at first scarcely aware that he had been sleeping; then he was angry with himself for having done so.

He began to fight his fatigue and the anesthetic effect of the sun. He would tighten his abdominal and neck muscles as if to squeeze out any softness or laziness that could spread throughout his body. He would widen and narrow his eyes almost without arching his eyebrows, fearful that even such slight movement might scare the snakes. When clumps of tiredness threatened to weigh him down, he willed them away. He had begun to refer to the weariness as Satan, for he had always been intrigued by a Bible verse his mother often used, “Get thee behind me, Satan.” He would form the words silently in the back of his throat and hurl them at the tiredness with little spurts of nasal exhalations. Soon, it became a ritual, Cletis repeating the sentence very slowly and methodically, though never mechanically, three times. Meanwhile, his concentration on the snakes tightened.

Outside of his daily passing relationship with his family, the boy's only companions and associates were the snakes. He had no friends, male or female. He spoke to no one unless spoken to. Nor did he speak to the snakes. His voice, in which music and power lay expectant, had almost shriveled within him. Yet his thoughts had not; they were snake-rich. Converging on the snakes he had collected, those notions darted in and around and beyond the reptiles, emerging finally as fantasies and pipe dreams.

Black snakes, yellow timbers, garters, copperheads--all fed Cletis's imagination; they became the classroom he had ben forced to leave so painfully; they became his teachers, his books. Their coloring enhanced his definition of beauty as their reds, blues, greens, yellows, olives, blacks and browns blended into a kaleidoscopic praise to the riches of nature. Their silent slinking and darting offered him new dimensions for the concepts of sound and movement.

Not all of his time, however, could be spent watching snakes and dreaming about them. He had to feed them. Captive, they could not forage for themselves. So whenever he could, Cletis trapped and captured rats, mice, frogs, caterpillars, cicada, snails, earthworms, bats and, occasionally, chipmunks and baby squirrels. Whatever the snakes were fed, they ate whole.

The first time he watched a corn snake consume a rat in its entirety, his own stomach quaked as though the rodent had found its way there. Cletis knew then that he would himself need to eat the meat of a snake someday. Why he felt he had to do it he did not yet know; he sensed a hunger gnawing at his mind. He did not know whether it could be satisfied by eating part of a snake, but he knew--he knew as he had never known anything before--that he must eat of the snake. Yet he had scarcely touched any of the reptiles. When he had caught some of the smaller black or garden snakes, he had picked them up quickly and put them in a burlap bag. Always and unconsciously he had wiped his hands on his coveralls immediately afterward--as though to remove any residual traces of the ancient curse. The more dangerous snakes he had picked up with forked hickory sticks. Each time that he did so, he felt compelled to throw away the stick and use his hands; at the same time, however, he was paralyzed at the thought of touching them. More and more the feeling grew that not only must he pick them up but must also hold them, perhaps even befriend them. But first he needed to know as much as he could about snakes. He would go and pay a visit to old Lemuel Poling.

Lemuel Poling may have invented the saying “old as the hills.” For he was a very old man. Some folks even thought he had built the hills around the valley. As though to oversee his creation, he lived at the top of the highest one, named Poling for his family, where most of the time he sat hunched over, forever looking at the floor, awaiting any visitor, since he loved to talk. And, if anyone knew about snakes, Lemuel Poling did.

On a crisp November Sunday afternoon, after the noon meal, Cletis set out to pay a visit to the old man. Most of the trees, stripped of their foliage, had not yet taken on the dull harshness which was their winter dress. Now and then, a well-protected maple tree, still clothed in most of its reddish-gold trapping, rustled in its fragility and pulled the afternoon sun directly to it. Together, leaves and sun shared gold with the Appalachian world. In contrast, the lustrous dark green of the spruce seemed to be recalling summer from it weeks'-long departure

Lemuel welcomed Cletis happily. “Knowed all the Chiddy-sters as long as they wuz in these parts. Lez'see, now, you'd be whose young'un?”

“Delmar and Idaene's,” said Cletis.

“That's right, boy. Now is hit your ma or pa what's dead? I know one of them is, but I forgot which'un.”

“My pa,” Cletis answered. “He died a spell ago.”

“Whatcha a'cornin' here fur?”

“Some of your learning brings me here, Mister Poling. I'd like to know about snakes.”

“Lordgodamighty, snakes! Most folks gets along better outen such learning. What's a'provokin' you 'bout snakes? Wonderful critters, snakes, wonderful. But bruisers of the heel they be. It's part of the curse put down in the Garden, you know. But we be head bruisers. Can step right on the critter's head. If we seen him, that is.”

“Yes, sir, I know them parts about snakes. What I want to know is, is...well, that is....” Suddenly, for some unclear reason, Cletis was not sure he wanted to go on with the interview. He had already talked longer than he had for months.

“Well, out with it, boy! You want to know what?”

“I want to know if I can be learned to be friends-like with them,” Cletis said quickly.

“Son, who put such damnfool notions in your head? Snakes is man's nat'rel enemy. 'Pears to me makin' friends with them is contrary to God, but then I ain't seen nuthin' in nature that in some way or t'other can't be bridled, lessen it's lightning storms and the mighty wind. I've heerd tell of earthquakes but none in these parts, so I guess that won't count. Why, I remember a storm down in Pokey-haunt is....”

Cletis knew that Poling was beginning to drift away from snakes, and while the boy was reluctant to interrupt the old man, he was determined to find out as much as he could. “Where do snakes go in a storm?” he asked.

“Why, depends on the snake,” Poling replied, unaware that he had been interrupted. “Some goes under rocks, some goes in tree bark, some in the water. Why, you should know that, boy.”

“Another thing, did'you ever eat snake meat?”

“Lordy, I guess I did. There hain't much I ain't et, boy. You take them di'mund back rattlers. I've saw them as long as eight foot, and as big around as the leg of a full-growed man. I'd say my leg, but hit's so thin you could almost thread it. Now, onect I was a'workin' in a loggin' camp on the Peace River with a passel of men. We wuz as low as ever we wuz on vittles. But there wuz as many snakes around as there wuz trees.”

A high-pitched bark followed by a lower moaning “aaaahhhoooo” interrupted Lemuel. He turned his head toward the door of his cabin and then looked back at Cletis. “Now where was I?”

“You were telling me about snakes being plentiful in the logging camp.”

“Plentiful? They wuz multiplyin' like rabbits, 'peared to all of us. And our vittles was disapperin' like jack rabbits into a snake's belly--iffen he has one.”

“A snake can eat a rabbit?” Cletis's voice rose.

“You didn't know that, boy? For sartin, for sartin. Why, they'll...”

From outside came another bark and another moan. This time the “ooooooo” seemed to ring across the valley.

“Dang that coon pup. You'd a think we wuz a'talkin' 'bout him. Unlatch the door and welcome him in, boy, I thank'ee.”

Slightly annoyed because of this further intrusion, Cletis sprang up from the stool he was sitting on and pulled open the door. A streak of brown and white shot into the room and ran in circles around Lemuel in his rocker. When Cletis sat back down, the dog ran around him-and then, alternately, around Lemuel. The old man, with a movement surprisingly deft for his age, kicked his foot outward, caught the dog under its belly and lifted it, balanced like a pair of weighted scales, into the air. “Coon Pie, stop!” he shouted, lowering the dog back down. Coon Pie, his tail and ears drooping, paddled across the room and disappeared head first under the bed.

“Dang pup! Now, what wuz I a'sayin'?”

“About them snakes that'll eat a rabbit,” said Cletis.

“Yes, siree. They kin do it quick as a flea jumpin' off a weed monkey. Mebbe not that quick seein' that, you kin set and watch. They's other things a body ought to know 'bout snakes. 'Pecially what my great-grandpappy a'tole me. He set me to watchin' how corn is related to snakes. Hain't you ever saw a tender baby corn plant? Look at it one day to see how it likens itself to a snake. After hit comes up 'bout this high,”--Lemuel held up his thumb and index finger forming a letter “C” about an inch and a half apart---”the tips split apart like in the fashion of the serpent's tongue. Then when the stalk's full growed, them tops droops down like a snake's tail.”

Cletis sat spellbound, each syllable of the old man's narrative building yet another word that endowed snakes with a mystery far greater than the boy could have guessed. Outside the long quivering shadows of evening settled over the cabin and crept into the windows.

“Don't stop, sir. Please, please, tell me more,” said Cletis, sounding more live a seven year-old instead of a 17 year-old.

“Well, then, boy, there's the corn hitself. Them kernels on the ear, whey, they pertinear match up to the marks on that granpappy snake, on the rattler. Scales, I reckon they call it. Wouldn't surprise me none iffen there's some connection in creation of the two. 'Spect 'tis something that will be revealed in the latter days.”

“What do you reckon it is?” said Cletis.

“Iffen I'se to know that,” replied Lemuel, “I reckon as how I'd be God A'mighty, boy! Yet and still, there do be somethin' else I can tell you 'bout them critter snakes, but I don't know that I oughten to.”

“Tell me anything you can, sir. I want to know everything there is to know on this green earth about snakes.” Cletis could hardly sit still.

“Well, don't know as I oughten. It's a gettin' dark. They's lamps to be lit and wood fetched.”

Cletis offered to do chores: cut wood, carry water, fix supper, feed Coon Pie--anything just so Lemuel would go on talking about snakes. Though the roan refused all these suggestions, he clearly had something on his mind.

“Well, son,” Lemuel paused. “Well, you're closer to knowin' about snakes than you might fancy.” The old man's hands fell into his lap.

“How is that?”

“Men has snakes. Both of us has 'em. Right between our legs. Some calls 'em a third leg, but they's snakes as sure as you're a'settin' in front of me.”

Cletis squirmed in his seat. He could feel the blood filling his cheeks. Something suddenly sucked all the air out of the cabin. Here was a man, an adult, talking to him in a way no other person ever had. These were grown-up matters. These were closed-door, almost closed-mouth notions. And, think of it, here was old Lemuel Poling, seated less than a foot away from him, talking to him as a man. Cletis did not know what to say.

Lemuel's husky voice eased into the silence. “Why, I 'spect you've seen your snake grow more and more lately. Just like a lit'l garden snake grows, ain't it?”

“Uh, yes sir, I reckon so.” I, I, I...” Whew, it's so hot in here, he thought.

“Why don't you picture it for me? Tell me how it's like a snake.”

“I never thought much on it, Mr. Poling. I was dependin' on you revealing snake things to me.” Cletis jumped as Coon Pie rolled out from under the bed.

“Waal, likely, I could best point them out iffen I was to see your snake. I could prophecy the years of your life by a'lookin' at your snake skin.” Lemuel rocked back and forth.

“I never heard tell of nothin' like that--ever!” The boy leaned forward in his chair. “Is one of the powers of the snake akin to something like fortune telling?”

“Jest so, jest so,” said Lemuel, nodding his head. “My snake thing foretelled right. Nobody's older than me that I know tell of. Well, now, boy, quicken it up. Show me your snake.”

Cletis did not know what to do. Nobody had ever said anything about his penis before. But, instinctively, he knew this was a realm of life which held the greatest mystery. Just the wonder of erection held him spellbound. How could a piece of soft, floppy skin turn into a rock hard stick in a matter of seconds. Snakes, as far as he knew, couldn't turn hard. Maybe now, with Lemuel Poling, he was on the threshold of understanding what folks whispering about as sex. Perspiring, he stood up.

“How, how do I do it?” Cletis said.

“Do it, you jest do it!. Taint nothin' to it. Jest do it.” Lemuel, his neck stretched, gazed at the boy's belt. He had ceased rocking.

Cletis fumbled with his tarnished belt buckle, the clasp not yielding to the boy's tug. Looking down, he found that the fastener had caught in a loop of his pants rather than in the eyelet of the belt. Drawing in his abdomen as far as he could, he released the catch.

Lemuel's eyes never wavered from the boy's crotch. He had almost stopped breathing as Cletis's thin fingers loosened the five buttons on his fly to reveal the white patch of his underwear.

Pulling down on his shorts, Cletis stood with his penis and scrotum hanging before the old man. The boy stared at the floor.

“Come closer, boy. My eyes ain't what they once was.”

Cletis waddled two steps toward Lemuel's chair.

“Hhhhhhhhmmmmmmm. Hain't much there but skin. Howsomever, that there skin a'hangin' out there in front aforetells a smartness of time ahead of you. How much I ain't a'fixin' to say 'til I see the snake grow. Make it grow, boy, make it grow.”

The impatience in Poling's voice caused Cletis to look at him. As he did, Poling reached out and grabbed Cletis's organ. The boy jumped but couldn't move.

“What are you doing? No one's ever touched that before. What are you doing?”

“Hold still, so's I can read the snake signs.” Lemuel pushed the foreskin of the penis back as far as it could go. The shiny red head glistened. “Make it grow. Make it push outen its skin itself.”

“No, I can't. It won't! Let me go!” Cletis yanked away with a backward swivel. Straightening up, he lost his balance, caught it, wavered, and then stood. He reached down and grabbed his shorts and pants, pulling them both up on him at the same time. Lemuel slumped back into his chair. He finally spoke.

“Hold your horses, boy. Nothin's a'hurtin' here. What's wrong?”

“That's not something that has to do with snakes. That's some tom-foolishness I don't want to have nothin' to do with. I'll be a'settin' off now.” Cletis moved toward the door.

“Hold on there, boy. Now don't be a'leavin' in a fret. I want you to have something of mine. Poling moved slowly to the northeast corner of the room. Bending over, he rummaged about and picked up a large object. As he walked toward Cletis, he attempted a smile.

“This here's my leaf collection. Started it when I was 'bout your age. Worked on it all my life. There's a preservated leaf for every tree, shrub, bush, flower, plant, weed in this county. They's all labeled. Lookee here.” He opened a wood-covered packet which contained hundred of pages. Cletis could see veins on the leaves.

“I'm sorry, sir. I can't take that. It wouldn't be proper. No, no, thank you.”

“Thunderation, why not? It'll just be throwed out when I'm sure enuf dead.”

“My ma would just make me fetch it back if I took it. No, sir, I can't.”

Lemuel, holding the leaf book, dropped into his rocker He leaned his head back, resting it on a soiled pillow tied onto the top of his chair. He closed his eyes. “Tell your ma she's raised a cracker, boy.”

“Yes, sir--and thank you, Mr. Poling,” said Cletis.

“No thanks took for jut passin' on learnin' that's all around us for the takin', son,” said the old man. “Good night, now. Mebbe you'd best not let on to anyone you wuz here. We'll jest keep this here visit 'twixt you and me now.”

“Good night--and, uh, well, good night.” Cletis let himself out of the house and headed down the trail which would take him back to the farm.

From that day on, Cletis changed. He knew it--and why others noticed the change but not the reason why. The boy insisted on helping his mother carry water for washing clothes. Wanting to assist the children with their school work, he read to them each evening; they loved hearing him make their books come alive. He began talking frequently this mother, aunt, cousins and, particularly, to his uncle. Yoke was flabbergasted when his nephew suggested that they double the corn crop in the spring. Since Cletis promised everything except “cross the heart and hope to die” to assure the burden of the extra work would be his, Yoke said he would “study on it” and let Cletis know. The man was even more certain now that the boy was sparking some gal in the neighboring valley. What other explanation could there be for his happy frame of mind and his prolonged absences from the farm. The thing that impressed Yoke was that instead of neglecting work or trying to get out of it, Cletis actually did more and more--and still often looked for more.

No one knew of the snake collection. True, nearly everyone in the family had observed Cletis's catching snakes of one kind or another, but they just assumed that he had taken each of them somewhere and killed it or let it go. Had anyone known he was penning them up, it would have made little difference one way or another. The women in the family would have shivered with something akin to disgust; the children would have thought him only a bit stranger than they already regarded him; and Yoke would have chided Cletis for wasting time on such silliness. If the snakes did not feed or clothe a family or keep a body warm, then they were pure foolishness.

During the winter when the snakes went into hibernation, Cletis was deprived of his near-daily routine of keeping them under close observation. He, nevertheless, was absorbed in them. He was building himself up to be able to handle the reptiles and to taste their meat in the spring. He practiced holding a snake, a copperhead--a homemade one. Whenever in the pen or in the woods he found a snake skin, discarded by the annual shedding ritual, he would save it. One of the best specimens he had was of a copperhead, rusty brown and red with nearly all its scales intact. To try and keep the skin from drying out too much, he had, from time to time, coated and rubbed it with lard. When it was somewhat malleable, he stuffed it with tufts of cat-o-nine tails, tearing each one apart to get just the right amount of padding to fill in any gaps. Then he took a piece of muslin that he begged from his mother. Cutting it in strips, he crudely sewed them together to form a liner to hold the cat-o-nine stuffing in the snake. This done, he bound the snake with thin strands, almost threads of the muslin. The result was a slightly lumpy, roughly scaly replica of a copperhead. This he would imagine to be alive--and deadly.

“Snake, snake, you are my friend. Peace, peace, peace to you. I won't hurt you. You won't hurt me. I am your friend. You are my friend. Snake, snake, we are friends,” he said very quietly, all the while running the palms of his hands over the snake while holding it across the lap, his legs spread wide apart. Still intoning a similar litany, he would place his forearms under the snake--one arm about three-quarters of a foot from the head, the other the same distance from the tail--and carefully stand up. Then he would practice slowly lifting the creature up and then lowering it, all the while whispering, “Snake, snake, you are my friend.”

After several days of this, he draped the carcass about, his neck, letting the sides dangle down past his waist. He wanted to have the head and tail encircle each of his wrists, but the stuffed skin was not flexible enough to do that.

“Oh, snake, beautiful snake. Beautiful copperhead. You are safe. I am safe. We are safe. Rest. Rest,” Cletis intoned.

He had to keep his voice low lest anyone hear him and begin asking questions or sneaking up on him. He was eager for good weather to) return so that he could use the full vitality of his voice somewhere out in the open air; he believed he would greater control that way. When he was not practicing with the snake, he hid it in the most remote reaches of a woodpile.

Until he each time, he thought of another visit to old Lemuel Poling, to try to learn anything else he could about snakes, he was grupped with fear. He thought of asking the teacher at school if she would “borry a book on snakes from the state liberry,” but the memory of his uncles's beating in front of her and the class was stronger than his desire for the book. Instead, he decided he would go through the Holy Bible to fill all the references there to snakes and serpents.

The first evening he sat in front of the fire reading the Good Book, as so many in the valley called it, no one paid much attention. His mother, aunt and uncle were more surprised at his being there at all than that he was going through the Scriptures.

“Can't tell you how pleased we are to see you settin' there, Cletey,” said his aunt, looking up from a scrap of wool cloth which she was taking apart, thread by thread.

His mother, also unthreading a piece of wool, nodded and winked at his sister-in-law. “It do beat me what's got into that boy. But, Lord, it does make the heart beat happy,” she said.

Uncle Yoke spoke from his chair across the room. “I always knowed deep down this boy was good. Now he cornin' into manhood with that goodness sproutin' forth. Yes, indeed.”

“Why don't you read us a piece from the Scripture, son?” asked his mother.

“It'd pleasure me mightily to hear tell the Twenty-third Psalm myself,” said his aunt. “Somewheres else than buryin', that is. It's a farm piece, not always havin' to be a death piece.”

Since Cletis was not that familiar with the Bible, it took him a few minutes and a slight bit of direction from his mother to find the Book of Psalms. Locating it, he ran the heel of his hand up the inside of the book's spine, cleared his throat and started to read: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.” As he read, he could feel strength returning to his voice and confidence building in his mind. In the flow of words came the rush of power he had felt when standing before his classmates in school.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...” It was almost as though God himself were speaking. The rich resonance of Cletis's voice filled the words and the room as the tones and undertones rang out as harmoniously as if a great musical anthem were being sung.

“And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” Everyone in the room believed it--that each personally would live with the Lord. The only sound in the room when he finished was the crackling of the fire. Both his mother and aunt had ceased their handiwork. Tears, illuminated by the glow of the fire, glistened on his mother's face. Yoke, who earlier had been close to drowsing, was sitting straight up, the traces of a smile on his face, his eyes wide and shining. No one spoke. For the first time, these simple people knew something of what lay in the song of David. The hillsides of Judea were not much different from those of West Virginia. Green pastures, still waters, peaceful valleys--these were also the realms of the Chidesters and their clans. Their inner strength, solid as the rock bed out of which the hills rose, equalled that of ancient herdsmen and kings. While none of them may have been able to define such words as righteousness, mercy or even justice, they lived their lives as illustrations of each. Now here in their own family was a boy/man who had been given a gift, surely one from God, of a magnificent voice. In Yoke's mind were the words of another Psalm; he was thinking of them as a benediction over his nephew's reading “He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass: as showers that water the earth.”

After a few moments, Cletis stood, kissed his mother and aunt. Then, pausing for a moment to look into the fire he turned to shake Yoke's hand and went out into the night.

CHAPTER 10

Despite her initial outburst when she realized Will Horner was approaching her house, Etta's tempestuousness subsided quickly. She would not have refrained from an attack simply because she was outnumbered; such a thing would not even be a consideration with her. She would not have thought about embarrassment in front of neighbors who had come to mourn, for too often she had stood alone in the face of dissension and controversy. Etta held back simply because she was exhausted. She had kept sleep away from her the night before, not because of grief but because her anger with Vergie's lack of faith exploded in little energy bursts all night long. Over and over again the woman doubled her fists at the realization that her daughter did not love Jesus enough to withstand the test of faith. In no way did Etta blame herself; she knew she was tested and triumphant; she knew, too, that she had had the mantle of the gift of speaking in tongues thrown about her shoulders. And so she wondered why Vergie, Etta's own descendant in the faith, could not stand before the world and mean it when she said, “Come, Holy Spirit.” All that had remained of the night after she had gone to bed, she wrestled with the demons of disappointment and rage. Not once did she grieve for the loss of the child herself.

So almost as quickly as Hiram had restrained her from a confrontation with Horner, Etta recoiled. After Lovey and the other women went into Vergie's room, Etta set about putting the kitchen in order. She tucked a blue and white checkered cloth around the uneaten corn bread and put it back into the over. Carrying the dishes to the sink, she then took from the stove the kettle of simmering water and splashed it over the cups and plates. She took a tattered, yellowed rag and with rapid swipes cleaned away the food morsels. Gripping the handle of the pump which stood at attention over the sink, she rinsed the dishes. Just as quickly, she dried them and put them away. As she placed the clean spoons in the holder which sat on the table, she knocked over the container. Spoons of various sizes and patterns clattered to the floor. Etta scooped them up, dusted them cursorily with the dish cloth and put them back into the spoon jar. Then she heard Horner laugh.

Wherever Will Horner was, everyone knew it--by his laughter. Even on somber occasions such as this, the rich peals of his laughter might ring out; it was almost as if today they were the contrapuntal sounds of the earlier church bells tolled for Vergie. In no way was his laughter disrespectful; it was as natural for his personality as voice inflection or cracking knuckles. While he could control the laughter, he could not erase it completely. It was never a nervous laugh but a punctuation mark for his response to life. What Etta heard was Horner's reaction to something the sheriff had told him about Fatty. But minutes later, the talk was about Vergie. Will was standing with Hiram and Job, both of whom sat, backsides drooping over the railing of the porch. Fatty leaned against a nearby post.

Will spoke. “I knew this would happen, by God! I never dreamed it would be Vergie, though. Thought sure it would be one of those fools who had played with the danger all these years. Dammit to hell! This has to be stopped, and stop it I will!”

“They been warned enough, God knows,” said the sheriff.

“Warnings don't mean nothin' to zealots,” said Hiram, turning slightly to look over his shoulder.

“You should put the whole lot of them in jail, starting with Chidester first of all,” said Will, looking at Job.

“Then they'd carry on their foolishness right afore your eyes,” said Hiram.

“Not for a second they wouldn't. I'd turn them snakes into whips and beat the tar outten them,” Job said.

They were interrupted by the arrival of more neighbors. The women carried more covered dishes of food. The menfolk ambled behind their wives. Their greetings to Hiram were similar and sincere: “Cain't know what you must be thinkin', Hiram, but know you can bear up,” said one woman, Lutabell Parkins, as she laid her hand on Hiram's arm. Her head moved from side to side as though still couldn't believe that the child Vergie was dead.

A man whose name Hiram knew as well as he knew Lutabell's but had temporarily forgotten said, “I'm powerful sorrowful, sir. Indeed, the Lord giveth and the Lord taken away, but blessed be the name of the Lord.”

Hiram's neck muscles stiffened, so much so that Horner noticed immediately. The doctor gritted his teeth to keep in the words he would have spoken had the circumstances been any different. This was not the time; besides the words would be wasted. They needed to be saved for more fertile moments. Did these idiots have verses of Scripture for everything, he wondered. Where had their minds gone? Hiram nodded slowly as the man moved away. The nod seemed to have snapped the last twig of strength in Rollins. Beneath his pale skin, he trembled. His mouth and fingers twitched. The green of his eyes dimmed and paled. His breath came in rapid jerks.

“Hiram, I want you to sit over here in this chair,” said Horner as he took his friend by the arm.

Hiram begain to lift his hand in protest, but he dropped it just as feebly as he let himself be escorted away from the railing. Job, sensing what Horner was doing, stood and took Hiram's other arm. Together, the men guided him to the wicker rocking chair. Before easing him into it, Horner flipped back into place the worn cushioned back rest which had blown over the chair top. The rocker practically swallowed the man.

“Job, couldn't Fatty lay his hands on some good whiskey right fast?” asked Will.

Fatty was down the steps before Job could answer. While the men waited, Will looked down at Hiram. Almost as a mother rocked her child, Will moved the rocker back and forth. He welcomed the lump in his throat, for he knew the second it disappeared hot anger would surge through him.

Just then, Fatty leaped upon the porch, an unlabled bottle in his hand the product, no doubts form high in the nearly hills. He handed it to Will, and as he did, Lovey, coming out of the house, noticed what was happening, she went back inside and returned quickly with a cup. Horner's thanks were in his eyes as he looked at her. He poured some of the whiskey into the cup. He held it to Hiram's lips as the latter drank and then nodded his gratitude. Lovey brushed his forehead with the palm of her hand.

“Well, I'd be obliged for a cup of that myself, what with all that's a'goin' on here,” she said.

“You'll be run out of the county, Lovey, but here you are.” Will poured a fingernail's depth of whiskey into the cup and gave it to the woman.

“Will you try to keep any of the visitors away from coming over to Hi for a while? He's just not up to it right now,” said the doctor.

“For certain I will,” she said. Before returning to the other side of the porch, she leaned down and patted Hiram on the hand. Horner reached for the other hand to take his pulse. Satisfied for the moment that Hiram was all right, Will relaxed.

“Job,” he said, “I'm going in to see Etta. You and Fatty keep Hi Company--and keep folks away 'til I get back, if you will.”

“Sure, Will, you can count on us,” said Job.

Horner found Etta in the kitchen sitting at the blue-and-white covered table. A closed Bible, part of it encased in black oil cloth which was peeling to show yellow patches, lay in front of her. She had changed her clothes. Her dress was green, the color of mid-summer leaves, with clusters of faded purple roses in splotches here and there. A slight tapering indicated a waist for the dress while a miniflounce rounded out the skirt. The sleeves were three-quarter length, but Etta had pushed them up above her elbows in an accordion effect. As always, the woman sat with her back as straight as a yardstick. Her hands lay cupped in front of her on the table. Turning her head slightly when Horner came in, she saw who it was and did not speak. He stood just inside the doorway.

“Etta, I'm here to do whatever I can for Hiram and you. But I must examine the child, and I want you to be there when I do it. If you want someone else there also, that's all right, but I want us to do it quickly,” said Horner.

“Leave me be, Will Horner! Leave my house be. You have no business here. I won't even thank you to get out since properness never was nothing you understood. Get out and leave me and mine to Jesus,” said Etta, all the time looking toward a window on the other side of the kitchen.

“You've left too much to Jesus already and you find yourself with a dead daughter. If that's what your religion....” Horner's voice trailed off. The last thing he wanted now was a confrontation with Etta--or anyone--about her religion. Too much of that would likely come later. “It's your dead daughter the law says I must examine. That's the only reason I'm talking to you now.”

Etta said nothing for a few moments. Then, “The only law I have to obey is the law of the prophets and the commandments of Jesus.”

“One of those commandments, I believe, Mrs. Rollins, is 'Thou shalt not kill.'“

“Killin' is what menfolks seem to know more about than anything. Then it 'pears that some men can phrase the Bible without following it. Don't you be blasphemin' in my presence, mister.” For the first time, Etta looked directly at Horner.

“Killing comes in many different forms, in many different ways. You should know that by now, Etta. And as for blasphemy, you need to understand that all kinds exist, including not caring for a child that's a gift from God,” said Horner.

“What do you know of children? You took no wife to your bed. You had no young'uns. Why, I suppose you think birthing babes is what you know of children. Hmmmph, that's woman's work. More women in this country has done that than you. What you know about children and Jesus I could put in a thimble.”

“What I'm trying to get across to you is that children are a mother's responsibility. They are to be protected from all kinds of harm.” Horner plunged his hands into his pockets so that he could easier resist shaking a finger at Etta.

“Don't come here in my kitchen a'talkin' such highfalutin' words as 'responsibility.'“ Etta's voice was rising. I've tolerated the presence of evil long enough. Get out of here I” Etta got up from her seat and, with a wrench, turned it over. Spoons, jars and the Bible spilled to the floor.

Will ignored the outburst. “I'm here with your husband's knowledge and consent, and I can do it with or without your help. You decide. In five minutes, whether you agree or not, I am going to examine Vergie. It would be right and proper for you to be in the room--it might even be considered a loving thing to do--but even if you aren't, I'm still going to look at Vergie.”

“Then I want Cletis there,” Etta said.

“LIKE HELL! You might as well have said the Devil Incarnate!” Horner shouted. He turned and left the room. Etta followed him to the porch.

About two dozen people stood on the porch or in the yard; a few others, including Hiram, sat in chairs. Since all of them had been talking in muted voices, they had heard Will's “Hell” and “Devil Incarnate.” It had burst upon them like a popping firecracker. Now, as he and Etta walked onto the porch, all heads turned to look at them. Will went directly to Lovey.

“Lovey, I'd like you to go with me to examine Vergie. If Hiram is up to it now, I think he might want to go.” A tiny breeze teased stray hairs on people's heads.

Before answering, Lovey looked at Etta who stood behind Will with her arms folded. She gave no sign that she had heard the doctor's request; she gave no indication that Lovey was perhaps seeking permission from her. “Yes, Will, I'll go,” said Lovey.

“I'll go, too,” said Hiram in a far stronger voice than Horner would have imagined possible from what he had observed a few minutes earlier. Pulling himself out of the rocker, the man walked with a sure step over to the others.

“Where is Cletis?” asked Etta.

“He went out to the pasture field a short spell ago,” Said someone from the front yard.

“Go and fetch him, if ye will,” said Etta to whoever might comply. Two men walked toward the back of the house.

“We'll go now,” said Will, and, turning, he spread his hand to shepherd Hiram and Lovey toward the door. As they passed Etta, Hiram paused.

“Won't you go, wife?” he asked.

“In God's time, I will,” she said. She stared into distance.

The others went into the house.

CHAPTER 11

After Cletis and Will had wrestled on the porch, the preacher was surrounded for a few minutes by some of his church members who were among the mourners. Their whispers soothed him. Fortunately, he had been able to talk with Etta long enough to set the time for Vergie's burying. Already she had been dead too long to resist much longer the effects of the summer's heat. Ordinarily a body would have been viewed and buried in the early morning hours which now were slipping by. Noting the delays and smarting from the bout with Horner, Cletis thought that he had time to go into the woods for a while, so he set off at a brisk pace.

The walk through the quiet woodland would be, for most people, some balm to whatever vexed them. Layers of alternating air currents, now warm, now cooler, Crept into the ared settled over the body in undulating stripes. The brow and the ankles might be massaged by pine-cooled wavelets while the rest of the body basked in bands of wavering heat. Venerable oak and maple trees, aged with tenacity and climate, shared their strength with the weary passersby. Their trunks, ringed with centuries of endurance, imparted pride of the mountains. Gentle pods of spongy moss basketed emotional stess, its soothing greenness a blanket of peace. Even the moist underbrush of leaf decay, toadstool tents and burnished pine needles shed softness about. In such a climate of tranquility, animals tarried: squirrels slowed into second gear; scampering rabbits roamed instead of raced; white-tailed does lounged, listening with uncocked ears.

Splintered with agitation, Cletis walked-through the woods with his head down. He was oblivious to everything, s often had he passed down the trail that he could have walked it blindfolded. Not once in all the years he had lived as the preacher in Salt Hollow had he ever stopped to observe the majesty of these woods so intent had he always been on proclaiming his own self-hood. He saw all of nature, save one thing, as general blur of hills, sky and trees, of brown, blue and green or, in winter, brown, gray and white. The one exception, of course, was the snake. And it was to his snakes he was now darting with an almost bird-like hop. So absorbed in himself was he that he paid no attention to the baby red fox lying beside a pokeberry bush.

His head dropped so low that his chin touched his chest. Even when he walked, it scarcely bobbed. Folding his arms across his chest, he appeared to squeeze together all of his strength. The expressions on his face battled one another, mimicking his conflicting thoughts. His left eye as well as the cheek and corner of the lip scrunched into a drawn fleshiness that made him look as though he had suffered a stroke. At the same time, the right side of the face stretched upward. The eyebrow arched, the nostril widened, and the mouth parted slightly. Then, in a breath's intake, everything shifted. His upper teeth clamped down over his lower lip. Anyone observing him would have been mesmerized by this facial circus. It, however, was only a sign of the man's intense concentration.

As if by instinct, he made a sudden left turn into the woods. Brushing aside with both hands some overhanging vines, he ducked his head and went down a path he himself had created. To his knowledge, only two or three other persons had ever gone down it. He walked about a quarter of a mile to a clearing surrounded on all sides by a thicket of pin oak trees. There, sprawled over much of the open meadow and extending into one part of the wooded area, lay Cletis's snake pen.

More rectangular than square, the pen measured roughly sixty feet by nineteen or twenty. It was staked with small wooden posts of varying sizes and finishes positioned about every four feet. Chicken wire and screening stretched in patches from post to post, and their ragged edges and loose wires occasionally jabbed the air. In the center away from the screening. Cletis had piled rocks and boulders together; he had dragged logs, some decayed and hollow, others solid and powerful, from the surrounding woods and let them fall on and around the rocks. With some, he created cool retreats and hiding places for the snakes. In one corner of the pen he heaped a pile of sawdust so that he could cater to the preferences of copperheads. Nearby stood two dead trees, their loose bark a hiding place for ring-necks. In the corner of the pen that reached into the woods, he had made a mulch of fallen leaves, limp cornstalks, hay and grass cuttings. Sometimes, particularly in the hottest of summer days, he would shake the contents of a pail of water over the mulch heap. Had he or anyone else dug into the pile, turning the bottom upward, creatures of earlier evolutionary times would have stirred, so long had Cletis been cultivating the decay and deterioration of the mulch. Limbless burrowers, eyes and ears hidden or non-existent, they constituted life at the bottom of a heap of death.

On the other hand, particularly in the summer, life or the promise of it, embraced the reptile pen. Had Cletis sifted through the pen on a late July day, he would have uncovered hundreds of eggs: the thin-shelled elongated ones of the worm snake, the soft leathery ones of the rater, the hard capsule-like ones of the green snake and the yellowish ones of the ringneck. Some of these eggs would have hatched while others could be expected anytime in the next days or weeks. The squirming, nervous young of the live bearing snakes--the brown, the red-bellied, the common garter--would already be crawling about.

Cletis often wished he could have built the pen with part of a stream running through it so that dampness, a necessity for some species of snakes, could be maintained all the time. But the problems of containment of both water and snakes, as well as intruders, would be too unmanageable. For a time he had kept a washtub submerged in the ground, but it leaked and he could not carry enough water to keep it filled; it drew too many mosquitoes for his comfort in the summer, and, for reasons he never understood, he often found dead birds floating in it. With water and damper conditions, he could have attracted and kept the worm snake, though he knew that, no matter how secretive the tiny critter could be, it could not long stay out of the reaches of the king snake or the milk snake.

The milk snake was unwelcome at the Chidester pen. Cletis had done his very best to keep the species away since they were notorious for eating other snakes. On three different occasions he had himself killed the reddish chocolate brown snakes he found near the pen. He surmised they had been attracted there by the damp mulch and the decaying logs. Usually they kept hidden all day, slipping out of their damp, secret spots at night. Milk snakes had another strike against them; most people in the valley believed that they suckled on cows, milking them dry. Some old-timers claimed that once a cow's supply was completely drained by a snake, she would never give forth another drop of milk. Cletis believed none of that, but he just did not want them around. Though killing any snake was anathema to him, he nevertheless wielded the ax in their direction whenever he saw them. His mission was preservation of snakes, not their destruction, yet in order to maintain his control over his dominion, he had to remove any threats to his kingdom.

Parallel to the mulch pile, partially in the wooded area and partially in the sunlit clearing, were smaller pens cordoned off with wooden sections. These contained the minister's prize snakes, the ones most often used in service. In each of the six partitions was a single snake: two timber rattlers, a copperhead, a corn snake, a common kingsnake and his treasure, a scarlet snake.

The scarlet snake is not native to West Virginia, yet occasionally one ventures into the extreme eastern panhandle of the state. On one of the rare times Cletis ever went out of the valley, he and a scarlet snake found their way to the same place near. The preacher had gone with one of his flock to a family farm which was being sold. On the day after their arrival, while moving a pile of old lumber and rotting logs, they uncovered a streak of red and yellow. It was a scarlet snake. With the deftness which came from years of snake capturing, Cletis grasped the snake around the neck and tail before the creature knew what happened. With its broad red bands and its smaller yellow ones outlined in black, the snake radiated with a subdued beauty. Around its neck it wore a yellow scarf. Its shiny red nose might have identified it as the tippler of the reptile world. Its belly was white. Cletis knew immediately that he must have the snake, and since of course no one at the farm had wanted it, the two and a half foot long prize went back to Snake Hollow. From the start, Cletis told people he had a coral snake, a fiercely poisonous specie. No one there knew the coral snake is much larger and has a black head. For his purposes, however the preacher had a non-poisonous “poisonous” snake.

At the head of the pen nearest the cordoned off compartments Cletis dropped to his knees. He sprang back up as his left knee fell upon a burr; it sent an electric tremor up and down his leg. “Damn,” he said, as he jerked the burr loose from his pants leg and skin. Rubbing the knee for a few seconds, he then eased himself to the ground where, this time, he felt the cool moistness around the shaded moss soothe his knee. He began to pray.

“Oh, splendid treasure of treasures, dearest Jesus, your shepherd comes before you in the midst of a troublesome day. Sweet Jesus Lord, hear, oh hear the words of your preacher on earth, Cletis, yea Lord, your very Cletis. You and only you understand me, for mine understanding is too great for the people in these regions. Oh, yes, Jesus, yes and yes. Here, surrounded by the wonderous beauty of our serpents, hear mine prayer and grant me my desired wishes. Hear, oh Jesus!” Cletis extended both arms toward the sky.

“Hearts are hardened against me, yet my words shall prevail against them as against the very gates of Hell. Oh, blessed Jesus, give me strength to prevail. The way I have always took has been your way. I've known it even before it was revealed unto me. Just refirm the path now, Jesus meek, Jesus mild. You created the serpent to prevail though he always crawl upon the earth, except when he raises himself to the tree. You have raised me to the tree tops, Savior, and I know that is where you want me to be for the work that is to be done. Suffice it, Jesus Lord, oh yes suffice it!” Cletis clapped his hands three times over the top of his head. An unseen animal darted through the underbrush, a rustling of leaves scattering in its flight.

“Precious Lamb, 'how beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of them that bringest good tidings.' Here in the foothills I stand to prevail against them such as Hiram Rollins, Job Lester and Will Horner. They need to be made to see who is master and who is servant. Show them that, king-sweet Jesus! I bringst good tidings to the people, and they listen. Them that don't are to be the sufferers of the world. Your word has promised that. Press that promise upon my heart, dear Jesus. Smite the heart of...”

A harsh voice broke into the prayer, for a moment terrifying Cletis. He was not sure that God had not spoken, but then he recognized the dry shrillness of the voice. “Cletis,” said Etta. “Get up from there. Get up and speak to me!”

He did as he was bid so startled was he that he had not yet regained control. “Etta, what are you doing here? I've told you not to come here. This is no place for a woman. And, besides, why aren't you with Vergie?” He alternated between glaring at her and flicking away pieces of leaves, grass and twigs from off his trouser leg. “You're treading on holy ground.”

“Hush, Cletis. I've come to fetch you to commence the buryin' as soon as we can,” said Etta.

“Is the child ready?” the preacher asked.

“Lovey and the others finished her a short spell ago. But Will Horner is with her now,” Etta said.

“His meddling will come to no good, you mark my words. Why aren't you with him? Surely to God you didn't let him see Vergie alone.”

“Hiram's there. And Lovey, I reckon. He can't do any meddling now, can he?” Lovey asked, her face somewhat resembling a question mark.

“Will Horner can meddle anywhere he is to be found. I wouldn't trust him as far as a gnat could carry a hickory stick. Only trouble can come from him. I don't know why you didn't stay there and protect the child,” said Cletis.

“Protect Vergie? From what? She's dead. Who can harm the dead?” said Etta.

“The dead can harm the living. I've seen it many a'time,” replied Cletis. “Just as the living can hurt the dead. That's what that fool Horner will do.”

“He may have quare ideas but I misdoubt he's up to doing anything to a dead child whilst her pa is by her side,” said Etta, turning her back on the snakes. It was almost a calculated move, something she did quite voluntarily. Had seeing them stirred the woman to her senses?

“Maybe he'll try to give her some kind of medicine that will do something to her,” said Cletis.

“Why, Cletis, you're talking sech foolishness. It 'pears that the livelong night and day I've been set agin contrary men. I expect more from you,” said Etta.

“Don't be forgetting who you're talking to, woman,” said Cletis.

“I'm not forgetting anything. Anything--and that goes back twenty years, Mr. Preacher. Now, I want the child in the ground afore this day is ended. What's to be done?”

From his waist upward, Chidester jerked backward. He felt the blood rising upward and suffusing his cheeks. Reminding himself of the strain Etta obviously had been under, he restrained himself from reprimanding her. But he clearly did not like the emphatic, almost snarling way Etta had said “anything.” The first few words he did speak were offered formally, as though he were talking to a stranger--and uttered as though he himself were a stranger.

“The church-house is a'ready. The coffin will be brought there from your house. I, of course, will funeralize. I don't think it would be fitten for you to have a part in the service.” Cletis did not directly look at Etta when he spoke the sentence; instead, he fixed his eyes upon the scarlet snake, whose bright red markings looked like fresh blood on the dusty ground. It crossed his mind that the snake usually appeared only at night in the summer. What was he doing out now?

“I want no part of the service,” Etta said. “I don't know iffen I can hold my head up knowing my least one, my only one, did not have a lasty faith in Jesus. But Jesus knows I did my best. Besides, that child was of the age of accountability.”

“Jesus knows, Etta, Jesus knows. And so do I,” said Cletis, his voice softening considerably. “We all have trials, some mighty, some mighty indeed. Vergie has nothing to do with your faith. It has already been tested, we know that. Don't you reckon I'm the best judge of that?” Cletis held out both arms to Etta. A quarter-smile erased some of the harshness from his face.

Etta hesitated, but only for a moment. Then she moved closer to Cletis. Her steps were tentative ones; she didn't seem to know where to place her feet. But with a burst of relief she fell the short distance into Cletis's arms where, held secure, she trembled. A triple-pronged shiver shot through Cletis like a current of electricity. Both of them shook.

“Oh, spiritualized Jesus, thank you for the interruption which sent my Sister Rollins here. I hold her in my arms the way you hold us all. She is safe in the arms of Jesus, safe in the arms of Cletis Chidester. Oh, yes, Jesus, touch us both with your healing grace.” Very slowly, he swayed back and forth, back and forth, at the same time guiding Etta along with him.

“Hallelujah, praise the sweet Savior. Amen. Amen. You know the test you sent for this woman-servant, Etta. She showed herself to be approved, to be faithful for your commands. Help her to remember. Give her strength.” His voice rose in pitch and timbre. He jerked in response to powerful body spasm from Etta who mumbled something unintelligible. She tightened her hold on Cletis. “Oh, yes, Jesus. You have chose Cletis and Etta to do your work in these hills. Show us the path you have set before us. We will climb it. Nothing, no nothing--amen, nothing will slow our feet. Amen, oh the sweetlovingkindnessof-mercifulJesus. Oh, YES!!”

“Whooeeeee! Yes-uh, yes-uh, Jesus-uh. Sweet-uh Je-sus!” Etta screamed, her shrill voice sounding like a wild animal call. “Jesus, sus, sus! Jesus, sus, sus! Oh, yes, Cletis, deliver us to Jesus! “Owoo, ulla, ulla, bitmitimibob, bitimitibob, artana, artana...” “Ooo, ul, bitbob, art and tana” crooned Cletis trying to imitate Etta's words as he deftly extricated himself from her and raised both her arms and his heavenward. They stood, a human tepee, looking into each other's eyes.

“Miramara, ocotolla, lamintobtob, sulla, sulla,” Etta intoned. The two swayed from right to left, still holding their arms up. Neither was aware of the other, in spite of their having locked eyes. Glazed and unblinking, those eyes were expressionless.

Etta's speaking in tongues accelerated, her words colliding with the imitations of Cletis, the sounds grating and unmusical. Their bodies, however, harmonized as they moved back and forth, in and out. Seen from a distance, they could easily have been mistaken for country dancers celebrating the beauty of a summer day. Rhythmically, Cletis squeezed Etta's fingers in a downward motion while, at the same time, he bent his knees. Etta responded by moving her own knees toward the ground. Lowering themselves, and with their hands still locked together, they knelt on the ground.

“Ohhhhh, Jeesusssssss. JesussssssssSSSSS,” screeched Etta.

“Amen, Aman, Ammmaaaann,” said Cletis. With the gentlest of movements, he let go of Etta's hands, fashioned them together in a clasp and moved them close to her bosom. In choreographed-like motions, he rose and went over to the snake pens. Removing a stick holding one pen closed, he reached in and took out three black snakes.

“Oh, Lordgodjesus,” he said. “For this we were made. For the snakes which would show our belief in you. Yes, precious Jesus, we believe through the snake and proclaim it in your name.”

“Glomma arta salla maroica, roica, scanlouda, abbalora, eeee” came from Etta as Cletis walked back toward her. The snakes hung over his extended arms like pieces of black rope.

“Rise up, oh woman of God,” he commanded as he stood over her. She did not hear him. With three fingers he touched her on the forehead and spoke again, this time a bit louder. “Etta! Rise up! Stand before your God.” Cletis raised his arms with the snakes hanging from his hands.

Etta pulled herself up, leaning forward so that she stood within the arc created by Cletis's hands. “Oh, Lord, show me your power and might,” she prayed.

“Yea, Lord, oh sweet precious one. Show us your favorite. Lay on us the lavishment of your love,” said Cletis. As he spoke, he placed one of the black snakes over Etta's neck. She, closed her eyes and swooned, the upper half of her body flowing to the right in a semi-circle and then to the left.

Without taking his feet off the ground, Cletis made jumplike motions up and down. “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus” was the only word both of them spoke. Cletis put another snake around his own neck and then held the remaining one in his left hand. “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.” The words came faster and with more sibilance. With his right hand he struggled to unfasten his belt. Their undulations continuing, Etta and Cletis shifted in speech from mumbles to shouts. Etta yelled “MY SWEET JESUS” so intensely that several crows clamored out of nearby trees and flew away.

Fumbling with the buttons on his trousers, Cletis undid them one by one until his pants flopped open, forming a V-space of skin and hair. Deftly, he guided the snake down into the interior of his pants leg until only one fifth of the four and a half foot long reptile protruded, still held fast by Cletis. He hung that part of the snake over the bottom of his fly; then he hitched up his trousers, and bringing clasp and eyelet of both sides of the belt together, he joined them. His pants drooped slightly, but the belt held. So did the snake which, caught over the crotch fold in the pants, was imprisoned. It writhed slowly as though hypnotized.

“Oh, praise to the sweet bye and bye Jesus. Hallelujah, bless my soul, it is well, it is well with my soul,” Etta moaned. She stroked the snake around her neck with both of her hands, the right hand over her left shoulder and the left hand over the right shoulder; both hands brushed each other as they fondled the snakes. Her hips moved rhythmically with her hands.

“Hear, oh Jesus, hear: ballomorca, anta, anta, sallabantini, sallabantini, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus,” Etta's voice rang out, a trumpet call across the valley. A faint echo bounced back, though neither the man nor the woman heard it. Cletis bent over and took the end of Etta's dress. “Oh, Lord, to touch the hem of your garment was pure healing, let us feel your presence in the hem of this woman's garment. Pour your spirit here, Jesus. Pour it here--in this spot.” As he spoke, he lifted her dress, moving his fingers and thumbs around its edges. He could feel the strong thread criss-crossing the hem. Then, with the palms of both hands catching the folds of the dress and her muslin slip, he lifted them up.

Etta thrust her pelvis toward Cletis. His was a cadenced counter movement away from her. Quickly, with one hand, he gathered her skirt and slip in one mass of material at the back of her waist. With the other hand, he fumbled at the top of her underpants. Just as he curved his fingers around the thin elastic at the top of her flesh-colored drawers, Etta jerked back, her hips gyrating. “Oooohhhhhh, yes, Jeeee-sus, Jeeee-susssss. Revive me. Clean me. Make me your vessel. Yes, yes, yes, ah yes, sweet Jesus!” she shouted.

“Amen, amen, aman, aman, a-may-an,” said Cletis as he pulled the band at the top of Etta's pants; he quickly tugged at them until they curled about her hips an inch or two below the waist. He let go of the bunched-up folds of her dress he was holding behind her and grasped the squirming and frantic snake dangling from the front of his trousers. He guided it towards Etta's drawers. There he thrust the snake deep into the garment and let the band of elastic snap back imprisoning the snake. Thus joined, Cletis and Etta rocked back and forth, faster and faster, faster and faster, until

Cletis's face glistened with perspiration. Etta threw back her head. Her breath spurted out word fragments: “...jee...wea...come...you...ness...LOOYUH!!!”

“Gumph, auugh, oouh,” snorted Cletis, his entire body shaking as though in an epileptic seizure. The snake from around his neck flopped partially onto Etta's shoulder and attached itself to the creature around her neck.

“Oh, yes, Lord, precious Etta, oh yes, he's speaking to us,” screamed Cletis.

“EEEEEEEEEEEE!!!” Etta's cry slashed through the'forest.

“PRAISE JESUSGOD AMIGHTY!”

In a wild burst of oscillating arms and sprawling legs, they fell to the ground, separating from one another because of the direction in which each fell. Only the sound of their breathing could be heard, raspy gasps from Etta and snore-like grunts from Cletis. In the fall the snake which had buried its head in Etta's crotch was snapped free of its elastic bondage and the fly of the pants. It slithered soundlessly through the grass and disappeared into the woods. In its retreat, the reptile brushed the shoes of the person who had stood watching this worship service in the woods.

CHAPTER 12

Shortly after Etta went in search of Cletis, a rickety and ancient horse-drawn wagon creaked to a stop at the Rollins' gate. Driven by an equally rickety and ancient man, the wagon, its flat bed made of pine planks worn smooth by years of hauling, held a simple coffin. Everyone on the porch and in the yard turned and looked.

One man spoke. “Why, here's Uncle Pappy. We'd best go and help carry in the coffin.” Several men headed for the wagon.

For as long as anyone could remember, Uncle Pappy Timberlake had hewn coffins for almost everyone who had died. Early in his life, he had worked for a logging company, but when he realized the destruction being wrought by the wanton cutting of trees, especially the tulip poplars, he quit. As a carpenter, he still cut down trees, but he used every scrap of wood and bark in his craft. He fashioned beds, dressers, chests, tables, chairs, swings, carved animals and toys out of maples, buckeyes, cedars, red and chestnut oak and pine. He loved all wood. He shared that love and that wood with his neighbors by making the coffins for their dead.

The casket made for Vergie sat with dignity upon the wagon. About five and half feet in length, it narrowed for the head, widened for the shoulders and then tapered for the feet. Covering the exterior was a piece of black cloth, gathered every few inches into pleats. Pappy had left the top of the casket off as though to let as much air and sunlight inside it to last Vergie for a long time. A shiny beige cloth lining had been carefully tacked to the interior. As a special tribute to Vergie, Pappy had used the last of a bolt of silk dress material he had saved from his wife's burial of some ten years ago. A little head rest lay tucked up at the top of the coffin.

After helping Uncle Pappy down from the wagon, the men lifted the box and carried it onto the porch. Job Lester suggested they wait until Doc Horner came out before taking it into the house.

Horner was still in Vergie's room where, with Lovey and Hiram, he was examining the child. 'Her neck looked like a small log from a bluish-purple tree. Doc had never seen anything like it. He stared. The more he stared, the more flushed his face became. Hiram and Lovey held their breath.

Doc looked at them. “Lovey,” he said. “Just what in God's name happened?”

The woman sighed. “Well, the best that I can tell is that the young'un was bit by the rattler. She taken it outen the box and put it around her, just as she seen her mother do many a'time. The service was going strong, and many were transported in ecstasy. I was prayin' somethin' fierce and didn't see the serpent strike. If she cried out, I misdoubt I could have heard it.”

Doc continued the questioning. “Didn't anybody go to her aid?”

“No one knowed what had happened 'til I guess when Etta went forward,” said Lovey.

“How long after she was bitten?”

“Will, I couldn't say. I 'spect everyone thought the child was in prayer. We wanted to see what Etta would do.”

“When Etta went to her, what then?”

“Why, she unloosened the snake from the child and then put it back in the box,” said Lovey.

Hiram spoke for the first time. “Do you think Vergie was hurtin'?”

The doctor answered with a slow shaking of his head. “No Hi, I don't believe she was. It all probably happened so fast, much faster than with most people. I believe the child went into immediate shock, something that is called anaphylactic shock.” Lovey and Hiram looked at one another in bewilderment. Lovey patted Hiram's arm.

“Well, there's no question that the snake has done what it's created to do. All that poison isn't in it for decoration,” said Will, straightening Vergie's head on the pillow. “We'd best have the child buried as soon as we can.” Turning, he gestured for Lovey and Hiram to walk in front of him to the door. Both hesitated, Hiram because he did not want to leave his daughter And Lovey because she wanted to say something. She turned in a semi-circle, lifted her right foot and put it down again. She cleared her throat.

“Will...Hi...I'm a'wantin' to say something,” Lovey said.

“Yes?” Will said as Hiram raised both of his eyebrows in Anticipation.

“Well, I'm not sure how to go about it, it bein' right Personal like,” she said.

Doc spoke, the slightest hint of irritation in his voice. “Lovey, you know better than that. Just say what it is that's on your mind.”

The woman lifted her head and said in a voice more rapid than she usually spoke, “I think you should be examining the child's private parts.”

Hiram turned quickly, his face full of pain. “Why, Lovey!”

“I know it's a quare thing to be askin', but it would be a right smart thing to do,” Lovey said. “And I reckon you know how hard it is for me to ask sech a thing in front of her pa.”

“Yes, Lovey, I guess so. You'll have to help me, though. And, hi, you'll need to stay right here. If you want to turn around while we look at Vergie, that's all right. But I'd like you to be a full party to whatever is going on,” said Horner.

Hiram responded. “Lovey's got sense. She wouldn't devil us about this lessen she was on to somethin'. Let's be on with it and done with it.”

Doc and Lovey pulled back the coverlet and, as though he needed a role in what was going on, Hiram took hold of it. He pulled it back to the foot of the bed. Taking hold of the hem of Vergie's dress, Lovey folded it back, saying, “I'll try not to muss it.” As she lifted the dress, exposing the girl's legs and thighs, Hiram turned his head toward the window. Lovey raised the garment as far as Vergie's crotch, then draped it loosely across the child's body. Her pubic hair remained covered. Lovey asked the doctor to help her part Vergie's legs.

“Now, Will,” Lovey said. “If you'll just look close here at these marks we found whilst we warshed this dear youngster.” She pointed to the blue and purple splotches on the inside of the thighs Hiram, hearing Lovey's remark, moved his head to look at his daughter.

Bending over, Horner looked as he was directed. He saw the marks and leaned even closer. A soft “hmmmm” escaped him. Then he stood straight up. He scratched his head just over his right ear. Looking first at Hiram and then at Lovey, he reached into the satchel he had brought with him and took out a magnifying glass. He spoke, “Lovey, I'd like you to hold this lamp over here”--he pointed to a table lamp--”onto Vergie while I get a better look.”

Hiram handed the lamp to Lovey and held the cord so that the light could be as near to Vergie as possible. With a steady hand, Doc held the magnifying glass over the girl's thighs. No question about it, he said to himself, these are bruises. And, judging by their color, they're not very old. “Hmmmmm,” he said again. Then, taking the magnifier, her looked up and down the legs. He scrutinized Vergie's arms.

Hiram could not restrain himself any longer. “What is it, Doc? What have you found?” His heart thumped.

“I'll tell you in a moment, Hi. Before that, though, Lovey, I'd like to see the child's breasts,” he said. “Will you help me raise the dress more?”

Lovey replied, “The way the dress gathers I don't think we can get it up far enough 'til I undo the back. We need to lift her up offen the bed a trifle.”

Doc and Hiram each took one of Vergie's arms and held her up so that Lovey could open the dress in back. When she unfastened the buttons, she lifted the dress up over Vergie's head but not off. The woman remembered the earlier struggle to get the garment on the child. Hiram turned his hand and looked out the window.

Doc leaned forward and, while still holding Vergie, studied her chest, breasts and abdomen. He could find nothing. “Let the dress come back down to her genitals, Lovey,” he said as he and Hiram gently placed Vergie back on the bed. Then doctor examined her thighs once again and then turned to his companions.

“What Vergie has,” he began, “are bruises. How they got there I'm not sure. What I do know is that she could not have hit something accidentally because those bruises are too well spaced and uniform. Now I have an idea what might have caused them--and I'll tell you both in a minute. But first, Hi, I'm going to examine Vergie closer.” He paused, almost ready to utter what Lovey had said earlier about not knowing how to say something. Yet he had never quite been in a situation like this. “What I mean is that, I, uh, have to determine whether she's been hurt in her vagina.”

A cloud of embarrassment and awkwardness gathered in the room. “Vagina”--an anatomical term, probably a Latin word, Will thought, and he had used it thousands of times. Now it reverberated through the room. He could think of half a dozen substitute words for vagina, and he wondered if any one of them would have sounded so...so, the only thing he could think of was threatening.

When Lovey heard the word “vagina,” she knew exactly what the doctor suspected. She could scarcely formulate the idea, but it thudded about in her brain gathering shape. Was the child still a virgin? The enormity of possibilities engulfed her, but her first concern was Hiram and what all this meant to him. Having this horror piled on him after the way Vergie died surely would be too much for the poor soul to bear.

“Vagina. Vagina.” To Hiram, the word meant nothing for a few seconds. Then, slowly with some recognition its meaning came to him. Why, he realized, he had never ever thought of Vergie in such a way. He never viewed her as ever having anything but the most general of sexual organs--private parts, as indeed most everyone except miners and loggers and young sparking men referred to them. What was Doc Horner getting at? Had Vergie hurt herself in some way? What was Lovey thinking? Why was Doc acting a bit peculiar? For a moment, air filled his head. He sat down on the edge of the bed. Then he felt a hand on his shoulder and heard Will speak.

“Hi, this time I think it would be better if you wouldn't watch so closely. Don't you think Vergie would ask you to keep your head turned if she was being examined by me or any doctor? Lovey's here to help me, and you can talk if you like, but I don't believe a father should see his daughter the way a doctor and a woman should. You understand, don't you, Hi?”

“Mebbe I should go in the other room,” said Hiram in a low voice.

“No, no, I'd like you to be in here,” said Will.

“Your presence will be a comfort, Hiram.” Lovey's voice soothed.

Like an obedient child, Hiram moved to the window and looked out at the people gathered to mourn with him.

With Lovey standing at the doctor's side, Will very carefully and methodically probed the body of the dead child. Being so close to her, he could smell the flesh no longer fed and sustained by blood. The odor, faint traces similar to that of a rotting rat, only underscored for Will the shock of the last few moments. Tenderly, as though he were ministering to his own daughter, he shone a light into Vergie. “Hmmmmmm” drifted from his bowed head.

“My land, why is he a'takin' so long?” said Lovey to herself.

Suddenly the door flew open. Etta burst into the room. Cletis bounded in a step behind her. Hiram spun around. Will jerked upright. Only Lovey held her place, her eyes taking in the outburst.

Seeing Will and the position in which Vergie lay, Etta screamed, “WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” She seized Will by his wrist, flinging his arm up in the air. Surprised by her attack, he also marveled at her strength. Hiram grabbed Etta and, prying her fingers loose, said, “Stop it, Etta! Stop it!” With a glazed look, she stared at her husband. Lovey noticed that her clothes were covered with tiny flakes of leaves, pine needles and a thistle. Cletis's face twitched as he stood watching.

Again, Etta spoke. “I asked you, Will Horner, what are you doing?”

Calmly, Will said, “I'm doing my job as coroner, Etta. The county asks questions why someone dies.” Her looked her straight in the eyes.

Cletis spoke for the first time. “No one questions the will of God. No corner is needed here, sir!”

At the garbling of the word for “coroner,” Will mentally smiled. “I don't believe you're needed here, sizzrr. This is a matter for the family and the county.”

Cletis smirked. “I wonder what the county would think finding you in such a position as this.” He nodded toward the exposed body of Vergie. Then, turning to Lovey, he added, “And you should be ashamed of yourself to be a party to all of this. You will answer to your church.”

Will dropped his stethoscope on the bed and spun around to face Cletis. He grabbed the preacher by the front of his shirt, twisted the cloth into a ball inside a fist, and backed Cletis with a thump up against the wall.

Hiram cried out, “For God's sake! For Vergie's sake!” Lovey hastily threw the coverlet over Vergie. Etta started toward Hiram and Will, but just as she did, Will backed cletis out of the room. Almost as quickly as this happened, Hiram shut the door. He turned to his wife and said, “I'll tell you what's goin' on.” He pointed to Vergie's neck. “This, this is goin' on. And it's been a' goin' on far too long. Here be the results. If you sow the wind, you reap the whirlwind! This is our daughter, Vergie Rollins. And the doctor is a'tryin' to find out jest how and why she died. It has something to do with her private parts, and if anything is a'tampered with in them parts, woman, I'll take matters into my own hands!” He swung his pointing finger in Etta's direction.

Etta's eyes widened. “What do you mean private parts?” she asked looking first at Hiram and then at Lovey. Hiram did not say anything.

After a minute, debating with herself whether she should say anything, Lovey spoke. “When we were a'warshin' the body, Etta, we took notice of some quare marks on the legs. They was just below her private parts. Will was seein' what the marks was.”

Etta asked, “What did he find out?”

Her husband answered, “He had nary a chance the way you come a'thunderin' in here. He wasn't finished looking the child over.”

Lovey moved closer to the bed and pulled back the coverlet on Vergie. “You'd best have a look yourself at what we're a'meanin',” she said. She held the blanket up high at the foot of the bed so that Hiram would not again have to turn his back.

Although Etta hesitated for a moment, she sat down on the bed, placed both hands on either side of Vergie and then leaned on them as she bent over to look at the spot to which Lovey pointed. Etta viewed the bruises with silence. For a long time, she remained unmoving, yet concentrating upon the marks. Then, raising her right hand from the bed, she extended her index finger and traced the discolorations on her daughter's thighs. How cold the child is, Etta thought, as a network of shivers danced from shoulder to shoulder. But what could those marks be? It had been a long time since Etta had seen Vergie this close. Noting the patch of fine brown hair that covered her daughter's pubic area, Etta said in an undertone, “Why she's practically growed up. And I haven't even noticed.” She stared at the child until she sensed Lovey's discomfort in holding up the coverlet.

Etta stood. “Lovey, where are Vergie's underdrawers?”

Lovey answered, “We disremembered to put any on, Etta. I opine we didn't know where any was.”

Walking over to the dresser, Etta stooped and opened the second drawer. From inside she took out a pair of white cotton underpants. She shook them as though they were part of a wash to be hung out to dry. She closed the drawer and walked over to the side of the bed. “Lovey,” she said. “I'll need your help to get these on Vergie afore the buryin'.” Lovey, letting the blanket down finally, nodded.

As the women went about their task, Cletis stood at the window. In the far corner of the porch, he saw Uncle Pappy sitting talking to a man of his vintage. Hiram knew that Vergie's coffin had been fetched. His head felt as though an iron band were being tightened about it, and he put his hand up to rub his neck. Through the window he could hear muted voices, dull buzzes from the men and violin strings from the women. Had he tried isolating voice from voice, he might have discerned what some of his neighbors were saying. Gazing out through his yard where small bands of people stood, he saw the road running by the house. I'd like to be on that road and just start walkin' and walkin' to whereabouts it would take me, he thought. He looked at the wide-topped maples and slender birches across the road, their leaves vibrating in the wind. He imagined the comforting rustling sssshhhhing sound they would be making. The stair-step branches of the spruce waved like over-sized fans. Then, a soft rap on the door brought him back into the room.

He opened the door to Will Horner. “Hiram,” the doctor said squeezing his way through the opening. Etta and Lovey turned when they heard the voice. Pursing her lips, Etta straightened up. Lovey looked at Horner with expectation and then said to Etta, “She's ready, Sister. This child is ready.” Vergie lay as calmly as she had earlier when the three women had laid her out.

Etta spoke. “Yes, she's ready. If there's them that don't molest her agin.” She shot a look across to Horner.

He answered not in the way he wanted to but in the way the moment called for. “There'll be no more disturbing. Vergie can be buried now. Come, Lovey,” he said, taking the woman by an arm Let's leave this family alone for a few minutes.”

Lovey, recognizing Will's efforts at uniting Hiram and Etta, smiled at them and left. She burned with questions: what had happened to Cletis? where had the doctor been? what had he found examining Vergie? “why did he think Etta was so rumpled? She had some things she wanted to tell him, too. All that would have to wait because Will immediately set about to find Job to have the coffin brought in. Lovey couldn't ask him a thing. And, then, she herself was distracted. The paper bag she had brought with her had disappeared.

CHAPTER 13

When Doc pushed Cletis out of Vergie's bedroom, he let go of him just outside the door. Since only two or three people were in the front room and another two or three in the kitchen, few were aware of the confrontation between the men. Nearly everyone had heard Etta's scream, but no one took it seriously enough to see what had happened. To them it was the anguish of a mother whose child had died. The enmity between Etta and the doctor was well-known, more so since rumor and exaggeration had fanned the flames higher than ever they had burned for the two people themselves.

Even though he had let go of Cletis, Horner stood so close to him that their noses almost touched. Doc snarled, “Don't you ever make such vile suggestions to me again, Chidester, or I'll perform an operation on you that no one in this valley ever heard of. Damn you!”

Cletis flinched. Certain that Doc made an allusion to the preacher's botched self-circumcision, Cletis cringed with shame. But then, he heard Horner saying, “Without a tongue that pretty voice of yours won't be able to hypnotize all these poor folks you lead down the road to perdition.”

The very thought of losing his tongue struck Cletis as catastrophic: for him that would be far worse than a mutilated penis or even castration. His tongue was his life, his power. It was Cletis Chidester. Without it, his voice would die or worse be reduced to hog grunts or blatherskiting. To reassure himself that such a thing could not be possible, he rolled and twisted his tongue all around the interior of his mouth. He bit the tip of it to ensure that feeling remained in it. Then, so that he would appear unintimidated, Cletis said, “It is easy to threaten a preacher, ain't it, doc-tor? You think another cheek will be turned, do you? Think on it again.”

The two men stared at one another for about half a minute. Then, Job Lester having been alerted that Cletis and Will had burst out of Vergie's room, came in from the front porch. He saw them standing enveloped in tension. “Doc,” he said, as though nothing was amiss, “are you ready for the coffin to be brought in?”

Doc replied, “In just a few minutes, Job. By the way, the preacher here could use a drink of something to cool him down.” He smiled and bowed slightly in Cletis's direction. Then, turning, he walked over to Vergie's door and rapped on it.

Job knew Will jested when he requested a drink for Cletis, but the sheriff thought he would oblige. “What'll it be, Mr. Preacher? Some of Weary River's best”--he winked at Cletis--”or some of what the revenooers missed?”

“Don't contrary me, Lester,” sneered Cletis. “'Pears to me that you've forgot all you ever did ascribe to in your religion.” He glanced into the kitchen. “I do want something to drink, but it will be the clear water of life.” Turning his back on Job, he walked into the kitchen. There, Rachel, who had been finding places for all the food the neighbors had brought, gave him, instead of water, a cup of sassafras tea. He wished, though, that it was whiskey.

Finishing the tea in gulps, he left' the kitchen and went back into the living room. No one else was there. He looked all around with squinting eyes below a furrowed forehead. The room, plain, contained a brown horse-hair sofa with a matching overstuffed chair, the head rests and arms covered with Etta's crocheted doilies. Dark blue pillows with yellow roses rested on either side of the sofa and in the middle of the chair. Two tables book-ended the sofa. On one stood a lamp; on the other lay a Bible. On the floor beside the easy chair and the floor lamp was an ashtray Hiram had left. Three butts from rolled cigarettes lay crumpled in the clay saucer. Two cane-bottomed chairs stood pushed up against the wall; the third had been shattered the night before when Etta tried to bar the door. A faded carpet which at one time had been bright red with blue and orange urns in it covered the floor. Hanging on the wall a 1950 calendar, opened to July, showed a weather-scarred barn in front of which three cats frolicked under the bent head of a grazing cow. Nothing else adorned the walls. Cletis appeared to be searching for something. But the room had no hiding place unless it could be the closet to the right of Vergie's door. He started for it but changed his mind after glancing around once more. Instead, he went out onto the porch.

In the front room of her house, Vergie lay in her casket. It rested on the seats of two chairs placed side by side. A table behind the chairs contained so many flowers that it looked as though a mound of a meadow had been brought inside. Jars and tin cans, two or three covered with the cartoon pages from outdated Sunday papers, crowded together on the table. The bright white daisy flung petals in all directions from her sun-yellow center. Glossy buttercups nodded side by side. The blue eyes of the heliotrope peeked out from their mint-green, full bodies. Perfume-softened mock orange blossoms fanned out above most of the blooms, their faces radiant even indoors. Pink tea roses, fuschia-tinted on the edges, splashed color and scent about. In the only vase on the table, golden yellow and royal purple dahlias stood at attention small brancnes of pine; someone had given her garden's finest to Vergie. From out of a brown pickling crock to the side, of the coffin rose lush branches of mountain laurel with their pink/purple clusters the dead child's favorite flower. A sweet mugginess, like boiled syrup becoming too heavy to stir, clogged the room.

While Etta sat near the front window and Cletis stood by the door, their neighbors and friends walked by the casket to look at Vergie. They were shepherded by Cletis who stood near her feet. In the two hours since her laying out, Vergie had changed. A tinge of grayness suffused her. The earlier lustre which the women remarked about had dulled. Her face appeared pinched near the eyes and mouth. Her neck strained at her dress, and its dark color could be seen. Some of the folks were to remark later that the child lying in the coffin didn't look any more like Vergie than Adam's off ox. The children came first, footsteps uncertain, eyes held as though by a magnet on the frozen form of their playmate. One boy extended his hand toward the coffin and then, as though burned, pulled back quickly. One girl dropped a golden zinnia on Vergie's shoulder and then looked furtively about her to make sure no one disapproved of her missing her aim toward Vergie's hand. Next came the adults. Some of the women dabbed at their eyes o-r nose with fist-crushed handkerchiefs. Tensey Poulton bowed her head. Ida Pattison led Sister Rupert by the arm past the bier. A man, his face screwed in puzzlement, slowly shook his head. Pap Talbott, his fiddle bow tucked under his arm, stood at attention until Fatty, who was next in line, nudged him a bit. Just as Will Horner stopped before the coffin, Lovey came through the front door, twisting her large body so that she could get through the crowd. She was breathing hard. Since she had gone home to change her clothes, she'd run back not wanting to miss any part of the procession to the cemetery. Going up to Vergie, she stood with her hands folded. Then she bent and once again kissed the child.

Without looking at either Etta or Hiram, Cletis stepped in front of the coffin. He spoke in a loud distinct voice so that he could be heard by the people who had spilled out onto the porch and into the yard. “Since it has been decided that this child will not be buried from the church, it is only fitten that we have a prayer here before we process to the burying ground.” He spread his hands outward. “All are asked to bow and keep bowed.” He looked directly at Horner, who was standing near Etta's chair.

“Oh, sweet and foretasteful Jesus. Descend down upon us in the face of this child's leave-taking. We don't ask why. It is not for us to know why. Some, howsomever though, might guess the reasons. But we see it to be the mysterious moving of the Saviour Lord. We ask that through this moment those that does not yet believe can be brought to the mercy seat. Amen, let it be so. Oh, dear face of Jesus, shine down the mercy on us. Tell, Lord, Lord, what you hold us accountable for as you did with Vergie. Send the gift of tongues to them that deserves it. Lead us to the burying place and keep the truth breakers away. I'm glad I know the name of Jesus. All them that's glad, seal this prayer with your Amens. Amen! Amen!” The echoing amens resounded through the and yard. Cletis nodded to some men who approached the coffin. They had hammers, in hand. Then, directing people to go outside, Cletis walked over to Etta and went out to the porch with her. Will and Job waited for Hiram, who walked slowly past the casket, letting his fingers trail along the edges.

Outside, people lined up in casual double file waiting for the procession to begin. The sun, nearing its zenith, glistened out of a blue sky. The few clouds looked like frothy heaps of meringue. The pine breath of the breeze settled on everyone. Suddenly the sounds of hammering shot from the house. As each nail was driven into the coffin, the mothers in the group felt the pounding of their hearts. Perhaps to drown the sound, Pap Talbott put his fiddle in position and began the opening notes of “Amazing Grace.” His cousin who had brought her guitar joined in. The group sang the hymn's familiar and beloved words,

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me.

I was once lost, but now am found

Was blind, but now I see.”

On the word “blind” the screen door opened and four men appeared with the casket. They paused for a moment while Cletis stepped out and then motioned for Etta and Hiram to step in front of him. Lovey walked behind Cletis. Job quickly jumped off the porch to walk with his wife who stood waiting mid-way in the line. She, like many of the others, carried flowers. Doc lingered in a corner of the porch as the group bearing its burden went down into the yard.

“Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,

And grace my fears relieved;

How precious did that grace appear

The hour I first believed!”

The music, surprisingly rich and sweet, drifted up over the hills. A clear, unstrained tenor coaxed the best from everyone's voice. A pencil-thin girl began striking a tambourine she had brought with her, adding a slow marching beat to the mourners' steps.

Through the gate and out onto the trail went the group, tiny puffs of dry dust swirling up around their ankles. Fallen pine cones littered the path. Etta strode, almost strutted in the manner of a Prussian soldier. Her husband walked confidently, though with a slightly irregular step. He bore with him the stoicism of his ancestors to whose resting place Vergie was now being bourne. Cletis nodded from time to time, first to the right and then to the left. Observing all of this from his position at the end of the line, Will Horner dragged his feet.

As the trail arched upward, the coffin bearers slowed, and the first two men lowered the front of the casket so that Vergie would not slide inside the box. Pap Talbott and the guitar player, exchanging glances, modulated into a different melody. Immediately, the people recognized an old favorite, “High o'er the Hills, the Mountains Rise:”

“Their summits tower toward the skies;

But far above them I must dwell,

Or sink beneath the flames of hell.”

Lovey held her breath. She didn't want them to sing that third stanza that went “Although I walk on mountains high/Ere long my body low must lie,/And in some lonesome place must rot/And by the living be forgot,” but she didn't know what in the world she could do to stop them But, could it be? The words of another stanza? They had skipped it, led by the tenor:

“But may I rise on wings of love,

And soar to the blest world above.”

Lovey knew that Vergie must indeed be soaring.

“I'll rise above the mountain top,

And there remain for evermore.”

Was that a smile on Hiram's face? Was he knowing these words applied to Vergie? She saw him lift his head to look at Crabtree Mountain.

The trail narrowed into a path. Darkened by the thick growth of trees and shrubs, the passageway still provided enough room for people to keep walking in double-file. Sunlight sprinkled down from directly overhead. The pointed edges of the pine tree tops fringed the patch of blue sky. The air cooled, yet no breeze reached through the walls of this sanctuary. Mentholated waves of pine scent made the air seem even cooler. The last stanza of the hymn vibrated throughout the grove:

“Then will I sing God's praises there

Who brought me through my troubles here,

I'll sing, and be forever blest,

Find sweet and everlasting rest.”

On the last notes shortness of breath prevented full expression of the music. The incline of the path grew steeper, but just ahead lay the cemetery, bright lanes of sunshine spotlighting the opening to it.

Reaching their destination, the grieving people gathered around the open grave. Huge mounds of black earth spotted with clay-orange clumps rose above the spot which awaited Vergie. Old tottering tombstones leaned in all directions. The names etched on them were the names of the people walking now carefully about: Rupert, Pattison, Ridenour, Lester, Poulton, Stirling, Talbott, Strawderman. Some of the stones bore faded dates reaching back almost 150 years. Many were hand-hewn, a few store-bought. Scattered throughout the graveyard some wooden crosses bore simple familial designations such as “Mother,” “Baby,” “Pa.” In larger plots, small footstones surrounded a marker with a family name. The tarnished bronze plaques of two men killed in the war designated their graves; a faded, washed-out American flag, its frayed edges wiggling, drooped over one mound. Some of the burial spots had flowers on them. The raw, rough heap of earth piled over Vergie's grave seemed alien to the otherwise orderly simplicity of the Weary River Burying Ground.

Around the Rollins plot the band of mourners halted. The pallbearers gently lowered the coffin to the ground, putting it on a spot that had been raked smooth. Cletis stood at the head of the grave. In his hands an open Bible rested. Etta and Hiram stood together slightly to the right of Cletis, while all the others encircled the opening. Already the sun and air had dried the top and sides of the exposed earth. The breeze had dropped. Flies and gnats flitted in front of people's faces.

Cletis began, his voice as loud and controlled as though he were standing at the podium of the state's largest auditorium. “Men and women, we are gathered here to bury one of our own, the girl, Vergie.” He looked all around him. “She lived amongst us and she has perished amongst us.” He caught Will Horner's eye briefly. “It be not for us to question why she has perished, but look around you at the babes that lie yonder. They were taken before their time, and we do not know the reason why. But God has his reasons. And they are his reasons. They are not our reasons.” Cletis's voice rose with each repetition of “reasons.” “I do not know the reason. Her ma does not know the reason. Not one of you know the reason.” He slapped the open Bible. “But the Lord's will must be done! Hallelujah, it must be!” Cletis paused for almost a minute. “Who amongst us can know what the will is except that he follows the admonish ion of the Scripture to test our faith. If we believe, IF, IF, If we believe, believe on what? the Lord Jesus Christ, then--and this is the simple truth all he must learn...” He looked first at Will, then at Job and then, twisting around to do so, at Hiram. “...all men, that if you believe you can handle the serpent, drink poison, handle fire and heal the sick. If, IF!” A finger punctured the air above his head. “If you believe. Some knows that, some doesn't. But we that do, hallelu, hallelu, hallelu, knows we're heaven bound.

“We don't know about Vergie. We do not know if, child that she was, she became a child in the faith. Not to do as a child does, but to believe without questioning, without fussing, what the Lordjesuschrist wants.” Cletis spoke very rapidly, turning his voice into machine-gun fire. “Jesus Christ wants us to believe...”

Believe, believe, thought Will Horner, cutting Cletis off with the preacher's own words. I cannot believe that you are saying this at the burial of a child. What the hell is wrong with you, you ass? A screeched word brought Horner back.

“...FIRE if we trifle with him. Did God Strike Gown Cain? Did God strike down Pharoah? Did God strike down Goliath? Did God strike down the lion? The whale? The serpent? Wait, wait before you answer. Why? Why? 'Cause it is not revealed in Scripture. You can only surmiserate since the story of Vergie is not in God's word.” He held up the Bible and moved it in a semicircle about his head. “But if it was a parable in the Word, we would have the answer here.”

When Lovey heard the question about Vergie, she bowed her head and began to pray, as though to counterbalance some of the things Cletis was suggesting. As she did, she felt the warmth of sun on the back of her neck.

Cletis droned on. “...children obeying their parents and their elders. They, above all, must obey their Father God. This child's father was God. Perhaps she did not know how to listen to a father. Perhaps she misnamed what she heard from her father...”

Hiram had not listened to Cletis from the beginning. His thoughts, indeed his heart, had fled to the casket where his beloved daughter lay in such confined quarters. For you to live, child, I would give you my place in this world. Then, abruptly, the word “father” from Cletis snapped Hiram out of those thoughts.

“...father's house are many mansions. Her mansion on this earth was a household where her mother held forth with her faith so fierce that it had to be enough for the family. But another's beliefs cannot scarcely carry anyone else, not a father, mother, nor an offspring, nor a husband. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved!” Cletis unfastened the top button on his shirt as though to vent his voice more. “Them that's saved shout 'Glory, I am saved!'“

“Glory, glory, glory, I am saved,” rang out from several persons. Someone clapped hands.

“GLORY! GG-LL-OOOO-RR-EEEEE! I am saved!” pierced the midday. Etta stepped out with her hands in the air, and her eyes closed. She swooned. Then, slowly, she spoke, “Oh, yes, come Holy Spirit, come down. Tama lleblinka salla jumma, rheo scalla-li scallali comosena javocanna coshela mohohanna.”

“Amen, Amen, Sister!” shouted Cletis, nodding and smiling. “Oh, yes.” He clasped the Bible to his chest.

“Amen, Amen,” came murmuring echoes from voices in the group. Sister Pattison threw her arms into the air, cupping and uncupping her hands above the heads of others. “Ooooohhhhhh.”

Electric charges surged from Etta to Tensey to Pap Talbott. They shook as though they were loosening something within them while Will Horner dreaded what might occur if the burial turned into mass melodrama and religious hysteria. He wanted to spare Hiram that, at least. Quickly, he moved over to where Job Lester was standing and whispered something in the sheriff's ear. Amid the growing palpitations of energy that both men could feel around them, they walked over beside Hiram. Etta's shrill chant caused Job to wince.

“Solomo callanda aggot aggot surilla mosolono...,” she yelled.

Pap Talbott shrieked, “Hallelujah! Amen! Amen!”

“Amen, amen!! Yes, amen!” came from the other side of the grave.

Suddenly, in strong masculine tones, not quite shouts, Will and Job recited: “OUR FATHER, WHICH ART IN HEAVEN; HALLOWED BE THY NAME...”

As though the voice of God had cannonaded down through the trees, Etta stopped. She opened her eyes and stared. The voices of others fell, mumbled, then ceased. Cletis turned red, his lips forming a thin straight line over his mouth.

“ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN....” Despite their deliberate attempt at intoning the prayer, the men found their voices in pleasing harmony. Hiram joined in, his voice firm and untrembling as he recalled the words from his childhood: “FOR THOSE WHO TRESPASS AGAINST US...”

Two or three others took up the prayer. Etta's eyes softened ever so slightly, but no other part of her body showed any sign of relaxation.

“BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL...”

Then the lead trio became a quartet as Lovey's strong contralto burst in: “FOR THINE IS THE KINGDOM, AND THE POWER AND THE GLORY FOREVER. AMEN.”

“Amen, Amen, Amen.” The hushed conclusion faded away.

“Amen!” said Hiram loudly. “And I would be pleased if you was to sing that “Amazing Grace” oncet more whilst you are leaving. I'll finish the buryin' myself.” His voice faltered toward the end of the sentence.

A guitar chord sounded, and the hymn began. No one, not even Cletis, could protest such a request. One or two people looked at Etta as though she might. But she said nothing.

Through the trees and back down the hilly path the mourners went, leaving behind Hiram, Etta, Cletis, Job and Will. Fading musical notes and indistinguishable words drifted up the hill until they could be heard no longer. Stillness sat upon the grave. Then Hiram spoke.

“Etta, we're a'goin' to bury Vergie. You and your, uh, preacher man can say what some over you want afterwards. Mistrustin's not my nature but I just want to make sure the child is covered with earth afore I leave you to your Jesus.” over to pick up one of the ropes on which the casket rested. Will and Job moved quickly.

“Here, Hi,” said Job. “We'll get that and lower her down. You can put on the first shovelful of dirt, if you're a mind to it. He brushed against Cletis as he reached for the rope.

Will took up his rope and, struggling to keep the casket from tilting in its rope swing, he and Job lowered it into the grave. Job's foot came down so close to the edge that he broke off the corner of the opening; the foot slid forward, but he was able to pull it back. Clods of damp earth struck the descending coffin. Hiram peered into the grave, not wanting to take his eyes away from the box. With scarcely a sound the coffin reached the bottom, but the ropes being pulled back out sounded like a stick hitting the slats of a picket fence in rapid succession.

Then, picking up several of the bouquets of flowers which the mourners had placed on the ground, Hiram dropped them onto the lid of the casket.

“There,” he said. “They'll be closer to her this way. She always loved 'em so. Seems a pity to put 'em all on top further away from her.” Picking up a handful of dirt and holding his hand high over the grave, he let the dirt sift through his fingers and fall slowly on top of the flowers. Scooping up another handful, he extended it to Etta who, with a slight pause and a quick glance in the direction of Cletis, took the dirt and sprinkled it into the grave. Hiram reached for one of the shovels, but Will shook his head as he took the spade from Hiram.

“We'll do it gentle-like, Hi, he said.

“She's my daughter, my child Will. I want to bury her,” said Hiram as he picked up the shovel. Will handed the rusty tool back to him.

Despite the loss of the three fingers on his right hand, Hiram nevertheless had a vise-like hold with it, so maneuvering the shovel came easily for him. He worked quickly, each spadeful of earth landing with a dull thud. Finally, the grave was filled, packed down, filled some more, and then mounded. Rivulets of perspiration ran down Hiram's face, neck and arms like clear blood. His breath came in short gasps. He let the shovel fall to the ground.

“Now,” he said, pausing to catch his breath. “Now, Job, if you and Will can hep me put these here flowers on top...”

The two men gathered up the daisies, roses, buttercups and other flowers, all now showing the effects of being in the sun too long, and helped Hiram Cover the grave. Their color and bulk camouflaged the stark, bald earth. Stepping back, Hiram raised his hand and in a half-salute, half-wave gesture toward the grave, turned to Etta who stood in front of Cletis.

“Are you a'goin' home, woman?” he asked.

“No,” she replied. “No, I'm a'fixin' to stay here in the buryin' ground a spell. Then I'll go to the church house.” Her face revealed nothing.

“Suit yerself,” he said as he turned and headed toward the edge of the cemetery. Job and will fell in step behind him.

Once inside the protective bower of the hemlocks, Hiram slowed his pace. His feet, it seemed, did not know what to do. His brain did not know how to function. He did not know where he was. Since he was headed in one direction, he would follow that wherever it would lead, although he did not make any decision to do so. An iron bar felt wedged in the back of his throat and up behind his eyes. If he moved too quickly, would it plunge down into his stomach? Only his fingers reminded him he was alive; the tips of them tingled and burned. He shuffled, dragging his feet in the fallen pine needles. A thought squeezed into him somehow. Vergie, I can't leave Vergie there, I must go and fetch her back. I can't leave my daughter there. He looked around, bewildered. His head bobbed in tiny jerks. Something whispered to him so faintly he couldn't identify it. Death. Death, he thought it bleated. Deaaatttthhhh. He reached to the side of him, as though grasping for something.

Will, who had been watching Hiram since they left the graveyard, grabbed the man's shoulders. Job supported him at the waist.

“Now, Hi, we just need to sit a spell. Right here looks like a pretty good spot,” said the doctor. He and Job eased Hiram down to a sitting position so that his back could rest on a tree trunk.

I can't let them see me this a'way, Hiram thought. A man don't act this a'way. But his lead-filled spirit crushed the thought almost before it emerged.

“Vergie, Vergie, Baby Vergie,” Hiram's voice cracked. “I've lost my baby. Vergie, I loved, loved you. But I guess no love can win over a Jesus that kills. Child, did you feel the love of Jesus the way you felt mine? Did Jesus hold you pig-a-back? Did he throw you up in the air and catch you? Catch you ever time? Did Jesus carve you toys outen spruce and pine? And roll 'em 'crost the floor to you? Did he learn you to swim? Did he set up nights with you when you had the croup and chick pox? Did your mother? No, your mother was at church! Prayin' at the church! Prayin' to who? To Jesus! What did you ever feel from Jesus? You felt killed, that's what! Killed. And by that pack of whores for Jesus!” He picked up a fistful of pine needles and leaves and threw them out in front of him. They floated and spun to the ground. He slumped back against the tree. For several minutes he said nothing while Job and Will kept watching him. Then he looked up, stretched his facial muscles and said, “Well, Vergie wouldn't much want to see her pa this a'way.” Before his companions could help him, he lifted himself up with a half spring and started back down the path.

CHAPTER 14

Standing at the front of his church, Cletis swore to himself. He had not been listened to by anyone all day. He had been ignored, questioned, threatened, pushed and insulted. What should have been a day which found him at the center of activities was one that eclipsed him and all that he stood for. Damn!

He couldn't understand why Etta had given in to Hiram and his demands that Vergie not be taken to the church. Will Horner's influence, he guessed. Yet Etta should have been stronger with all of them; after all hadn't the service in the woods with the snakes fortified her against all opposition? Damn it all! What had gotten into her?

Maybe Lovey put something in her mind woman-to-woman-like. He would have to put Sister Ridenour in her place and mighty fast. What did she know about Horner doctoring Vergie? What was she snooping around every cranny on the child's body for?

And me, me, dammit, what's wrong with me, letting Horner push me around the way he did? I could have clobbered the hell out of him and, by God, why didn't I? Why, he just stole the burying away from me. Damn! Damn! Damn! Trumpeting the Lord's Prayer the way he did you'd think he was the preacher. And he don't even believe none of it.

And my so-called followers repeating after him! They got no more sense than hogs nosin' along after slop. Don't they realize where their 'legiance is? where their treasure house is? In me, that's where! So how could they say a prayer led by infidels and meddlers? well, they'll answer for it, as sure as I can preach. There's got to be some reckoning for this day, I can tell you that!

Halfway through his thoughts, he started speaking aloud so that by the time he had finished he was preaching. His voice reverberated in the hollowness of the empty church. So absorbed had he been in his musings that he would not have realized it if someone had entered the church or if gunshots echoed up a hollow Earlier, Etta had been there for a few moments after leaving the graveyard. She had told Cletis she was “plumb wore out” and didn't want to say anything or hear anything. So once again he had been rebuffed. He couldn't much blame Etta, what with having to contend not only with Hiram but the doctor as well. Of course, Job Lester didn't help any either. And, Cletis supposed, may be it was hard for any mother to lose a child. But Etta wasn't “any mother.” She had more strength and gumption than any of the mothers that he knew of. Sometimes she had too much. Fortunately for him, though, most of the time she relied on him for direction.

Etta knew Cletis had been called by God to serve her and the others. The meaning he settled on most things was accepted by the church people. But, then there was Lovely. She always wanted to know what lay behind everything. Not a day went by without her wanting to know why. Why don't other churches handle snakes? Why does the Holy Spirit settle on only a few? Why is there so much sickness among church folk? Why did Jesus get mad at the fig tree which didn't bear fruit out of season? At one time the woman could be held off with the statement, “If we knew why, we would be God.” But that hadn't lasted long. Now Cletis had a “why”--why couldn't she be more like Etta and the others, accepting the Word of the Lord and the Word of Cletis? And why today did Lovey seem to be everywhere that Cletis should have been? Why was she privy to all that went on in the Rollins house? Why Lovey? Dammit, he said again, out loud.

He ran his hand over his head, just skimming the top of his hair. Then, he stepped down from the pulpit and walked slowly up the center aisle of the church. He touched the top of a pew, then stopped near the spot where the television camera had been set up the night before.

“Hmmmm,” he said. “I wonder how those pictures developed up? I wonder did they show them on the television boxes down in Charleston? I expect people are wondering who the fine-looking preacher is. I wonder how the people on the filums are named?” Since he knew nothing about television, Cletis did not even know what speculations to make about it. He pushed his shirt down into his pants, sighed and left the church.

CHAPTER 15

On the day after Vergie's burial, Will Horner sat in the front room of his house. It served as a combination office and examining room, though no one ever referred to it as such. Even Doc said to his patients, “Come on to the house and let me have a look.” The room looked like a parlor, except for a gangly white enamel table with a crank at the bottom of it and a white china closet filled with medicines, gauzes, tongue depressors, cotton and a few oddly-shaped medical instruments. For a desk, Doc used a modified serving table, the top of which had been scratched, chipped and dented in a hundred different designs.

He sat now at that table/desk, a pencil in his uplifted hand, his elbow resting on his stomach. A piece of white writing paper stared up at him from the surface of the desk. In his mind, he was going over everything that had happened the day before. He wanted to write letters about Vergie's death, but he did not know whom he was going to write let alone what he wanted to say. He wanted to say. He wanted to complain. He wanted to rage. He wanted to protest. Yet what possible good could his solitary complaint to some unknown person miles and miles away do? What could he write that would set his letter apart from any others? Should he write the governor, the head of the state police, the newspapers, the medical society? He had tried before with all of them and got nowhere. From the governor he had recived a thank-you note which did not relate at all to anything Horner had written. The state police had sent some kind of official complaint form which will threw in the fire. Nothing of course came from the newspapers; he never knew whether anything appeared in print as a “letter-to-the-editor” since he did not then subscribe to any of the papers. The then-president of the medical society nibbled a bit when he suggested in his letter that perhaps a committee could be formed “to look into the matter of such untoward religious practices which are contrary to acceptable medical knowledge in this state.” Will was unsure what the statement meant.

The doctor bit on the end of the pencil. He wondered whether he might be able to do something through the television company. Maybe the film could be used in some way to make his point, at least to protect innocent children like Vergie from getting bitten by snakes. With a trip to Charleston, he probably could get leads of some kind. Maybe some of the people who saw the service....

Footsteps on his front porch interrupted Will's thinking as did the two raps on the door.

“Come on in,” he called.

The door opened and in walked Lovey. Seeing her, Will stood. “Lovey, come in. Have a seat or do you want up here?” He pointed to the examining table.

She smiled. “No, Will Horner. I'm not in need of that just yet. And I sure hope I never am.” She sat in a well-worn wing chair covered in a dark blue corduroy.

“Well, that certainly makes the doctor feel wanted,” Will said as he sat back down.

“Oh, you're wanted a'plenty but not for what you might always be a'thinkin'. There's still a cent's worth of goodness in you, Doctor Horner.” She continued to smile.

“Now, Lovey, curiosity drove you here, didn't it?”

“I don't see no cats about,” Lovey replied, looking around her.

“You're the cat, Lady Ridenour. And since you've got your tongue, use it.” Will put his feet up on the desk.

“Will,” said Lovey, seriousness taking over her voice. “Will, what did you find when you examined the child?”

“Ordinarily that would be something I should only tell the parents of the child. That would be the, shall I say, the professional thing to do...”

“Yes, there's professional and there's human,” Lovey said. “We're human beings here.”

“Now, Lovey, I was about to say since you were there when I looked at Vergie and since you have shown more interest than Etta has, and since I may need you later on when I tell....”

“Tell! Tell! Tell me, Will, a' fore I bust open!” Lovey leaned out of the chair toward the doctor.

“As near as I could tell the child was still intact. She is still all right. She is, was, uh, is a virgin,” Will said.

“Well, thank mercy for that,” Lovey said, pushing herself back into the chair.

“But that's not to say someone didn't try.”

“Didn't try what? Will Horner, talk plainer-.” Lovey leaned forward again.

“Someone's been fooling with the child. Someone tried to have his way with her or teased her or something. I'm just not sure,” Horner said. He drummed his long, thin fingers on the desk.

“Oooohhh,” said Lovey. Pain crushed her face. After a pause, she spoke: “Who could it have been?”

“With Vergie dead, we'll probably never know. We can't go out on a chase after someone we don't know who did something we're not sure about. I do know that the marks you and the other women saw were bruises made by someone's thumbs.”

“Maybe they was Vergie's.”

“Oh, no. I'm sure of that. The prints were much larger than hers would be, and it would have been very hard for her to twist her thumbs around to get them in the position they showed on her thighs.”

“Could the snake have did it?”

“Now, Lovey, you know better than that. Well, maybe you don't. None of us knows too much about snakes. And I know even less of how they're handled in that service of yours.” Will looked at her as though she might tell him what strange habits her fellow church members had.

“Who could have did anything like that? Why, I've never heard of sech goin's on ever. Have you?” Lovey said.

“A doctor hears and sees a great deal. And here and there. There's someone everywhere doing everything that anyone could ever imagine,” said Will, taking his feet down from the desk. “If it hasn't been done around here, it just hasn't been thought of, I guess.”

“I reckon so.” Lovey had a far-away look in her eyes. Shifting her weight in the chair, she looked at the doctor. “Will, something's on my mind. It might or might not be related, but I need to explore it through.”

“What's that, Lovey?”

“You probably don't remember the little china doll that sets in my parlor, do you? It's always been in the young'un's chair that my pa made for me when I was no bigger'n a growed pup.”

“No, I can't say that I do remember it, Lovey.”

“Well, it's a beauteous thing. The head all china glass and painted up with eye color. The arms and legs is made of cotton stuffing and sewed loose-like so they move. Shoes is made of real leather.” Lovey nodded her head, as though in approval. “My ma made a gingham dress for her, green and white checks. So fur as I know, it's the only doll like it around.”

“It sounds as if it's a cracker jack, all right,” said Will.

“Now, Vergie loved that doll. I never seen anyone stand so in admiration of it. She'd come a'callin', I think, just to see the doll. And, my, was she tender with it. Iffen it had been a real baby, she couldn't have been more careful a'fussin' over it.” Lovey smiled.

The doctor sat, a look of expectation on his face.

Lovey continued. “Now, recent-like, the child asked all kinds of questions about the doll. I wouldn't say she pestered me, but at times she came close to it for certain. The quare thing, Will, about the question was they concerned the doll's private parts.”

Hearing that, Will sat straight up in his chair. “Whaaattt?”

“She started at first askin' why the doll had no underthings. Said that since it had a dress and shoes shouldn't there be underthings. I think I told her the dress covered ever' thing pretty good. Then, another time she asked me why the doll didn't match her. I wasn't sure 'bout her meanin'. She said how come the doll had no holes. I still didn't know what her meanin' was. Then, she pointed to the, to what call the womb, or where it would be, on the doll. Well, I didn't know how to answer her. But she kept after it, wouldn't let go of it. I thought to myself she should be askin' Etta these things. I know for certain that her ma wouldn't give her an answer a'tall. Howsomever, it weren't my place a'tall to be answerin'.” Lovey paused, took a deep breath and then went on.

“I tried answerin' that it was only a doll and not supposed to have ever'thing. iI said that's why it don't have actual skin. Then, the next time she brought the subject up, she reckoned that we could cut holes in the doll and then maybe make some underthings. I asked her what good the holes would be in the doll. She told me it would likely be a good hiding place for things. My land, I said to the child, that place ain't for the hidin' of things, and don't you be a'puttin' anything in there!”

“That's good advice, Lovey. But why do you think she was asking all of those questions?”

“I've studied on that quite a spell. I thought maybe it was the beginning of her monthly time. But Etta would need to spell out what that was. Then I thought she maybe was ailing' there. She said no to whatever I tried to ask. And I didn't want to ask too much, all that bein' a mother's job, don't you know.” Lovey leaned on her right hip so that she could smooth out her dress under her left side. She readjusted herself in the chair.

“Then, Lord have mercy, she asked me if a snake could get in there! A snake, mind you! I told her for certain no and to stop a'thinkin' anything like that a'tall. Where do you reckon she ever got a notion like that?”

“I reckon from all the goings-on in the church. That's exactly where she got it,” said Will, sharpness edging into his voice.

“Well, no one talks about sech combinations of foolishness in church,” said Lovey.

“Not in so many words I'm sure they don't,” said Will. “But if a child is seeing the physical changes in her body and doesn't understand them, then she's going to draw some conclusions, right or wrong. If she's surrounded by snakes, especially with her mother being so involved with them, then her mind is going to make some leap and connect the two. The snake hides in holes. She has holes in her body. Therefore, the snake might want to crawl in her hole.”

“Will Horner!” Lovey cried. “I can't believe it! Sech a thing!”

“Now, just stop and think about it, Lovey. If the child doesn't know what's going on, and she has her body and snakes always on her mind, isn't she going to make some connection?”

“It's too deep for me. My thinkin' can't handle notions such as that,” said Lovey.

“Can you remember when your body was changing, Lovey?”

“All's I remember now is the change of life, and I knowed full well what was a'goin' on,” she said.

“That's because you were old enough and experienced enough to know what was happening. Think about a child like Vergie who is undergoing such changes. She'll look anywhere for some kind of explanation.”

“But Vergie wasn't the kind of a child to even think of putting snakes and private parts together,” protested Lovey.

“Evidently she did. You heard her.”

“Someone must have told her something like that.”

“Maybe that someone was a something. Something like a church where....”

“The church don't teach anything of the sort, Will, and you know it!” Lovey stood up.

“I don't know it, Lovely and that's what I'd like to find out. Now settle down a minute and hear me out.”

“Well, all right, but I still don't think the church has a thing to do with all of this.”

“Perhaps not. However, Vergie was influenced by the power of the snake. Why? She sees the importance given to it by the church. It's the ultimate test of the believer. She sees only a very few people handling the snake. The chief one, the person in the lime-light, is her own mother. Maybe Vergie senses her mother thinks more of the snake than she does of her daughter.' Did you ever think about that? If that's so, then the snake's importance in Vergie's eye is all the greater. Add these things together and you come up with some of the basic things going into Vergie's thinking. There's a great deal of psychology, theology, mythology involved.”

“Well, some of what you say could make some sense iffen a body was to reason it out over a spell of time. And I'll be a'doin' that. But when you talk theology and all that, you're too far over my head. Them 'ologies' ain't for people like me who didn't go to school long enough for the water to get hot. We don't have room for them. You should know that,” said Lovey.

“What I do know,” Will said gently,” is that you understand a great deal, Lovey, a lot more than you will ever give yourself credit for. You may not realize it, but you have come by so many things naturally. In school they would be classified under an 'ology' of some kind. Perhaps I shouldn't have brought those words into our talk. Reminds me of one of the smartest men I ever knew. He left these hills and became a well-known teacher, yet he always said, 'I love religion, but don't know anything about theology. I love flowers, but know nothing about botany.' You're like that, Lovey, and I respect you for it. If I didn't, I wouldn't have sat here talking with you like this. So take some time to think about what live said here.”

“Well, I do like to find answers to things. I'll for certain be studyin' upon these burdens. But I don't want to forget the rest of my story about the doll. And it's just this. Vergie favored that plaything so much that I was a fixin' to give it to her. None of my young'uns ever showed a bit of interest in it. So I was a'goin' to slip it in her coffin with her. I toted it over to Etta's yesterday morn when we was a'layin' the child out. I laid it down on the front room lamp table whilst I went in with you for the examination. And, do you know, Will Horner, when I came out of Vergie's bedroom, the doll was gone! Gone! Disappeared! Now who on earth would take a doll from the home of the dead? Only good Christian folk was there.”

“Sometimes it's the good Christian folk who do the most surprising things. Did you ask if anyone saw the doll?”

“Only Rachel and Tensey. They seen me a 'carryin' the brown paper poke all morning. They didn't know it's whereabouts. And I wouldn't trouble Etta with such a question. 'Sides I wasn't a'goin' to tell her about the doll. I don't 'spect she would approve. I was just goin' to slip it in with the child.”

“It does seem peculiar that someone would take the doll.”

“As I just told you about Vergie Studying the doll's underparts for long spells. She put a heap of stock in spreading' the doll's legs apart. She'd hold the legs apart with her thumbs whilst she looked up into the privates. I reckon, as hard as she held them legs, if it hands been a person, she could of bruised it.”

“Hhhmmmmm,” pondered the doctor. “You may well be right, Lovey. We'd both better give all of this serious thought. But I can't right now. I've got to get over to the old Jackson place to check on Clytice. You knew-she had the mumps, didn't you? And mumps at her age can be very dangerous.”

“Let me know iffen I can fetch her anything. Or if her warsh needs did, iffen you bring it to me, I'll do it up. Well, my mind is cast of its burden, knowin' the little child had not been hurt. I'll ponder on these things. Bless you, Will Horner, you're a good man.” Lovey patted his hand as she left.

CHAPTER 16

On the day after the funeral Hiram did not go to work. Even though he was not expected, he sent word that he would not be there. At first he considered going, thinking that a full day's toil in the mine would help take his mind off Vergie. But then he reasoned that, if he, weren't able to stop thinking about the child, he might be too distracted from his work. After the emotional pitch of the day before, he wanted time to himself. The mourners had returned from the ceremony to share' in a meal with the family, and Hiram held forth by himself, for Etta did not return until almost supper time. By then, nearly everyone had gone home, chores and tasks tugging at them as the day wore on. Lovey and Tensey stayed to put everything in order. Will and a first cousin sat on the porch until after Etta came back. Then all the visitors departed. Etta and Hiram said nothing to one another the remainder of the day.

Now, the next day, Hiram sat on the porch smoking his second cigarette of the morning. He had been up since the first rooster squawk drifted across the valley on the first slant of eastern light. Two hours later he heard Etta stirring about. A bit later she appeared at the screen door and asked Hiram if the wanted anything to eat.

“I'd be obliged for a cup of coffee and any of them vittles left over from yes'tidday,” he said, somewhat surprised at the offer.

In a few minutes she called to him to come into the kitchen. As he went into the front room, he looked toward Vergie's room. The door gaped open. In a flashing image, he saw her lying on the bed. The image fled. He walked into the kitchen and sat down at the table.

Etta, who was stirring a pot on the stove, said, “There'll be no need of cookin' in this household goin' on a week. There's passels of food perched hither and yon.”

“Our neighbors poured forth their best,” said Hiram.

Etta set a plate before her husband. Dark brown buckwheat cakes with rounded pats of melting butter, a yellow square of corn pone steaming with more butter, three slabs of bacon, and fried green tomatoes covered the plate. She poured a cup of coffee from an over-sized enameled pot.

“There be enough food on this plate alone to last me for a week,” said Cletis.

“Eat what you're a mind to,” responded Etta as she sat down in front of a plate of buckwheat cakes and a spoonful of green tomatoes.

They ate in silence for a while. Hiram wondered whether this might be the calm before some kind of storm. He had much to say to Etta and sensing that no time would be the right time to say it, he swallowed a mouthful of coffee, drew in his breath and spoke.

“Etta, I came awful close to losin' myself yes'tidday. I left most of me up there on the ridge with Vergie.”

“I guess you put more stock than most folks in human things,” she said, looking at him. “The things of this life all pass away.”

“Vergie weren't things. She was our flesh and blood.”

“Hiram, you don't have understandin' yet. It's the flesh and blood that don't endure. Iffen we count them as treasure, they bind us to earthen things.” Etta kept her index finger entwined in the handle of her coffee cup.

“I allays thought people was treasure. Especially a child. You used to think so about Vergie.”

“Vergie was a good young'un. She honored her father and mother. But she had to first honor God. I had to raise her to do that.”

“What I don't have understandin' of, Etta, is why you have so much feelin' for your religion and pertenear none for your family.” Hiram folded his arms and rested them on the edge of the table. “Why, you hain't been a woman for me since not long after Vergie was borned. How many years is it now I've been a'sleepin' alone up in my little attic room? You tended to Vergie, seen she was fed and clothed, took schoolin' and was a worker. But I never seen you kiss or hug her whilst she was a'growin' up. In spite of it, she loved you a heap. Why do you take all of your feelin' to the church.”

Etta put down her coffee cup. “I don't expect you to have understandin' about the church. You've made up your mind that it's not to your likin'. I've tried to tell you many a'time what its meanin' was, but you don't have ears to hear. A body's got to have more than they can find here what with misery all around. It may be the less we have in this life the more we'll have in the eternal one. Them promises of the Bible will be fulfilled. Look around you. What do you see? Folks milkin' the earth dry. A little heat spell and then no crops, Nothin' to get through the winter but the gracious mercy of neighbors. Some that's as bad off. You go off to the mines. The roof falls in. A man's kilt or maimed. Look at you. Three fingers a'missin' from one hand. How many womenfolk in the valley has watched as her man was toted up to the door with a sheet over his face? There's sickness and contrariness to contend with and floods and dry spells. Who's to put up with all of this? All of us'n are, for we stand to gain the reward.”

“Them things you talk of are real, but I don't see rewards as part of them,” said Hiram.

“That comes by believin' on the Lord Jesus Christ.”

“Well, Etta, it'd seem to me that you could practice some of that believin' by believin' in your husband and daughter. You kin see us. We're knowed to you. You've got things backwards. Savin' your feelin' for what you can't see and don't know for certain whilst lockin' out your feelin' for what you can see and do know for certain. No wonder I can't bring understandin'. Hiram got up and poured himself another cup of coffee.

“You could pray for some,” said Etta quietly.

“That's the answer, is it?”

“That's where I got some of mine.”

Hiram wanted to respond with a “hell of a lot of good it's done you,” but he also wanted to carry on the conversation as long as he could. So he said, “Well, I never was one much to study on things I couldn't see. In sums or whatever. I have to concern myself with things I can see and touch and hear.” He reached down in his trousers and took out some coins.

“Like dealin' with how much money these here add up to. Les see, twenty, twenty-five, thirty, fifty-five,fifty-eight--fifty-eight cents. It's here, I can touch it, I can count it, and I know I can buy fifty-eight cents worth of goods,” he said.

“Lay up not for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust corrupt,” said Etta.

“One thing I can say is religion has gave you a peculiar way of talking.”

“Them is Biblical words.”

“Why can't you recite your own? You and Cletis and most of them others goes around recitin' the Bible all the time. Can't you come up with something of your own? Why do you follow ever one else's thoughts? Ain't you got a mind of your own?”

“Iffen you have a Bible, you don't need no mind,” said Etta, getting up from the table and carrying her plate and cup to the sink.

“Woman, you sure plowed a straight line, with that pronouncement.” A smile brightened his face, but since Etta had her back turned, she did not see it.

“Besides,” Etta said, “Cletis's mind does much of the interpretation for us.”

“What makes him so special?”

“He has been annointed and appointed of the Lord.”

“How do you know?”

“The Lord has revealed that to us.”

“The Lord?! You mean old Cletis hisself. He's told you all enough times that ever'body in the church believes it. Iffen you have to tell something about yourself too many times, it might be you're a'tryin' to tell yourself. Tellin' ain't knowin'.” Cletis stood watching Etta wash the dishes.

“I can tell you Cletis Chidester has something that none of the other men in this valley has,” said Etta.

“And what is that?”

“A calling from God.”

“Oh, woman, why don't you say something that makes sense. God don't go a'callin' men---or women neither for that matter. I've saw men in these parts take up religion to get some sort of power over people. There's something in folks that makes them run after a man that's got a little oil in his tongue. I've saw it time and time again. The meanest rascal can paint a word picture of God and Heaven and have people lined up for particulars. It ain't no different than them side shows at a carnival. You put something behind a tent and let a man with an oily tongue stand outside a'barkin' in a horn about the unusual half-man, half-woman that can be looked at for a quarter. His description gets floweryer and floweryer and the next thing you know all the men in the county is lined up with their quarters in their hand. What you see when you get inside, many times ain't pretty, mabbe a man with pancake flour on his face and some picture pasted on his underpants to look like a woman. The light's a candle, and ropes perteck the strange one, so folks believe they seen half a man and half a woman. Natcherally, they're only half-seein' themselves. “A slick preacher is like that. With a prettyfied voice he can paint pictures of what no one has ever saw to dispute him--golden streets, angels strummin' on harps, trumpets a'soundin' to wake the dead. What's worser is he sets up a test for believin', and that test's the most carnival-like thing he can come up with. I'm a'talkin' about handling snakes or drinking poison. Seems to me that's devil-testin', not God-testin'. I don't know who's the fool. The slick preacher or the folks who follow what he says. I guess him and them both.”

Etta looked as though she would burst if she couldn't say something, but Hiram went on.

“A few so-called believers is like Lovey, half-thinkin' and half-seein'. Most of you others don't reason a'tall, and you let preachers like Cletis see for you. Iffen that's what you want to do, Etta, then you do it. But now that you've took Vergie there and had-her slaughtered like a lamb, things about your religion and me has got to change.”

Etta stood up, folded her arms over her bosom and glared at her husband. In a tree outside, a woodpecker's clackety-clack-clack-clack put several exclamation points on Hiram's last sentence.

“Iffen you don't loosen up with all that religion, you can go and live at the church house or with some of the sisters. I've put up with your foolishment for too long now. The way you acted with Vergie a'dying, why, you showed nothing for the child. Iffen you hadn't of took her to church and put them crazy-fool ideas in her head, she wouldn't of died.” He stopped to swallow so that the lump in his throat might dissolve somewhat.

“As I said before, you hain't been much of a woman to me for years. A cryin' dime would of been worth more. But I don't know now that I want you to be, what with all them snakes a'havin' crawled over and over you. God I How can you let them things slither and squirm all over you like that? It's a mercy I've never saw them on you. I think it would make me puke. Maybe it's just the same that I don't sleep in the same bed with you.”

“No man will come between me and my religion!” Etta shouted. “No man! You can't put me outen my house and home neither. It's never been heard of in these parts. If there's to be any leavin', it's the man. It's you. No, Hiram Rollins, I'll see you in your grave a'fore I let you come betwixt me and my religion or put me outen my home.” Etta's voice was brittle.

“Well, you seen one member of this family in her grave, but by God, I know how to take care of myself, woman.” Hiram doubled his fists at his sides.

“There'll be no protection against God's will. That's what you're up against, mister! The best thing you could do is come to the Lord.”

“Jesus Christ, Etta, there's no getting through to you. Your religion has made you crazy. It's got holt of your mind and your heart. You pore, pore soul.”

For a minute or two they looked at one another. Then Hiram spoke. “Well, woman, I'm dead set in what I say. Iffen you keep this up, you get out. I don't hold with divorcement, and I hain't heard of too many people in any of these hollows a'leavin' wives or husbands, but, on Vergie's honor, I can tell you that one of us will leave here, and it surely won't be me.”

“We'll just see about that!” Etta said. She walked past Hiram as she left the room. In a moment, her bedroom slammed shut.

Hiram smiled and nodded to himself. What he had said over the years in little snippets he had brought to a head in this protracted confrontation. As he lit a cigarette, he wondered what might have happened if he had let Etta take over the morning's conversation. After all, she had prepared breakfast for him and then sat down at the table in a polite, if reserved, way. He would never know, though. He was relieved to have spilled out some of the thoughts and feelings which were crushing him. Yes, he was quite relieved, but not of the growing emptiness of the loss of his only child.

Hiram went back out to the porch, once again sitting in the wicker rocker. Lighting a cigarette, he leaned back. In the woods to the side of the house a drumming grouse beat an incessant roll on a log. The sound comforted Hiram, for it was one that Vergie often remarked about. The child has been fascinated that a bird would return again and again to the same log and spend so much time just drilling away with its bill. Bird song sweetened the hour. The short-cropped grass shimmered with its cover of dew which the sun had not yet drunk. A few leaves stirred on some of the trees surrounding the house.

Hiram sat thinking. Now and then the rocker creaked. Blue gray smoke drifted up from his cigarette. “I misdoubt whether Etta will do a thing about Vergie's belongings. I expect I'd better think of what to do with them. There's no point in keeping her room just as she's left it. I'll take her room. It'll be somewhat of a comfort to me to be where the child was.” He bent over to snuff out his cigarette in the ashtray at the side of his chair, and when he straightened back up Cletis Chidester was watching him from the front gate. “Oh, God, the vulture is a'flappin' his wings a'ready,” Hiram said to himself. He waited for Cletis to speak.

“Mornin', Hiram,” the preacher said as he tipped an imaginary hat on his head.

“Hello, Cletis.” Hiram did not get up as he glared at the writer.

“How are you a'feelin' today?” Chidester stood with one foot up on the first step to the porch.

“Tolerable, right tolerable,” replied Hiram.

“And how's Etta?” He still lingered at the bottom step, aware that Hiram had not extended even the most perfunctory courtesy of inviting a guest, welcome or not, to have a seat.

“You'll be after askin' her herself,” said Hiram.

“Is she t'home?”

“She is.”

“I'd be pleased to have a word with her.”

“Then have the word under her window. You know which one it is.” Hiram nodded to the left of the house.

Cletis turned to go around to Etta's window, but Hiram interrupted him.

“Afore you go, Chidester, you need to know something. You won't be welcomeon this property again. I don't want you here no more. And if there was any way to stop Etta a'goin' to that so called church of yours, I'd stop her.”

“You start that kind of meddling, and you're up against the wrath of God.” Cletis sounded like an Old Testament prophet. All he needed to do to complete the picture was to point a bony finger in Hiram's face.

“Why is it always the wrath of God? Where's the love of God? That's one whoppin' thing wrong with your religion, your so-called religion, as I say. And that is it's squeezed bone dry of love.”

“If you don't see the love, Hiram, maybe it's because you are faith-blind.”

“Iffen it was there, even the blind could see it. All I see is dried-up, puny love. You've got so many 'shalt-nots' it's like weeds choking the crops. You people have got religion around you like a vise. Don't it hurt most of the time, Chidester?”

“It might look and seem that way to you, but to us, to them that believes, it is a free, open path to eternal life. We are saved, Hiram, saved. We are in another kind of life altogether and bound for an even greater one. Etta and I--and the others-- pray all the time that you will see the light.”

“Instead of prayin', you should be a'doin', a'doin' things for this life instead of the next.” The thought struck Hiram that he and Cletis were almost carrying on a normal conversation. So far as he knew, the preacher had not quoted any Scripture, and neither of them had raised their voices in the slightest.

“This is just a temporary vale that we have to endure while we pass through it,” said Cletis.

“Well, to make endurance a mite easier, you best be a'lookin' for Etta a place to stay 'til she's ready for that eternal life. I told her this morning if she keeps up with all this foolishment of religion, she'll be a'lookin' for a place to lay her head. For she's not a'goin' to be livin' here.” With his back, he pushed the rocker as far as he could.

“Now, Hiram, you're just upset over what happened to Vergie. There's no need....”

“You're damned right I'm upset over what happened to Vergie. As far as I can tell, I'm about the only one who is. It don't appear that her own mother is. I'm more than upset. So the less I have to do with any kind of religion that fosters killin', the better off I will be. That includes havin' anything to do with the likes of you. You ain't worth a wet hole in the snow! And Etta. If Etta keeps it up, I'll have nothing to do with her.”

“I can't believe you mean that,” said Cletis.

“Well, I'll give you something so you can believe it. Then you'll have something to show for your belief. That's more than you have with your God. Unless, that is, you count a dead child.”

“Hiram, don't go on so,” said Cletis in the softest tones he had used in a lonq time.

“I've just started. Iffen you don't want more, then stay out of my way, sir.” Hiram took a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it.

In the front room Etta had overheard most of the exchange between her husband and Cletis. Upon hearing voices, she had come out of her bedroom to see who was there. Finding Cletis, she lingered. Now she came out onto the porch.

“Good morning, Cletis,” she said. “How are you this morning?” She did not look at Hiram.

“Morning, Sister Etta.”

The formality in Cletis's tone caused Hiram to smile.

“What brings you here today?” Etta's voice strained with a similar formality.

“I was concerned with how you...how you and Hiram was doing,” he said.

“Well, you know half of that, I reckon.”

She looked at Hiram, lowering her head by forcing her chin in toward her neck. “As for myself, I'm ever ready to do the work that is set before me.”

She even sounds like Cletis, Hiram thought. What is it about that man that gives him power over his followers? Can't any' of 'em size him up for what he is?

Cletis spoke. “If we could go down to the church house, we can see what some of that work is.”

“I'm a'willin',” said Etta, as she descended the porch steps.

Both she and the preacher made sounds which could have been interpreted as “good-byes” to Hiram. He said not a word but sat watching them as they disappeared into the woody path leading to the church.

CHAPTER 17

In Charleston, Tim and Joe, the television cameramen, stood viewing the footage from the coverage of the church service. Parts of it had been used on the news spots the day before, and telephone calls had poured in from all over the southern part of the state. Most people wanted to know more about the church and just where it was located. A few complained about snakes crawling over people, especially over a child. One woman shrieked that the National Guard should be called out; she did not say, why.

The men's boss had been furious when he found out that they had not known whether the girl had died. They were just as furious with their boss because he had not sent a reporter along with them. The only name they had was that of the preacher, the Reverend Cletis Chidester. They thought, they said to their boss, that the girl's name was Vergie. Beyond that, they had only the dramatic shots on film.

The video, finely focused with sharp detail, was much better than the audio. Crackling, rasping and occasional popping made the sound portion of the film impossible to understand. Added to it, the speaking in tongues emerged as gibberish. Not a single enunciated phrase came through in known or unknown languages. Once in awhile, the dulcimer and guitar chords squeaked out.

Tim and Joe were studying the film, frame by frame, so they could plan their strategy for going back to Salt Hollow. The management of the station wanted to send a reporter to gather material for a documentary, but they knew no stranger could ever penetrate the resistance that many of the isolated commmunities in the hills had to outsiders. A wall of firm politeness, the television workers had discovered, is often far more difficult to climb over than a wall of silence. The only possible chance to get a story, barring an inside source, was if the two men who had been there once could go back.

Tim spoke. “You know, pal, I don't think we'd have too much trouble appealing to that preacher guy's ego. Look at some of these shots he's in. He's a poseur, if I ever saw one.” Tim pointed to one frame and then to another.

“What the hell is a posewer?” Joe asked, contorting his face as he looked at his partner.

“Come off it, Joe. You know very well what it is. And that Chidester is a perfect example of it. I don't think we'll have as much trouble getting back in as we thought we would. Trouble is making the initial contact. We don't have time to do it through letters the way we did before. And not too many of those people have telephones.” He slipped a reel of film into a black carrying case.

“That sheriff would have a phone, but I forget his name.”

“Hell, that's easy enough to find out.”

“Maybe we just ought to take our chances and pop up there unannounced,” said Joe. “We gotta go anyway whether the way is paved or not.”

“Let's give the sheriff the old try first,” said Tim. “I'll go get the info.”

A short time later the telephone in Sheriff Job Lester's office in Salt Hollow rang. The shrill ring awakened Fatty who was asleep sitting up on one of the cots in a cell. The broom with which he had begun sweeping the jail had slumped to its side. He tripped over it as, startled, he jumped up and ran for the telephone.

“Hullo,” he said in a thick voice.

“Sheriff Lester?” On the other end of the line Joe asked his question,

“Nope,” said Fatty.

“Is he there?”

“Nope.”

“When do you expect him?”

“When he gets here.”

“Can you give me some idea?”

“Nope.”

“Well, who is this?”

“This here is his deppity, Fatty Strawderman.”

“Could I leave a message for the sheriff?”

“Is it a 'mergency?”

“Nor an emergency, no, but I would like to talk to him. I'm calling from Charleston.”

“Oh, from Charleston?”

“Yes, and I would like to talk to the sheriff in person.”

“Wal, he ain't a'goin' to Charleston that I know of.”

“I guess not. But I'm coming there. When would be a good time to see him?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Just come and I expect he'll see you.”

Tim was just about to hang up in anger when Fatty's next words gave the first bit of satisfaction in the entire conversation.

“Be here at ten o'clock in the morning and you can see him.”

“That's fine, Mr. Strawderman. But don't you want my name?” said Tim.

“Wal, since you called me Mister Strawderman, I'd be pleased to return the favor. What did you say your name was?”

“Tim Callison. I'm from the Charleston television station.”

“Yes, sir. Mr. Tim Callison. I'll notify the sheriff. You'll be here in the mornin'.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Don't mention it.”

“Good-bye.”

“Bye.”

The message Job received from Fatty was more than Tim could have hoped for: “Mr. Tim Callison from, the Charleston television station will be here to see you at ten o'clock in the morning.” Job sensed immediately that the call had something to do with Vergie. He had forgotten he had met the two fellows from Charleston. He recalled now the details of having stopped by the church on his way from Greenbrier County. He tried to picture what the men looked like, but for the life of him he couldn't remember. Wondering now what kinds of pictures they had taken, he contemplated that they might have a somewhat detailed photographic account of what had occurred during the service.

What struck him now was whether others knew about Vergie through the television pictures. By others, he meant “the outside world.” Job and people like him who had traveled or lived away from the valley always referred to distant places by that phrase. Others, though, would not have dared used the words since that would be an admission that a world existed outside of their hills. When you have been born in one place, born there of parents whose, great-great-great grandparents on both sides were also born there, scarcely another world can exist. What little experience some of the people had had with any other world, most did not like at all. From the war, nearly all of the men had returned, except of course those who had “given their lives for their country.” To them, and the ones who survived, “their country” meant the world enclosed and defined by the hills. Job Lester himself, with more than a slight tinge of worldliness, had chosen to come back to the valley after being in the military. Doc Horner, with as fine an education as man could get, had returned to the hills.

Job knew why he had come back. It was to a life which he could explain to himself. Too much of what he had to contend with in the service complicated even the every-day simplicity of what life was about. What had to be done in life could best be done here. What was left over could provide some kind of surprise. No matter where you were, you had to eat, you had to sleep and you had to keep warm. If you grew your own food, you knew what you were eating and where it came from. Oh, yes, you had to put up with too much rain or not enough; you had to worry about killing frost or scorching sun; you had to weed and seed; you had to keep animals and bugs away. But your own labor brought forth the yellow blossoms on the tomato, and you and nature, working together in her own time, not yours, would keep at it until the fat red tomato fell into your hands. A woman's labor brought forth bread, loaf after loaf of honey brown bread, raised from leaven. Hadn't people been baking bread since whatever beginnings we had? Dough swelled with life. Job always felt close to some understanding of life whenever he saw the freshly baked loaves of bread his wife lined up on the table.

Here a man has no trouble sleeping. Job had hardly ever heard of people having difficulty sleeping. Only the very old or the sick might complain about not closing their eyes all night long. In magazines Job had read the statistics about the number of people in the United States who had trouble sleeping at night. If they worked outside in the air and the dirt, of salt hollow they surely would sleep.

A roof over your head didn't come as easy as growing or baking food, Job knew, but fortunately in here everyone had a place to live. Most always it was on property handed down through the generations. If a maiden relative never married, she found welcome with nearly all her kinfolk. And if she had no relatives, something almost unheard of in the valley, she found more than refuge with friends or became a companion to an elderly person. No one was homeless. If a property began to fall to ruin because of illness or hard times, neighbors came, hammer in hand, to set the place aright. Those who could make shingles made them; those who could raise beams raised them. A widow might have lost a husband but she would gain the skills of a dozen men in the valley.

Saying these were good people left Job feeling he needed more explanation. Yet no other term better characterized them. They worked hard with an acceptance that went far above resignation. They accepted what came their way without complaint. To whom would they complain? Who would listen? Who could do anything? Where people had nothing or little, their neighbors supplied, knowing full well that they, in turn, would be provided for. Mean-spiritedness or violence, when it appeared, would not be tolerated. Injustice, though, like a splinter in the finger, had to be excised before it festered. Occasionally, family would be pitted against family in a dispute over land or marriage, and a random outburst of ugliness might occur, but these were the exception. The people paced themselves with gentleness and good, common, bay horse sense.

How in the world did I get started on all that, Job asked as he slapped himself on the forehead with an open hand. The outside world, that's it. Hhmmmm. Wonder if they do know of what happened to Vergie. If they do, it wouldn't surprise me a bit if they'd come flocking here by the hundreds. Wouldn't that be a howdy-do? He guessed he'd better let Doc know about tomorrow morning's visitor.

CHAPTER 18

Doc sat at the desk in his living room/office. Spread out before him were two books, one of them covered with a disintegrating leather binding. The other book had a piece of dark blue cloth as its cover. Horner looked up when he heard a rap on his door. Job walked in just as Horner said, “Come in.”

“Afternoon, officer,” Will said, the cheerfulness in his voice highlighting his greeting.

“Howdy, doctor. How are you?” said Job.

“Right tolerable.” Will lapsed into the speech of the hills. “I was going to come and see you. Now you've save me a trip.”

“Wouldna been much of a trip. Glad to oblige you, just the same.” Job eased down in to the chair in which Lovey had sat earlier in the day.

“I was just doing a bit of reading about the snake, “Will said as he held up one of the books. “You'd be surprised about what I've found. For instance, did you know that rattlers can shed their skins up to five times a year?”

“They can shed theirselves clear away as far as I'm concerned,” said Job.

“Then, there're a lot of superstitions associated with snakes. They can hypnotize or they can roll down hills like hoops.”

“Oh, certain they do. You see them ever mornin' rollin' down ever hill you pass goin' to see your patients, don't you?”

“Try this on for size. Ancient Indians in this country believed that mountain ranges and ridges were serpent bodies and hills and volcanoes were serpent heads. They regarded lightning, you know the zigzagging of it through the sky, as serpents falling.”

“You sound like you're ready to become one of old Chidester's followers,” said Job.

“Well, maybe I should since I read here that the snake is a symbol of sexual passion.”

“How's that?”

“Let me see here,” Will said as he leafed through the pages of the leather volume. “Ah, here. One scholar quotes this verse from the Bible which makes reference to the serpent: 'I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head and thou shall bruise his heel.' This scholar thinks this suggests that God has made sexual passion a sin, and the bruising means syphilis as a punishment is visited upon man.”

“How does he come to that notion?”

“I'm not sure yet. I've just been skimming these books to see what I can find.”

“I've never heard of much syphilis in these parts. I do know they sure warned us enough about it in the army.” Job lifted his right leg and rested it ankle on his left knee.

“There's been an occasional case of the disease here, but it's rare.” Will opened the second book. “Just one more thing here. According to this, there are 110 species of snakes in the United States. Forty-eight of the harmless varieties can be found in the East, and only four of the 18 poisonous snakes are in this region.” Will looked over at Job.

“I think I know where all four are, and that leads right in to what I came to see you about.”

“What's that?” Will said as he put the book down and leaned back.

“I had a call from the television guys and one of 'em'll be here tomorrow morning.”

“What television guys?”

“The one what took pictures the night Vergie died.”

“What television men who were here the night Vergie died?” Will stood up.

“Well, I'm tryin' to tell you. I forgot about it myself until Fatty told me they called. I guess Cletis and some of the others let Charleston people into the service to film it. That's what they'd been a'doin' before I stopped at the church when I saw the lights on.”

Will smashed his hand down on the desk. It hit with a splat. “I wish to hell somebody had told me before now,” he said.

“I know it don't put me in the best of light.”

“I guess you just had too much on your mind. Well, still and all, this fellow may be the help we need.”

“You lost me. What help, doc?”

“In getting this snake-handling foolishness stopped once and for all. He could give us the publicity to get the attention we need.” Will's face relaxed for a moment; then it tightened up again.

“Nothing short of the hand of God will stop Cletis, Doc. You know that.” Job stood up.

“Maybe man can help move that hand of God in Cletis's direction. Sit back down, Job. I need to talk to you.”

Obliging, Job dropped down into the chair. Doc also sat down.

“There's maybe a bit more to all this business with Vergie than I'd like to think. Lovey and the women laying her out found some bruises on the child. Now that might not be too unusual except that the marks were on the inside of Vergie's thighs. I keep telling, myself they are nothing to be concerned about, yet something keep popping into my head that I shouldn't ignore them.”

“Do you have any notion what they could be?” Job's interest grew with each word Will spoke.

“Not just a notion. I'm pretty damned certain they are thumb marks,” said Will.

“Thumb marks! What are you saying?”

“Yes, I think they are the thumb marks of an adult. They weren't Vergie's, that I'm sure of. They were too large and positioned in such a way that the girl could not possibly have managed.”

“Do you think they were forced on her?” Job could feel himself perspiring under the arms.

“If they were forced, it wasn't with violence. It was with just a little heavy-handedness, I'd say.”

“Who in the hell could it be? I mean, no one would do a thing like that.”

“I thought at first Etta might have done it. Maybe she was checking Vergie over for something. I don't know. I just couldn't follow any possibility anywhere.”

“There ain't any young bucks around that she might a'been seein' that I know of,” said Job. He passed his hand over his forehead.

“None that I know of, either. Between the two of us, we'd surely know or Lovey would.” He paused. “But I didn't know about those television men, so maybe I wouldn't.”

“Now, Will, I tole you that that plumb passed out of my mind 'til a little while ago.”

“No need to protest, sheriff. I was just trying to rile you a bit, as they say.” Horner smiled.

“Waaalll, now.” Job couldn't suppress a sheepish grin. Then he spoke with some hesitation. “Uh, uh, Doc...Uh. Was Vergie all right otherwise, you know, uh....”

“Yes, Job, she was still intact, as they say. I held my breath while I was examining her, afraid of what I might find. But thank God she was all right there.”

“Whew! That's a relief. I was just about to accuse Cletis of something.”

Doc looked at Job. “Don't think that hasn't crossed my mind. But he's all talk, don't you know. That voice of his just helps the boast along. Besides, I don't think he's capable of it. Remember the story about how he performed an operation on himself maybe thirty years ago?”

“Oh, that story comes up all the time. Men don't let go of somethin' like that. Tried to mutilate hisself. Shoot. Only Cletis could ever think of somethin' like that. Say, do you think he really did it?”

Doc's upper torso quaked as he threw off a shudder. “Makes me sick to my stomach to even think about it.”

“God, he must be tetched to do somethin' like that.” “Whether he is or isn't, I wouldn't trust him. He has so much influence over Etta that she'd probably go along with anything he suggested. He'd find something in the Bible to back him up,” said Will.

“What is it a lot of the womenfolks see in him? Take Lovey. Now, there's....”

Will interrupted. “That's something else I wanted to mention, Job. Sorry to cut you off like that, but when you mentioned Lovey, I had to tell you something curious she told me this morning.”

“What's that, Will?” Job stretched his legs out in front of him.

“Well, it's nothing, but it's a nothing that hasn't gone away since she told me. Someone took a china doll she had with her when she went to lay Vergie out. The doll was a favorite of Vergie's, and Lovey was planning to put it in the child's coffin.”

“I' guess one of the children at the funeral took a likin' to it and just picked it up,” said Job.

“Now you know no mother or father would let their child keep anything like that. And surely no child could have carried the doll home without someone seeing it.” Doc closed the two books in front of him on the desk.

“Mebbe a young'un hid it 'round the Rollins place and was goin' to come and fetch it later.”

“That's a possibility but not very likely.”

“Why is it a'pesterin' you?”

“Don't you see anything strange about a doll disappearing from a laying-out in Salt Hollow?”

“Not strange. Disappointin', mebbe. I'm surprised that any folks here would steal a doll, especially one at a burial. What's the place a'comin' to?” said Job.

“Lovey said Vergie was always asking questions about the doll, particularly about what was or wasn't under the dress.”

“That's pretty natural, I'd say. Vergie was of the age for needin' to understand about turnin' into a woman. Etta might not let her ask questions.”

“Of course, you're right. But I can't help feeling there's some connection between Vergie and the missing doll.”

“You're not askin' me to investigate a stolen doll, are you?” Job's face almost formed a question mark.

“Not investigate, but keep your eyes and ears open. If nothing else, Lovey would want to have the doll back. She's had it since she was a child.”

“I'll talk to her about it, sorta find out what it looks like. Now, about the television fella. Do you want to be there with me when he comes?” said Job.

“When is it you said he was coming?”

“Ten, t'morrow mornin'.”

“You're damned right I want to be there. I want to see if he can help us bring this snake handling to the attention of someone who will stop this nonsense.”

“You'll have a hard time doin' that, Will, and you know it. Folks here aren't a'goin' to let strangers in. Cletis and Etta especially. They'll close up, theirselves and the church tighter'n rheumatiz binds the toes. If they shut out a man's eye from lookin', you know how they're gonna feel with a machine's eye. That Charleston man won't last here a minute.”

“We can try, Job. We've got to,” said the doctor. “Maybe Lovey can help us.”

“She'll draw the line, too. She won't go 'gainst the wishes of her that flock. Her loyalty will show. It's more to God than to Cletis, so she might not always listen to the preacher. But she won't go up against the church.” Job spoke with the authority which comes from knowing his neighbors in some instances better than they knew themselves.

“I know you're right, but we won't actually know anything until we try something. We have to try at least.

Do you want to bury another child with snake bite?”

“I don't want to buy anybody with snake bite.”

“Then we have to try and fight this in some way. Think about what we discussed. We'll see what the television man wants, and then we'll lay out some plan.”

Doc and Job both got up out of their chairs at the same time. Job threw his hands over his head, stretching and yawning. After a bit of small talk, they said goodbye.

Not long after. Job had driven away, the growl and crunch of another vehicle signaled the arrival of someone else. He drove an ancient Ford pickup, a truck practically consumed with rust. On the fenders and doors, over the windows and on the roof, copper dust clung to scales of black paint. In the back of the truck were tethered two lambs. Before the driver could knock on Horner's door, it opened and Will came out. After a few polite words of greeting, the doctor handed several dollar bills to the driver. Then each man lifted a lamb and carried it to a shed behind the house. As the visitor departed, Horner said to him, “Now, remember, part of the deal is that you don't tell a soul about this.”

CHAPTER 19

Cletis sat at the little table in his kitchen' bent over a piece of cold corn bread and a glass of buttermilk. He picked crumbs off the bread and washed each bit down with a sip of milk. Lately, most of his meals had consisted of such fare, with little more than an occasional apple or peach. If one of the church women sent in a hot meal, he of course would eat it and gladly. And nearly every Sunday he went to someone's house for dinner. But more and more his solitary lunches and suppers had little variation in them. Whatever Cletis ate, though, made scant difference to him. Mealtime was thinking time.

He had known for a long time that he did not like Etta Rollins. Now as he sat once more pondering why, he brooded over many things, and, as always, he skirted the real reason: envy. What galled Cletis--and to his very core--was that Etta could handle rattlers and he could not. He had seen her pick up as many as three snakes at a time and hold them for as long as half an hour. How she did it he just did not know, and that, too, bothered him. He thought of every possible artifice she might use to deceive. He found none. He had watched her closely to see if she relied on some unusual device or maneuver. He found none. It crossed his mind that she knew of some ancient herb potion or old granny's concoction such as henbane or wild indigo, yet as far as he could tell she used nothing before or during her handling of the snakes. Time after time, she embraced the rattlers. Cletis handled only copperheads and the scarlet snake.

He refused to acknowledge that her faith had anything to do with it. What was faith anyhow? Probably only the repetitious utterance of whatever words and sentences you choose to express yourself with and try to pass off as your “belief.” Cletis had done that often enough--to himself and from the pulpit. He “believed” in whatever he proclaimed at the moment. But he didn't have faith. He was no mustard seed fool. He hadn't seen any mountains moved, and God knows he hadn't moved any. Curiously, Etta had never said she had faith. Many of her brethren, though, used her as an example when they spoke of someone whose faith they stood in awe of. Cletis could not accept such a notion.

One thing Cletis did avow, however, was that Etta put a great deal of stock in him. He guessed that amounted to something like faith. Most of the time, she relied on him for direction, and most of the time he supplied it. But lately she seemed so preoccupied that whatever he said had to be filtered through the gauze of her distraction. It had been going on since long before Vergie died. Once or twice the thought had struck Cletis that Etta was not of this world. Periods of intense concentration removed her from the levels on which the preacher always found himself grounded. He wondered between what worlds she indeed did wander, the realms of earth and heaven or sanity and insanity. “Damn,” he said aloud, between gulps of milk. “I don't believe in other worlds.”

Something else nettled him, her speaking in tongues. More than once she had almost convinced him that she commanded a language all of her own. It rippled from her as naturally as the brook flowed past the church. Taming strange and foreign words and sounds, she never faltered in her speech; its intimacy enveloped her. Cletis scoffed at the notion that Etta could be attuned to spiritual things. Yet there was something about the woman, something he could not even come close to explaining. His resentment of her seethed within him.

One more thing about Etta galled him. She was the only woman who had seen his mutilated penis. His face flushed with shame every time he remembered, but heaped upon that was the painful, humiliating knowledge that she surely thought of him as far less of a man than her pale, dull husband. While Cletis knew she could never say anything to anyone, he cringed whenever he thought of Etta's comparing him in any way with other men. He wanted everyone, but especially Etta, to think of him as nearly perfect. After, all she had been the only woman since his near self-circumcision who had succeeded in arousing him to an erection and intercourse which had not been painful.

What tortured Cletis was that, even though he had planned to do so a hundred times, he had never been able to tell Etta why his penis bore such ugly, yet distinctive marks, scars resembling tiny lobster claws. He felt that if she knew why he had wanted to be circumcised (he had planned to find some scripture verse to quote so that she would be sure to listen to him), she might very well admire him that much more despite his disfigurement. But how could he ever just casually say to her, “Sit down. I'd like to explain to you about my penis.” He closed his eyes at just the thought of such a thing.

He had tried to figure out a way to weave some sort of commentary about circumcision into sermons, but that proved even more difficult. No matter how many references in the Bible there might be to circumcision, no congregation anywhere would have listened to any kind of explanation why a man would even think of circumcising himself. Cletis thought again about why he had done it. He had found during laborious reading about reptiles that the ancient Egyptians observed snakes shedding their skins. To those people, this act assured the creatures of several different lives. It conferred immortality upon them. If man could shed the skin on his “snake,” the penis, perhaps he could attain eternal life. So these Egyptians, long before the Biblical Hebrews, initiated circumcision. After reading of the practice, Cletis was gripped by an obsession: he wanted to be circumcised.

It never occurred to him to ask a doctor about it. True, Will Horner's predecessor, venerold Dr. Hoskins would not have let Cletis finish the sentence with such a request in it. He would have been outraged. But the preacher could have gone into Charleston where a competent doctor might have performed a legitimate operation. After all, apparently some instances were recorded of men in their late twenties being circumcised.

Instead, Cletis himself folded back the foreskin of his penis and, at first, tried to keep it from sliding back into place by tying it tightly with twine. That chafed the skin and did not hold. Replacing the twine with thin wire brought only great discomfort and even less success. Finally, after talking to old Aunt Sweet about how she pierced the ears of hundreds of women, he tried another approach.

First he pressed a chunk of ice on one side of a thumbful of skin he pulled away from the organ. Then, with a needle sterilized over a candle, he punctured the loose fold of skin. Some blood oozed out, but its flow diminished under the pressure of the ice. Cletis looped a piece of string through the hole and tied it. Then, on the other side of the penis, he repeated the process. Weeks later, when much of the soreness and irritation had gone away, he placed a longer piece of twine through the two circles of string in the foreskin. Tugging on the twine to bring the two loops together, he wrapped the string several times around the base of his penis and then tied it. Then, using very thin catgut as thread in a sterilized needle, he sewed the skin. Slashes of fire and ice bit at him. He felt it now, all these years later. He paused and caught breath. He rubbed his crotch softly.

Surprisingly, the stitches held, even as he carefully held is penis while urinating, but when Cletis walked, little by little the string tore at the delicate holes. Before long, the raw skin festered. An infection erupted. When finally Cletis had to go to the doctor in white sulphur springs, the latter raged that he had never seen or heard of such self-butchery. He almost refused to treat Cletis, bellowing the only one who could help the preacher was a veterinarian or maybe a stay in a mental hospital. However, the doctor treated the infection until it cleared up. Then he had little choice but to send Cletis over to the hospital in Greenbrier to have him examined. There, doctors, in order to prevent recurring infection and damage, circumcised Cletis.

For months the man suffered pain and discomfort. Healing eventually came, but not before Chidester imagined that he had a sliver of raw venison dangling between his legs. Erections tortured him. Often he awakened with throbbing darts in his groin, his penis swollen with erotic dreaming. He would then get out of bed, wrap ice in a towel and place it on his genitals. Relief came quickly. Sometimes urination was painful; he always anticipated that it would be. Intercourse and masturbation he at first felt would be impossible. He shuddered whenever he thought of any kind of friction on his organ. As time passed, though, the pain, even with arousal, lessened until only occasionally did he feel a tinge of uncomfortableness.

By the time Etta came into his church Cletis had not been with a woman for a long time. What limited sexual activity he had was self-stimulation, yet almost never with much pleasure, for apprehension about his injured penis settled over him like a dark rain cloud. Along with the sting of own. But Etta was the breeze that blew that cloud away, if only for a short time.

As a woman of 22, she radiated with a something Cletis had never seen in a woman, something he couldn't define. Everything about her appeared to be softness: her skin, her blue eyes, her walk. She reminded Cletis of a lily. Sitting in the front row of the church where she gave her full attention to the preacher, she appeared to glow. He found himself singling her out and preaching only to her. On the day when she first spoke in tongues, Cletis sensed that others in the congregation believed her words had their origins in heaven, so delicate and mellifluous were their sounds. That very day, as though she had done it a thousand times, Etta picked up a rattler, petted it and let it slither all about her. Even the snake seemed to respond to her gentleness.

From the start, Cletis realized that Etta could do much for the church. She could be their finest advertisement, bringing more sheep into the fold. Why, she could be the Scripture come alive, he thought. So, the preacher set about to multiply her talents--more for him than for the Lord.

Etta learned quickly, and she idolized her teacher. Memorizing large portions of the Bible, she could quote passages that Cletis forgot or had never known. She seemed to fear no snake in any service but stayed away from them outside of the church. She confided in Cletis the difficulty she and Hiram had in having children after Vergie, and when she lowered her voice in such frank confession, he could feel his penis stirring.

From then on, each day brought to Cletis the pounding desire to be submerged in Etta's softness. He thought of every way he knew to seduce her, but nothing worked. Then, one afternoon when they were praying in Cletis's house, the prayer turned into speaking in tongues, and the speaking turned into fondling. As Etta spoke, Cletis stroked her hair, arms and legs. Etta responded with gentle little spasms, all the while lost in prayer. He took her dress off; she gave no resistance. When they were both naked, Cletis led her to the bed. So caught up in his obsession with her softness was he that he never once thought of how his penis might look to her or whether he would injure it is some way. He wanted only to lose himself in her femininity, in even her religiousness.

The act was quick, almost mechanical, yet satisfying to Cletis. Etta's softness settled about him like a featherbed. All the time, though, she murmured, still in what sounded like speaking in tongues. As he raised himself from her, she took hold of his erect penis and immediately recoiled from it with a rapid jerk backward. Cletis reddened and flushed. Grabbing his clothes, he fled to the kitchen where he dressed.

As he was tying his shoes, Etta came out of the bedroom, dressed and smiling, softness billowing from her. She did not say a word about what had happened. Instead, she asked Cletis about whether the church had ever had a revival meeting. He didn't remember how he answered her because he had realized that Etta had been so caught up in some sort of religious ecstasy that she was not aware of what had just occurred. She had let go of his penis, not because she could feel the disfigurement but because she was emerging from her trance. She had not known where she was or what she was doing--or so Cletis had always thought. From that day she never uttered a word of what had gone on-- until the day before yesterday at the snake pen when the sarcasm in her voice had cut right through him: “I'm hot forgetting anything. Anything--and that goes back twenty years, Mr. Preacher.”

So she had remembered, he thought. His face burned with the recollection. And he burned with the resentment he felt toward her. Well, he had ways to deal with her. He was still the pastor of his church.

Something else troubled Cletis. He wanted to know what happened to the doll Lovey had taken with her to the laying out. He knew she had taken it since she had left his house with it that morning. He suspected that the woman planned to lay it in the coffin with Vergie. Had she done it, he would have removed it, he told himself. Why, that would be like some kind of idol worship; it would be having false gods. In no way could Cletis stand for that. Lovey should know better. Yet Cletis had no knowledge that the woman even thought of putting the doll in the casket. Maybe, he thought, she was going to give it to Etta as something to remember Vergie by. Of course, Etta would not have accepted it, believing such a notion smacked of pure foolishness. Could Lovey have given the doll to some other child? Not likely, but possible. Who? Cletis couldn't think of a single child, especially since Lovey herself put a great deal of stock in the doll. No, Vergie would be the only one Lovey would even consider. Well, then, what could have happened to it? Had Lovey taken it back home when she went to dress? If so, why had she brought it in the first place? Pushing back his chair from the table, he got up, brushed some random crumbs from his shirt onto the floor and went into his bedroom.

CHAPTER 20

At a few minutes before seven thirty the next morning a late model blue Chevrolet eased out of a spot in downtown Charleston and headed east. In the back seat of the car squatted several black and brown cases; inside, television cameras, their electric eyes unseeing, awaited action. Tim Callison drove uneasily until the dome of the state capitol could scarcely be seen in the rear view mirror. With each passing mile, rural West Virginia engulfed him and he relaxed.

Two and a half hours later Tim pulled up in front of Job Lester's jail. Fatty opened the front door to greet him. Job, who had been sitting with his feet on the desk, removed them and leaned forward to re-introduce himself. Then he introduced Will Horner and Fatty. They all sat down at Job's request.

Job spoke: “Well, what brings you back here?”

“How's the girl that took the snake bite?” asked Tim.

Job and Will exchanged glances. Will nodded slightly to Job as if he were giving him the O.K. to speak.

“The child is dead and buried. Her funeral was day a'fore yesterday.” Job scratched the back of his head.

“Christ, I knew it!” said Tim in a loud voice. “I'm, I'm so sorry.”

Doc spoke for the first time. “I was given to understand that you filmed part of the service. Is that right?”

“Yes, sir,” said Tim.

“Do you have the part where the child was bitten?”

“Well, you can't see the actual biting. What we have is the girl--what's her name?--slumping down. Somebody looking at it just might think it's another segment of the service. It's the damnedest thing I ever saw myself, all the screaming and hollering. No wonder they're called holy rollers.” Tim spoke too fast and said too much.

“Wait a minute, son, said Doc.” One thing at a time. The girl's name is Vergie. Vergie Rollins. She no doubt slumped down right after the rattler bit her. The screaming and hollering I believe you will find has the rather dignified name of glossalalia, speaking in tongues. And as far as the holy roller designation, you'll get no argument from me on the 'roller' part.” A trace of pomposity crept into Doc's voice.

“Excuse me. I just got excited when you told me the girl was dead,” Tim said.

Job spoke. “I can sympathy that. There was a lot of excited folks 'round here the last few days.”

“Well,” said Tim. “I've got an assignment to do a piece on the holy rol....uh, these, this religious cult. I thought you'd be able to help me.

“I don't know how far you'll get, particularly with the church folk theirselves. They don't warm up to outsiders, I can rightly tell you,” said Job.

“What kind of piece did you have in mind?” asked Will.

“Background. History. Who these people are. What causes them to join a church like this. The snakes. Are they for real? Do the people actually drink poison?” He turned to Will. “Say, you ought' to be able to help us out there. You must have a lot of information to give me.”

Will Horner stood up. “I have plenty of information, but it's not the kind you want. What you have seen in the death of the poor child is the result of ignorance, stupidity, hypocrisy and blighted Christianity. The best 'piece' you could ever do is present what you find in such a way that this nonsense is stopped once and for all. Whether it's by legislation or guns, I don't care. But it must be stopped.”

Job had rarely seen Will so fired up. “What'd you think the best way to go about what you're after, Tim?”

“I'd like to go back to the church. Maybe the best thing is to try to follow one person through a day in their life. It could end at a church service. I guess there's no chance to get to Vergie's mother, is there?” said Tim.

“Sure, there is. Just as soon as you can get that car of yours hitched up to a whirlwind in hell,” replied Doc, falling into the hill talk which constantly surrounded him.

They all laughed.

“You won't have much luck in getting anyone from the church. They'll be behind closed doors about this,” said Job.

“What about Cletis Chidester?” Patty finally spoke.

“Now, Fatty, you know very well he'd be the most agin this,” said the sheriff.

“Wait a minute, Job. I'm not so sure Fatty is wrong here. Caught at just the right moment, old Cletis might very well jump at the chance. Oh, he'd spout some self-righteous tripe, and he'd probably quote to Armageddon and back, but if he knew he'd be the focus of attention beyond his front stoop, he'd go for it. Yes, he would,” said Doc.

“Not if he knew it was putting him and his sheep in a bad light,” protested Job.

“Well, that's true enough. I don't imagine this reporter has to tell him that, do you, especially if you want to get his cooperation.” Doc smiled.

“You do realize I have to get a balanced, fair report, of course,” said Tim.

“Of course, of course,” said Doc, Tim's irony not lost upon him.

“Where do I start?”

“What do you suggest, Job?” said Will.

“How about Lovey and maybe Hiram?”

“Excellent idea, if it will work,” said Doc. “Hiram--that's Vergie's father--may not want to talk about his daughter, but he'll talk plenty about the church and what he thinks about it. Now, Lovey's another story. She'll have to be approached in just the right way. Maybe, though, we could go over to Hi's now and look in on him.”

Overhead, slate gray clouds bumped against lighter, fleecier ones, pushing them out of the way. Patches of baby blue sky faded into white and then disappeared under layers of angry grays and blacks. Puffs of wind teased the leaves on the trees, exposing their whitened underside to the world. In a nearby field black and white cows stood, all facing the same way so that the wind would caress them instead of ruffling the hair on their backs. Beside the split rail fence, wild mustard flung their golden manes recklessly about. Beige swirls of dust spiralled from under the tires of Tim's car as it lumbered along the country road with its three occupants. The sky blackened.

Tim parked the car in front of the Rollins house. As he did, the men saw Hiram's back just as the man disappeared into the grove of trees. Job called to him. Hiram kept walking. Job called again, this time louder. At that, Hiram turned around, hesitated and then walked toward the group. When they met, Hiram explained that he had been on his way to the graveyard.

Job said to him, “Hi, it's a'fixin' to rain. It's just as well maybe that you don't go up.”

“But that's why I wanted to go. It just don't seem fitten that Vergie be up there alone in a storm.”

As though his words fulfilled a rain prophecy, huge, wide drops splattered to the ground. The four men dashed for the cover of the porch. Scarcely had they reached the overhanging shelter when the rain stopped. In unison, the men shook themselves a cascade of man droplets spattering in all directions.

“That's just a taste of it,” said Job. “Mark my words, we'll get a drowndin' if we don't watch out.”

“I guess it was plumb crazy to be a'settin' out for the burial ground when I knowed the rain was about nigh here.”

“I don't think so, Hi. I can see why you'd want to be going there,” said Will. He paused. “Why, we're forgetting our manners. Tim, I'm sorry. Hiram, this is Tim Callison. He's from Charleston and was at the service the other night.”

“Mighty pleased to make your acquaintance,” Hiram said, extending his left hand to Tim.

“Thank you, sir. Likewise. And, sir,...I'm very sorry about your daughter.”

Hiram's eyes widened as though to ask how the stranger knew about Vergie.

Job spoke quickly. “Hi, I don't know whether you knowed there was some television people at the church the other night. They was there to make part of a picture show of the snake's doin's. Well, Tim's one of the men.”

“I heard Etta and some of 'em talking about if it was proper for the fil-ums to be made, and Vergie took notice they'd be there. Have them pitchers been made yet?”

Everyone looked at Tim.

“Yes, sir. We have some footage, uh, some pictures of part of the service. They're not very good, though, not very clear.”

Hiram opened his mouth but then closed it without saying anything. Will sensed his friend was about to ask to see the film and then changed his mind.

Hiram's next words were pitched higher than he normally spoke: “I'll bet this here city man ain't nary had some white lightning. I'd be pleased to have you all sample some of mine.”

“Even with the sheriff here?” asked Will.

“Why, that's all the more reason,” said Job. “Since it's a'rainin' so hard, I can't hardly leave.”

By the time the bottle of clear, slightly oily liquid had been passed around twice, the men joked and laughed. Hiram four times filled a cigarette paper with tobacco, licked its sides and rolled it between his palms. A bluish gray haze hung over the porch. Raindrops dripped from trees, hitting the ground with little plops.

After a while Hiram turned to Tim with a grave look on his face. “You won't want to hear what I have to say 'bout the church but I sure as hell will tell you anyhows.” He clenched his teeth. “You know Etta, Cletis, and the rest of them won't have no truck with you, don't you? Why, Etta will be rummaging in the closet again for my shotgun.”

“That's what we already told this fellow. That's why he's going to have to try to get information from wherever he can. But, by damn, I see this as a way to stop this snake-foolishness dead in its tracks.” Will took a sip out of his glass and shivered. The upper part of his body shook like a dog throwing water off. “My God, Hiram, where did you get this stuff?”

Hiram leaned forward in his chair. Taking the bottle, he said, “Here, all of you, have more.” Into each glass, against mild protestations from his three guests, he poured more than a knuckle depth of the clear liquor. As he did, the leaden clouds opened. Sheets of rain slashed into the valley.

“Well, Mr. Tim. I'm about to give you an earful. Tell you 'bout religion turned sour. Try to tell you what it's like to live with a woman that eats, drinks, sleeps, cleans, bakes religion. Tell you how smidgen by smidgen she's got no thinkin' of her own, only rote memory of readin' the Bible hour after hour, day after day. I'll tell you what I think of Cletis Chidester a'makin' fools of all of us. He ain't only got the followers down there at the church house, he's got all of us followin' and watchin' him tempt God. We just sit and watch a man tempt God usin' our wives and children as the bait. We've let Cletis throw shit at us. Now we're a'lettin' him rub it in.”

Whether Hiram had raised his voice so that he could be heard above the crescendo of the rain or because he was so angry, Will did not know. He thought it was a good thing for his friend to be worked up; it might help him get some things out of his system.

Hiram revealed that, whenever the church door was opened, Etta dropped whatever she was doing to be there. Whether prayer service, revival, protracted meeting or hymn sing, she felt nothing could go on there without her. She insisted on being the only woman to clean the church. She was the last one to leave on any occasion. Hiram said he didn't know just what went on in the services but sometimes Etta would come home pale as a starched turnip and other times she'd be covered with sweat. Then, too, she'd come home better looking than when she left.

He didn't know how long she had handled snakes. Only when Vergie, at age five or six, started talking about her ma and the serpents did Hiram suspect what his wife was doing. In imitation of her mother, Vergie would thrash about, muttering gibberish and calling on snakes. Hiram asked Etta what their daughter was learning at the church. Etta told him to come there if he wanted to know. Gradually, of course, stories of Etta's escapades with snakes, particularly rattlers, spread through the valley, and Hiram pieced them together. (“Don't you think it's queer that no one in the church ever talked to me about Etta and her snakes?” Hiram had asked.) Pressed for an explanation, Etta did say once that she was proving her belief in Jesus by embracing the snakes.

At home, every second she could squeeze from cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing, canning, she spent in prayer or reading the Bible. So absorbed in these activities was she that Hiram started to tell people his wife breathed different from everyone else; she inhaled with “Jeee” and exhaled with “susss”: Jeee-susss. Jeee-susss. Repeating it, he demonstrated it for the group of men seated around him. Jesus started her morning fire. Oh, yes, Jesus, thank you. He made the feather beds. Yes, blessed Jesus. Jesus hoed her vegetable garden. And Jesus “walks with her and talks with her and tells her she is his own”. Jesus served up the food at mealtime. Thank you, dear Jesus, for the vittles on this table. Jesus played with Vergie on the floor. Oh, yes, Jesus, suffer this little child to come to you. Jesus went to bed with them. If I should die, I pray Jesus my soul to take. Yes, Etta breathed Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jeee-susss.

“When everything is Jesus,” said Hiram, “you forget who you are. I think Etta forgot she's Etta.”

Hiram knew he was shouting. “Here I am soundin' the way them hypocrites do down at that church. You've been there to hear the screamin' and carryin' on, speakin' in unknown tongues. Wild dogs and boars couldn't make more noise. Them idioty people: they....”

The men waited for Hiram to finish his sentence, but the only sound was the steady drumming of the rain on the porch roof and the ground. ThenX' Hiram, raising his glass and nodding toward Job, said,” I don't believe I ever knowed why you pulled out of the church, Job. As far as that goes, I don't believe I knowed why you went there in the first place.”

“Well, Hi, them's two pretty powerful questions. The last one first. I just sorta growed into goin' with the missus. Cletis does have a mighty rugged voice, you know. When he spoke something, it sounded right. It sounded truthful. So whatever he said, I guess I liked hearing it in the way he voiced it.”

“What could he say about snakes to get people to pick 'em up?” asked Tim who sat almost by hypnotized.

“I never got caught up in all the other foolishment with the snakes and furrin-tongue speaking. Or that poison drinking. It always appeared to me that's a'goin' against natural law. It's not so much that Cletis said anything as it is how he says it. Like I said, there's something in his voice. Of course, he says over and over that the only way to prove you're a believer in Jesus is to do them things.”

“God knows I've heard that enough from Etta,” said Hiram, rocking back and forth in his chair.

“Women seem to take up quicker with what Cletis says than men do. I expect it has something to do with the effect of his voice on them. I don't know. He's a charmer. There's something about him. Even my woman picks it up.” Job raised his eyebrows and then slowly shook his head.

“There's always been something about him that I didn't trust. I never could put my finger on it, though.”

Will, just finishing a swallow of drink, said, “Yep, he's a sly old fox, all right. He sure doesn't practice what he preaches. You can't get near to him. Did you ever notice he hardly goes where there is sickness? He never goes visiting unless he is invited to some affair. A funeral he'll take because it means he'll be standing up in front. But where there's no audience for him, he doesn't much want to be around. Time and again, I've seen some of his followers in dire need of him, but he'd take his good old time getting there. Old Delbert Homan died wanting in the worst way to see Cletis. I even went to get him in my truck, but Cletis said he'd go later of his own accord. Later was too late. That got to me after awhile.”

“I wisht it had got to Etta a long time ago,” said Hiram. The rain had slowed to a gentle splatter.

“It got to her in just the contrary way,” said Job, his words coming at a slower pace. “But I think she's got more religion than what Cletis does. At least Etta holds up her religion wherever she goes. That's a hell of a lot more than I can say for Chidester. You know, Hi, I've watched him close. I don't think he's ever picked up a rattler. Now, Etta has, over and over. I've never seen Cletis do it. A copperhead, yes, but you know yourself they're not near as dangerous as a rattler.”

“He's always fooled with snakes. I think he's lived with 'em so long he's taken on some of their likenesses. You 'member years ago when he cut up his own peter? Talk was he wanted it to look more like a snake.”

Tim nearly dropped his glass. “Cut his own what?”

“Do I remember? Why the stories reached as far as Kanawha County. I heard some man down there was a'gatherin' them to put in a book.”

The men chuckled and told Tim the circumcision story. The young man's hands trembled as he reached for the bottle of liquor. His companions laughed.

“I 'spect we could all use another dosees of that there medicine,” said Will, the effects of it already transforming his speech to the mountain vernacular.

Then Job spoke. “Another thing I noticed 'bout Cletis was he never speaks in tongues. He'd wait for someone else. Then after while he mouthed them but no one could hear. It seems to me that Etta took the lead in that. She'd get in a state and the words would just roll outen her mouth. I'd notice Clete a'starin' her down and then start a 'mouthed' almost the same words. It sure was an unknown tongue, to him I suspicion he doesn't know a damn thing. Well, I could go on about all the man's short and long faults. One day, I just got fed up with it all and chucked it. I didn't much like leavin' the missus to go to church alone, but she don't seem to mind now,”

“Doc had some power over your thinkin', didn't he?” asked Hiram, looking at both men.

“You're pretty sly yourself, Mister Rollins. Yep, he did. We talked a lot about what was a'goin' on. He made a lot of sense to me. When I'd say I learnt something bein' in the Army, he'd say I learnt the Devil's ways. That was only his way to set me a'thinkin' on the things I really wanted to know about. Doc listened, and he spoke my language.”

“I guess maybe I should of talked more with you and Doc. I might of understood Etta more.”

“I wish you had, Hi,” said Will. “But I don't know that I could have helped your understanding much. It's still a great puzzlement to me to this day.”

Suddenly a muffled voice could be heard in the woods near the house. “Mister Rollins! Mister Rollins!”

The men all jumped up to see who was calling. Into the path at the edge of the woods ran Peck Wells, one of the valley's teen-agers. His arms crossed back and forth over his head like a windmill. “Mister Rollins! Vergie's grave has been dug up!”

CHAPTER 21

Etta's dark eyebrows caught the drops of perspiration which slid down her forehead. She could feel them hesitating there before trickling down her face. Out of habit she wore a yellow and white flowered bonnet which on bright days shaded her eyes from the sun; now in the cloud-filled morning, it darkened her face. She had walked from the church to Lovey's house where she now stood looking at her friend's vegetable garden. She noticed that the soil was thirsty for the threatening, long-awaited rain.

Etta glanced at the house. Strange, she thought. Lovey should have seen me out here by now. Walking toward the house, she called out, “Mornin', Lovey.” No answer. The front door stood open about an inch. The first fat drops of rain splattered all about the woman. Instinctively, she picked up her speed. As she reached the porch, the drops seemed as large as silver dollars.

Etta sat down on a bright cane rocker across from a rusty old glider. The porch was curtained entirely across the front with morning glories trailing up avenues of string. Looking like hundreds of royal purple ear trumpets, they swung from side to side in the wind spurts. A sweet musty scent alternating with cool mentholated air drifted over the porch. Etta took a deep, lung-expanding breath.

“Lovey, you t'home?” The woman craned her neck toward the door. From inside came the sound of a floor board creaking. Lovey came to the door.

“Oh! Oh, Etta, you frighted me.” She hesitated behind the screen door, acting as though she were not going to come out. Then she raised a summer-brown arm to blot the sweat on her forehead.

“The air's so heavy with the storm I didn't fashion you could hear me a'comin,” said Etta. “Land o'misery, come ut of that hot house and let the wind dry your face, Lovey.”

“I don't rightly know that there's any wind a'blowin'.” With a glance behind her, Lovey stepped out on to the porch and, for a moment or two, looked around.

“Well, are you a'goin' to set or stare?” said Etta looking at the woman. “I declare I can't fathom what's the matter with you. You're actin' so peculiar.”

“Oh, uh, well, I've got burdens to carry.”

“And who don't?”

“That's so. That's so. Well, no matter. How are you? With another glance at the door, Lovey sat.

“Lovey,” said Etta. “Hiram has set his mind against me and the church. He's told me that if I keep at it, I'll have to get outen his house.”

“He don't mean nothin' by it, Etty,” said Lovey, reaching to pat the other woman's hand. “He's just too unsettled about all that's happened. He's not himself. He's not a'thinkin' a'tall.”

“He thinks too much. Too much about that church and me bein' beholden to it.”

“Sometimes them that don't believe have trouble understanding them that do,” said Lovey.

“For certain, I could leave before being told to,” said Etta.

“Well, where would you go?”

“Cousin Chloe has plenty of room. There'd be room in plenty of sainted folks' houses. Cletis could help me.”

“Maybe 'twould be better if you left Cletis out of the consideration, Etta,” said Lovey. But seeing her friend's face harden, she quickly steered in a different direction. “You'd be most welcome here, exceptin' I don't think you'll be a'goin' anywheres. Hiram won't put you out for any reason I could think of, so you don't need to be makin' any plans.”

Lovey pulled at her skirt. From inside, Etta thought she heard another creak. Lovey glanced at the door.

“In the long run, Hiram might not put me out, but I have to think on where I'd go if I left.”

This time Lovey could not ignore the implications of such a move. “Why, that's out of the question. It wouldn't be a'tall proper or fitten, Etta Rollins, and you know it. It'd bring talk in the church. And outside. It'd hurt your standin' as an example before the flock. Remember your marriage words, child.”

“If you're meanin' the 'for better or worst,' part, I can tell you right now it's gone past the worst,” Etta said.

Well, Lovey thought, Hiram didn't bring a blue ribbon home when he married you, neither.

Etta continued. “The Bible don't say anything about leavin' a husband that I know of howsomever. But anything standin' in the way of your religion is an impediment and must be removed. That, it 'pears to me, would signify a husband.”

“That's pure foolishness. Where on earth did you get such a notion?” Both Lovey and Etta turned their heads to look at the crashing downpour. Lovey squinted as she then peered into the house.

“Lovey Ridenour, you're more fidgety than an ailin' possum. If you're worried about your windows, why, go close them.”

“The windows is all right. Maybe Vergie's dyin' has something to do with the way you and Hiram are feelin' just now. Maybe the both of you is seein' through a glass darkly.”

“We're a'seein' God's will with Vergie dyin'. You know that, Lovey.”

“I don't know, Etta. I just don't know.” Lovey shook her head slowly. “If we use God's will for ever thing, then we don't have no mind of our own. Maybe it's God's will that you stay with Hiram.”

“Not if he stands in the way of my religion.”

“He'll stand there only as far as you let him. He ain't interfered as yet. I misdoubt that he's goin' to from here on out.”

“Well, don't you think if he had faith and passed it on to Vergie, the child would have had a better chance?”

Split-splats of rain fell on the ground where they swelled the puddles between the rows of earth in Lovey's garden.

“No, Etta, I don't. It sounds to me like you're a'wantin' the reverse of the sins of the fathers. You want the faith of the fathers to be passed down. You want the father's faith to work for the child. No, each person has to do for theirself. Vergie was a child. You can't expect her to act like her ma and pa. She had to act like herself.”

“She was at the age of accountability,” said Etta as she grasped the arms of the rocker.

“We don't know what the age of accountability is. It's different for ever person. Look how girls blossom into women, a different time for each one. I expect Vergie thought she could handle snakes easy because you done it. Maybe she felt she was always ready. The thing is, we don't know, Etty. We don't have such knowledge.”

“I did the best I could. I raised her for the Lord. I've got to leave it in the Lord's hands and go on to other things.”

“And you've got to leave the matter of you and Hiram not only in the Lord's hands but also in yours. Put your hands to work in tryin' to be a helpmate to Hiram. He don't have much to fall back on.”

Something inside the house crashed to the wooden floor. Both women jumped, Lovey as though she had been stuck with a knife.

“What in thunderation was that?” Etta asked.

Lovey did not reply. For several minutes the two women sat quietly listening to the watery sounds about them. Rain had stopped falling from the sky but not from the ceiling of balsam, maple, sycamore and oak which spread over Lovey's house with green, protective arms. Great globules of water, rolling off wide-brimmed leaves, splattered the tin roof with an irregular beat. Smaller drops, second by second, slid off the roof onto the porch steps with clicks and clacks. The overflow from the rain barrel at the side of the porch drizzled onto the ground. In the thick grove of trees at the side of the house, oboe and flute notes of raindrops echoed throughout.

Etta spoke again. “Lovey, something mighty guare is a'goin' on here, and I be obliged iffen you'd tell me just what it is.”

Lovey twisted, her fingers in and out of one another. Finally, she said, “I reckon I might as well tell you I have company in there. The person is just stirrin' about.”

“Company! You might a'tole me when I came a'callin' your name. Company! Where's your manners, woman? Why ain't she out here a'settin' with us instead of parchin' in that house?”

“She's not a she,” said Lovey as she lowered her head, then lifted it to look Etta in the eye.

“Not a she? Well, what? Who?” Etta's face expanded.

“If you must know, there's a man in there. I'll not hold that much from you.”

“A man! Lovella Ridenour! You talkin' to me about marriage words and husbands. And here you are a'carryin' on right in your own house!”

“Well, I can't think of a better place to carry on. I'll damn well do it in my own house!”

Etta leaped to her feet and glared at Lovey.

“Just simmer down, Etta. I'm far beyond the age of accountability you was just speakin' of. I'm a widow woman, and his, his woman died long ago Lovey nodded her head in the direction of the interior of the house.

Etta started to speak but refrained from it.

“There ain't a cussed thing wrong with me wantin' a man. You got a good one and doin' ever thing you can to sour your marriage. And now that the rain has quit, I think p'haps 'tis best you let me enjoy my company!”

CHAPTER 22

Just as soon as the torrential rain abated somewhat, Cletis left his house and went to the snake pen. There, as he had feared, he encountered near-chaos. What for years had been pulverized earth caused by the constant scraping of snakes back and forth over the ground was now thick mud. It resembled dark molasses cake, batter. As the rain fell with such vehemence, it poured off the hillsides and gushed into the pen. Some of the boulders were unmoored; smaller stones had spun all around. The planks sectioning off parts of the cage had fallen over while chicken wire and screen stretched in gnarled twists around sticks and boards. Clumps of May apples, their roots washed clean, were caught on the screen, while undulating pieces of straw dangled from the debris. Particles of at least half a dozen snake skins littered the ground. Pieces of bark as long as a shotgun had been ripped from the two trees Cletis had recently placed in the pen. One of the decaying logs had rolled around so that its whitish underside was now three-quarters exposed. Dozens of snake eggs, dashed from their birthing places, dotted the mud. Like damp, limp ribbons, the lead-colored babies of the red-bellied and eastern snakes lay strewn all over. Hognoses and common kingsnakes, with a natural preference of land to water, huddled on the tops of the boulders. Only the rough green snake, as much at home in the water as in a tree, seemed content; it slithered effortlessly about in the silky mud.

From within the pen came strange sound almost like those of a miniature high school orchestra tuning up. The buzz-click of the rattler sliced the monotone of the hiss of the puff adder. The throaty gurgle, coarse and low-pitched, of a spadefoot frog resonated from some deep, hidden realm within the enclosure. Cicada-like notes drifted out of a corner while a grating trill pitched above everything else. Cletis couldn't identify either sound. The plip-plop of rain dropping from trees to ground echoed all about.

Hanging over the pen and robbing the air of its after-rain freshness, the tepid musk of decay choked Cletis. Its sulphuric sourness spiked his nostrils while an odor somewhat like that of rotten tomatoes took his breath away. Waves of acrid stale vomit made him sick to his stomach. He tasted bile.

By some phenomenon, the partition for the rattlers stood intact. One plank of wood, with a jagged corner of screen ripped loose from it, tilted precariously toward the ground. Otherwise, the rectangular spot caging the creatures looked as it had for years. Inside, the snakes swung their rigid tails. Like thin armor-plated warriors, they girded for battle. The thought hit Cletis that, by God, these things lived up to their name of pit vipers. He had never seen them so agitated.

One of the copperheads was gone. Nor did Cletis see the scarlet snake. Either of them could be hidden anywhere in the muddy snake pile or they might be slaking through the woods. But he couldn't be concerned with them just now. He had to do something about restoring order and cleaning up the devastation. He couldn't risk losing any more snakes.

He knew he had to be extremely careful, for every one of the reptiles had been agitated. To their enemies of water, foreign debris and other snakes, he would be adding the most feared: himself. In such a highly excitable state, they would be quick to strike. Knowing scarcely where to begin, Cletis stood surveying the damage. Then he retrieved from its place in the crotch of an old pin oak tree the forked sapling he used for pinning snakes to :the ground and for picking them up. Positioning it in his hands, he pushed some of the dividing planks as much into place as he could, worrying all the while that they would not stay. He didn't dare pound the wood into the ground, but he did try to reinforce it with stones he could move around with the stick. As he worked, some snakes shot out from under the rubble and then disappeared under other pieces. With the prongs of the rod, he lifted three drowned snakes--a garter, black and milk--out of the pen and placed them in a pile on a near-by boulder. The milk snake rolled off, leaving mottled splotches of mud on the curvature of the rock. Then, using the stick as a lever, Cletis inched the decayed log back into place. It made a sucking swoosh as it was pried loose from the gluey mud.

As long as the poisonous snakes were segregated, the more harmless ones were reasonably safe together. So he did not try to separate them into individual sections of the pen. That he would have to do when the mud dried and the snakes calmed down. Grasping the curled pieces of wire and screen, he tugged at them until he managed to pull them over to cover most of the portions of the corral. Since he had no hammer and nails with him, he had to weight the screen and wire down with rocks. The screen over one of the corners resisted. It arched stubbornly, flipping off the anchoring stone on top of it. Cletis thought he could remedy the problem by kneading the wire to make it more pliable.

Using the palm of his hand, he pressed down on the edge of the screen. Suddenly, his hand slid and caught on the barbed wire edge. Its tiny tentacles ripped into his flesh. At that second, three needle-piercing jabs shot into the back of his hand. SNAKE BITE!!! Blood bubbled out. Cletis jerked his hand up.

“Son-of-a-bitch!” he screamed, his voice shattering the heavy stillness hanging over the forest.

Grabbing his right wrist with his left hand, he squeezed hard. He put his thumb on the artery in the wrist and pushed it down. A bright scarlet stream flowed out. Silken droplets painted the rocks and mud.

Perspiration glazed his forehead. “Oh, Jesus, it's the godammed rattler! Jesus! Oh, God, NO!” His teeth clattered. His chest heaved. A sonorous moan rocked him. He fell to his knees knocking over one of the planks as he did. The jolt to the ground, however, short-circuited his screaming, for out of the corner of his eye he saw the rattler. He vaulted back up on his feet. Holding one hand with the other, he flung them both over his head. Drops of blood spattered down upon him.

“Oooohhh Christ Jesus!” he shouted. He lowered his hands and then his head.

He saw among the debris washed into a heap at one side of the pen a long strand of grape vine which once, he had used to tie some pegs together. Seizing it with his left hand and pulling it to the ground, he moored the end of it with his foot. He then looped the remainder around his right arm midway between wrist and elbow and pulled it toward the portion of the vine held to the ground. Grabbing both ends, he twisted them and immediately felt the pressure on his arm increase. His arm jerked upward slightly as the makeshift tourniquet held. Cletis could feel the thump of pulse in his upper arm. Breaking into a run, he set out toward home. But then he turned around and sprinted around the edge of the pen.

Where am I going? What am I doing? Oh, God, tell me what to do! I'll go to a granny-woman, but which one's closest? Granny Dalton? She'll help the bite with yarrow or valerian. What if she's not home? Oh, my God! Who's the other granny women? I can't think! Ooohhhhhhh.

Slowing down and then stopping, he leaned his head against a tree. Call a healing service at the church. That's it, that's it! No, no, that would take too long. He started running again. Oh, what am I going to do? He held his arms out to try to look at his hand. Through his blurred eyes, he couldn't see anything. Doc Horner? Oh, Christ! Can I go to that man? I can't. I'll have to. I don't have any choice. He coughed and sputtered. Then he looked down at the crimson mess and sloshed ahead with mud and blood in his shoes. If I want to live, Horner is my only chance.

The rain had stopped, but the sky looked as though it still held more water. Etta, walking home from her visit with Lovey, kept as close to the edge of the trails and paths as she could to avoid getting her feet wet. But she hadn't dodged enough pine branches clinging with water. Two of them had smacked her squarely in the shoulder, showering the front of her dress with rain. So intent was she in avoiding any others that she nearly collided with Cletis, almost leasing along the soggy path.

“Merciful God, Cletis!” she exclaimed, looking at him dripping in blood and perspiration.

“One...of...the snakes...bit me,” he said before she could ask. “I don't know which one.”

“How?”

“Don't ask now, woman. Get hold of this here turny-cut and tighten it as hard as you can,” he snapped, raising his locked hands toward her.

As Etta twisted the grape vine around the preacher's arm, the blood flow diminished somewhat. Blood spattered on her. She paid no attention to it.

“Now walk as fast as you can with me and keep tightening on that thing.” Cletis broke into a little trot with Etta running sideways down the path. Her feet pointed in one direction, while much of the rest of her body faced in another, yoked to Cletis as she was. Whatever mud or puddles were in the way, they plunged into them.

“Where are you going, Cletis?” Etta asked. A strained huskiness garbled the last word.

“To Horner's,” Cletis yelled.

Etta stopped in her tracks so abruptly that she jerked Cletis halfway around. He crashed right into her.

“Then you've lost so much blood you're tetched, preacher!” Still holding on to the tourniquet with one hand, she pushed her other one into his chest.

“He's the only one to stop the blood! Now get...”

“The only one is Jesus Christ! Go to Horner and you'll go to hell! Now, get down on your knees and let Jesus heal you.” She tugged in a downward motion on the tourniquet.

As she did, Cletis pushed her back. When she let go of the grape vine to regain her balance, Cletis seized the tourniquet before it untwisted, thus keeping the pressure on the arm. He started to run.

Etta stood in the middle of the path watching him go. Then, shaking her head slowly, she said aloud, “He don't have enough faith to last until the water gets hot. The pore soul.”

She folded her hands and bowed her head. Again, aloud, she prayed. “Oh, dear Jesus. The man what gallops down the path needs your help. He don't know it, but he needs it more than most, maybe even more than Hiram and some others. He needs the healing that you can give and have gave. First he needs the healing of the stopping of the blood. Oh, yes', Lord. Let the healing waters mingle with that blood and then wash it all away. Stop the bite of the serpent now, Lord. And be praised for it.

“Cletis needs the healing of the soul. Maybe this blood is your way of washing him clean in ever which way. Baptize him and even rebaptize him so he can find his faith. Somewhere he lost it. Fall down upon him, Jesus, so he has no mistaking about who it 'tis. And be wonderful praised for it.

“Let the flow be felt on him, Jesus. Oh, yes, Jesus. And stop him running to them that can do him no good. Turn his head away from such notions. And I'll sing your songs, forever, Jesus.”

As she ended her prayers, tears rolled down over her cheeks. Lifting her head, she looked once again down the trail which Cletis had taken. Then she brushed over her dress with her hands and turned toward home.

When Cletis reached Doc Horner's office, he kicked the bottom of the door with several short taps. Nothing happened. He kicked again. No answer. His expectation turned to dismay. He stood, blood-soaked and trembling, on the porch.

“Oh, my God, what'll I do now?” Sweat rolled off his forehead and down to his neck; its saltiness irritated the skin.

“Ooooohhhh” came from deep within him. The bleat of a sheep close by answered him, though he could not hear it. Air seeped into his brain. He thought he was floating. Leaning against the wall of the house, Cletis slid to the floor. The “ooooohhhh” melted into a hum.

Get up, get up, he tried to tell himself. He didn't know whether he could get up, let alone walk. He guessed he knew how the snakes in the pen felt, trapped as they were and unable to get away. The snakes! What would happen to them? He couldn't remember how much of the pen he had secured or what had happened before he left it.

His head felt as light as a leaf. He wondered if it was floating away from him. With his free hand, he reached up to touch it, to reassure himself that it remained in place. Then he thought of Etta. She had tried to stop him from coming to Horner's. He hadn't listened to her. Why hadn't he let her pray for him? Had he pushed her down in the trail? He couldn't remember. How could his head just float off? He knew what the inside of the head looked like. He'd seen pictures. Round, chunky snakes curled about inside. Brains were snakes. And then he saw Hiram's penis. It was sooooo heav--y. Pat, swollen snakes, rainbow snakes with stars. Fat, swollen penises with stars blinking on their clammy plumpness. Snakes, eating themselves, tail into mouth, they grow heavier and heavier. Why...is...my...head...so...light? A warm, black wave of liquidity caressed his brain. He could feel part of himself evaporating. Then voices put weight into his surroundings.

“...bout a half hour ago...”

“...snake it was?”

“...even guess...”

“...saying anything that didn't make sense?”

“No, we was drivin' by and seen him slumped on the porch. Couldn't answer any questions,” said Job.

“Of course I could,” said Cletis in a voice dominated by his will to speak.

CHAPTER 23

When the Wells boy streaked out of the woods hollering that Vergie's grave had been dug up, the quartet of men on Hiram's porch froze for a moment. All of them, in one way or another, were basking in the glow of the liquor. Only Tim, though, was sluggish and thick-tongued. The others, more intimate with home concoctions, were exhilarated. Then, Job's glass slipped out of his hand and crashed to the floor. As if a signal had been given, the other men set their glasses down. In doing so, Tim fell back into his chair but pushed himself up again.

The boy reached the porch. His words spilled out in breathless spurts. “Oh... Mister. Mister...Rollins...It's Vergie...Her grave. Dug up.”

Job took three porch steps at once. He grabbed the child's shoulders. “How do you know that?”

“I 'uz takin' a short cut to get home afore the storm.” He paused and sucked in his breath. “And, and goin' through the buryln'ground, it was like no dirt was in her grave. It warshed out.”

Before the youngster had all his words out, Hiram sprinted out of the yard and toward the woods. The others followed. At the gate, Tim fell, tripping on a wet moss-covered stone. No one noticed. By the time he pulled himself up, his companions were almost out of sight.

Although the ponderous boughs of pine had somewhat protected the path from the downpour, water cascading off the hill had muddied the trail. In spots, a passageway looked as though it had just been glazed with a coat of greenish brown paint. Hiram led the way, Doc and Job several feet behind. Tim almost crawled.

At the top of the rise as the clearing of the cemetery came into view, Hiram stumbled and fell spread-eagle onto the ground. His head missed by half an inch a thin slab of stone marking an ancient grave. Terror flashed in his eyes. He lay for several seconds where he had fallen, time enough for Will and Job to reach him and pick him up. Mud clothed him. As the men approached Vergie's grave, all three held their breath.

Gaping open, a rectangular beige eye staring at the sullen sky, the grave lay exposed. Its starkness stabbed Hiram in the gut. What obviously had been the pile of dirt robbed from the earth had diminished to a' slag heap in the rain. Slime covered the top of the coffin which lay almost submerged in a diarrhea-like liquid. Tim, who had caught up with the others, stood with his mouth open.

Hiram, his fists clenched, chose his words with deliberation. “As this child lays dead afore God, I will kill whoever done this. I swear on this child's memory, I will, I will kill somebody for this.”

Will placed his hand on Hiram's shoulder. With a fierce jolt, he threw it off.

Will spoke. “Hi, I don't think whoever did it finished the job. I can't tell for sure but the coffin looks pretty tight in its position. What do you think, Job?” Both peered into the grave.

“It'd be ajar or a'floatin' had it been moved. And look, look, Hiram. The top ain't been disturbed. You can see a couple of the pegs Pappy put in to seal it.”

All leaned over to look into the grave.

“Wait a minute, here,” said Job. “Lemme show you. Doc, Tim, you two hold on to me while I brush some of this soft mud away.”

As they did so, Job lowered one foot almost to the top of the coffin and scraped it across the pine box. All the pegs he uncovered remained flush with the lid.

Hiram's face lost some of its tenseness. “Still and all, this child has been violated.”

“No question about that, Hi,” said Will. “Whoever did it must have had to stop on account of the storm.”

“Then that means the bastard'll somehow try again.” Hiram's voice rose.

“We don't know that for sure,” said Job.

“You mebbe know nothin' for sure, but this I know. I'm a'stayin' here 'til grass grows over this child.” Hiram looked around him. He seemed not to see anything.

“Come on, now, Hi. We'll put this back right and then you don't need to worry,” said Will.

“Didn't you hear me, sir? I'm not a'leavin' here--or I'm a'takin' this child with me.” Without another word, the man lowered himself to the side of the grave and gently slid into the opening. Under the weight of his body the wooden casket creaked and cracked. Quickly he placed his feet so that they stood on the more solid edges of the box. His eyes were steel as he looked up at the three men hovering over him.

Will spoke. “Hiram, this won't solve anything. You'll only catch pneumonia and die. Now, come on up out of there so we can restore the grave. It's what's best for your daughter.”

“What's best is me a'stayin' right here. And you know, Vergie, Vergie's probably wet, don't you think?”

“Hi, Hi, she can't feel it. And I doubt that she's wet. You know what a craftsman Pappy is,” said Will.

“Well, I'm staying.” He backed up so that he could rest his back on the damp wall of the grave.

“Then we'll stay with you, won't we, boys?” Doc winked at Job and Tim.

“Yes, sir,” said the latter, speaking for the first time. His voice fell into the grave.

As Hiram stood there, he shivered. Will whispered to Job and Tim that he wanted to talk to them over by the beech tree.

Each man was as perplexed as the next one about what they should do. They wanted to respect Hiram but, as they agreed, they couldn't let him make a fool of himself. Doc assured the others that there was scant danger of Hi's catching pneumonia; saying that had only been a straw-grasping appeal. Tim wondered whether, in a couple of hours, Hi would have reasoned things out for himself. They agreed that the only thing they could do was wait and see.

Then their talk turned to who had dug up the grave. Naturally, everyone pointed the first finger at Cletis. But why? Why would he be so stupid? Neither Will nor Job had ever heard of grave robbers of any description in Salt Hollow or Weary River, so they quickly discounted that possibility. As far as pranks went, they were all convinced that was dubious. If Tim, the outsider, the stranger, had not been with them, Will opined, he would probably be suspect.

Hiram, meanwhile, untightened somewhat. “KILL” had reverberated through him until he had little energy left. The puffs or explosions inside his head subsided. His vision was no longer blurred in red. His pulse slowed. Increasingly conscious that he might break the coffin lid and thus somehow injure Vergie, he shifted from one foot to the other. He stared at the coffin. Yes, Job was right, nobody's disturbed the child's rest, other than to take the earth away. And, yes, 'twould be pure foolishment to stand here like a scarecrow. If there's watch to be kept, best it's done in a more fittin' manner. And, besides, he thought of the scores he had to settle.

Although standing on the coffin elevated him somewhat, it was not enough to let him climb out of the slippery grave. The mud alone would stop him. He knew before he even tried to gain a hold to hoist himself up that he wouldn't be able to do it. Yet he couldn't call to the men for help. He didn't have to, for Hiram had never been out of their sight. At the first movement of his hands out of the opening, his friends were at the graveside. They knelt down to clasp him under the arms and lift him up. After a sliding first attempt, they succeeded on the next try.

Hiram spoke. “Before any of you'uns say a word, I warrant you right here and now, I've still got killin' on my mind. You won't none of you talk me out of it.”

“Now, Hi,” said Will, taking the man by the arm.

“Not now, Will. My mind's set. But we got to make Vergie decent afore we do anything else.”

“We can't do much without some diggin' tools,” said Job. “The boy here and I'll go fetch some while Doc stays here with you Hiram.”

Mixed with the sound of Job's words were the voices of some of their neighbors just emerging from the woods. Peck Wells had run home to his father and told him about Vergie. In minutes, the elder Wells had summoned his nearest kin from the hay field and saw mill. Along with their guns, they also brought shovels.

After assurances were given that everyone, especially Hiram, was all right, the men ladled the muddy clay into the grave. From a nearby grove of pine where the ground was more solid, they uncovered and carried shovelful after shovelful of rich black earth, packing it down into and on the grave. On the way back down the trail, Job quietly talked to some of the men about the measures they would need to take to protect Vergie's resting place.

CHAPTER 24

No one in Salt Hollow that evening lacked for supper table talk. The short-lived but powerful rain storm, the arrival of the television man, Cletis's snakebite and the descrecration of Vergie's grave provided more conversation and speculation than almost most anyone could handle. Years could go by--and often did--without four such provocative topics reverberating throughout the valley. That they were all, in one way or another, connected made the conversations all the more exciting.

What shocked them most, even horrified some, was the attempted grave robbery. No other term would suffice. Out and out robbery. Church members proclaimed the day of evil at hand. Less religious kindred, concerned that their dead relatives might be next, talked of organizing vigilante groups. At least one woman, old Bethbit Ogleby, claimed she had seen Vergie dancing between raindrops that very day.

When Lovey heard about Vergie's grave, she guessed what Etta's reaction would be, but to make sure, she decided to go and see for herself. Besides, she mused, she really should apologize for her rudeness earlier in the day. She certainly was not in the least apologetic about admitting to Etta she had a man in her house, though. Frankly, it was none of Etta's--or anyone else's--business.

“Yoo hoo! Yoo hoo! Anybody t'home?” Lovey's cheery greeting rang through the Rollins house.

“In the kitchen, Lovey,” called Etta.

Into the room came their friend, preceded by her outstretched hands carrying a pie.

“Strawberry rhubarb, just baked,” said Lovey as she placed the pie on the table between Etta and Hiram.

“What with company, Lord knows where you'd find time to bake a pie,” said Etta. She arched her eyebrows.

“Mighty thoughtful of you, Lovey,” said Hiram.

“I knowed you had a passel of food left in the house, but I wanted you to have something fresh and warm.”

“Set yourself down. And rest assured, woman, you'll not be asked to leave,” said Etta.

Hiram looked in amazement at his wife.

“I 'spect I was a mite testy this afternoon,so I beg your pardon.” Lovey folded her hands in her lap.

“A mite testy? I reckon courtin's backed you into a snively corner. But never you mind.” Without asking Lovey, Etta poured her a cup of coffee. Lovey interpreted the act as a token of forgiveness.

Hiram half smiled. “God only knows what you females is up to.”

“We'll enlighten you d'rectly, Hiram. What have you found out about Vergie's grave?”

“There's them that would better hope I don't find out,” said Hiram. “I swear to God I'll kill 'em. Disturbin' the peace of my youngin' is almost worse than her dyin'in the first place.” Hiram looked at Etta and then back at Lovey.

“What with strangers all about, a body can expect anything,” said Etta.

“It ain't no stranger, mark my words, what did it. We don't have to look no farther than this valley,” said Hiram, pointing out of the kitchen window.

“Well, if you're a'thinkin' it's Cletis, I can tell you, it ain't. I seen him in the church afore the rain.” Etta said as she held a coffee cup in both her hands. Then, abruptly, she asked, “Lovey, what have you heard about Cletis?”

The question took the woman by surprise. “Heard about him?”

“Certain you know he was bit by a snake today?”

Lovey looked first at Etta and then at Hiram.

Hiram spoke. “I wonder if he didn't get bit in the buryin' ground.” The corner of his mouth turned up.

Etta paled. “How is he? What condition is, he in?”

“He's resting now over to will's. I'm on my way over there to stay the night with him in case he needs tendin.'“

“The bleedin' hadn't stopped by the time he got to Will Horner's?” said Etta, her voice rising.

“Hadn't stopped afore he got there? What's a question like that mean, Etta?” said Hiram.

“It means I know he was bit. I met him on the road to Horner's and told him not to go.”

“Told him not to go?” Hiram said. “Did you want the man to bleed to death?”

“He wouldn't bleed with the laying on of hands. Or with praying for him”, said Etta. “It was my prayers that stopped the bleeding.”

“Don't be a damned fool, woman. When he got to Horner's he was bleedin' like a slaughtered lamb. It was Doc's needle and knowin' what should be in it that stopped the blood.” The pupils in Hiram's eyes narrowed.

Etta looked at Lovey as though for confirmation of the power of prayer, but Lovey asked Hiram a question. “What kind of fellow is that Charleston man?”

“What Charleston man?” broke in Etta.

“Oh, Etta, didn't you know?” said Lovey.

“What Charleston man?”

“The same as took the fil-ums of the service,” said Hiram.

“What'd he want?”

“The story of snakes and preachers and women like you,” said Hiram.

“There is no story. If he wants a story, send him to the scriptures. There is no story in this valley,” said Etta.

“Etta,” said Lovey. “He's bound and determined he's going to find all he can about our church.”

“He'll not find a single word. They'll not be a body that'll speak to them. Our church is private to us. If he wants a story, let it be of his conversion. Let him be saved. Let Jesus come into his heart,” said Etta. She rose from the table and started putting food away.

“I don't opine he's interested in that, Etta,” said Lovey who got up to help her friend.

“That's the last thing to his interest,” said Hiram. “He's a man with a job to do. He came to learn about why people'd be tetched enought to do the unnat'ral things you're a'doin' in that church.”

“Now, Hiram, them things is not so unnatural when you come to have understanding on them,” said Lovey.

Hiram looked at her and was silent for a moment. Then he said, “Lovey, you've heard me question before and I question now, why do you keep holdin' on to them practices? Why are you hankerin' after such foolishness?”

“I don't know how you expect me to answer with a cool tongue when you say things like that, Hiram Rollins. But I'll try to tell you.” She sat back down in her chair.

Etta broke in: “'Let him that has ears hear.'“ The sarcasm in her voice matched the unmusical sounds of the pots and pans she was slamming.

“I'm not good at learning people things, so I'll just tell you what I feel. Best I can liken it to is the little tiny shriveled up seed you plant in the spring. You have trust that in the fall it will bring forth a harvest. They planted seed sprouts and shoots up. It grows. We water it, hoe it, weed around it, and lo and behold, in the fall, there's a rich harvest. In May, you plant with faith for the fullness thereof. In August or September, the bounty comes forth. This here life is a seed. Its harvest is in eternity. What we plant now, we harvest later. Jesus promises later life, but faith has to be helped with watering and weeding. That's bringin' the good in your life and leavin' the bad out. When you nourish yourself in church, that's the waterin' of faith.”

Both Hiram and Etta were listening intently to Lovey. Hiram held an unlighted cigarette in his hand.

“In the harvest, holdin' an ear of corn in your hand is evidence of faith worked to its fullest. It's a sign. Holdin' on to a verse of Scripture that talks about signs is just part of the faith, Hiram. I guess we need some fruits of the harvest. So if there's them that drinks of the poison and lives, it's of the harvest. And the snake handlin', that's part harvest, too.”

Hearing such a simple explanation, Hiram thought he cloud almost be persuaded there might be something to it. How sometimes like a child Lovey is, he said to himself.

“Have you ever handled snakes, Lovey?” he asked.

“No, Hiram, I rejoice in the signs of others, faith with theirs, and their signs are my signs.”

“'Pears to me you're missing the point, Sister”, said Etta.

“What's that, Etta?” Lovey said.

“Everone has to prove theirselves to the church.”

“Proof ain't part of it. I'm not one to announce my belief in the outward ways. I'd pray I could carry faith quiet-like.”

“If anyone does, you do, Lovey,” said Hiram.

“People tend their gardens in different ways,” the woman responded way it is with belief. You know, sometimes the harvest don't yield much. The plant dries up, withers. There's nothing on the vine. But come the next season and the harvest is rich. The signs are good.”

Etta, who had been standing all the while, sat back down at the table. “It just may be that the season the plant dries up might be the missing out on Heaven. If you die in one of them seasons, the faith ain't strong enough to carry you through. Seems to me you need to produce a harvest ever year. The best way is to pick up snakes and speak in tongues.”

“Them's your gifts, Etta. Not all has them,” said Lovey.

“They will come to all. You have to have some blessed assurance of the after-life,” said Etta.

“Well, maybe I'm in blind error, but I believe if I take as good a care of this life as I know how, then the after-life is being took care of,” Lovey replied.

“That makes a heap o' sense to me,” said Hiram. He lit the cigarette he was holding.

“I ain't so sure that. I've spoke to your question about why I hold on to Cletis's church, Hiram. I see a mountain of good in most of them people. They're tryin' to find understanding Etta, in her way, gives strength to the people. Her heart's aimed in the right direction and others believe in her. There's many like me, the sheep who follow easier than we lead. If that's foolishment, then I must be a foolish old woman.”

“Now, Lovey, stop apologizin' for your goodness,” said Hiram.

“The good comes from the Lord, not from Lovey or me or anyone,” said Etta, throwing forth, her chest.

Hiram wanted to tell her to hold her tongue, but he didn't want to break the mood that Lovey had set. His next words, though, drew fire from Etta.

“With you feelin, the way you do about the church and religion, wouldn't you want more folks to know about it? By spreadin' the word.” He paused, And, Lovey, You can spread it with the help of the television man.”

Etta jumped up from the table. Her chair fell backward onto the floor.

“Thunderation and hell's fire! Ain't you a'tryin' to send this pore soul right into the arms of Satan? You want her goodness soured in one sweep? Well, that's the way to do it, by callin' in those varmints from Charleston. Day by day, you get more and more tetched. Let me tell you, mister, we ain't a'goin' to have any truck whatsoever with that intruder, lessen it's to run him outen here on a rail!” Etta was screeching.

The blood drained from Hiram's face.

In contrast to Etta's pitch, Lovey's voice soothed. “Hiram, whatever goodness might be in our lives, it ain't for announcin'. It's passed from one to t'other like the dove cornin' down and alightin' on Jesus. That television man would make it out to be somethin' it ain't. He mustn't be allowed in the church.”

“No use a'tryin' to talk to him. You might as well try puttin' an egg back inside a chicken. I've told you about livin', with a crazy man. Now you've seen it with your own eyes,” said Etta.

“If a man tryin' to have understandin' about how his daughter died is crazy, then by God, I'm crazy! And, woman, you'll live to see far more craziness that you're lookin' on now.” Hiram clenched his fists.

Before Etta could speak, a sound much like a pig's squeal escaped from Lovey. “Lord a'mercy. Doc's a'waitin' for me to minister to Cletis, and dusk has fell on us a'ready. Now you two seek reason for your differences, hear now? I must be off.”

“No, wait a minute. Why don't you go on home? I'll set by Cletis's bedside. Wait 'til I get my shawl,” said Etta.

“You just stay where you are, woman. You ain't a'goin' no place tonight.” Hiram stepped closer to Etta.

“I go where I please, mister.”

“You'll go to hell as far as I'm concerned, but you're not a'goin' to Cletis Chidester's.”

“He's my preacher. It's my duty.”

“I'm your husband. Or have you forgot that? And if you're a'worryin' that you might have to be a wife to me tonight, forget it. I've got other things on my mind.”

Lovey spoke. “P'haps it's better you don't go to Cletis, Etta. Doc and the young stranger are at my house, and my bed's all ready at will’s. I'll carry your sisterly concern to Cletis.”

“All right, Lovey. Good-bye,” said Hiram.

Lovey departed from the house in which not another word was spoken until the next morning.

CHAPTER 25

Cletis stirred from his exhaustion-induced sleep of several hours. At first he did not know where he was or what had happened to him. Then the soreness in his arm and the snowy white bandage nudged him into remembrance all too quickly. Numbness enveloped him. He lay looking around Horner's little room but seeing nothing. A faint odor of medication hung over the room. He heard no sounds coming from other parts of the house or from outside. He felt he should go home, but something held him fast to the bed. It wasn't the close call of bleeding to death as much as it was not having the strength-to go back and repair the snake pen. Lying there, his eyes wide open, he drifted back to the time 45 years earlier, when his family discovered the first pen Cletis had built.

The incident occurred not too long after the boy had read the 23rd Psalm to the family. For days afterward Uncle Yoke had treated him with a new respect. The man sensed what others had felt in Cletis's voice. But a voice couldn't make an axe handle or build a springhouse or butcher a pig, so it was pretty useless on a farm. Yoke knew it, and Cletis knew it. What the older man didn't think about, however, was that, of all the jobs anyone could have, the one where a voice could best be used was preaching.

Although he had never been of a religious bent, Cletis began to think about church. If just reading out of the Bible to his family could set them crying, what could he do if he really practiced? He remembered holding his classmates at school in almost a trance whenever he read; even his teacher, an educated woman who had been out in the world, had been impressed. All he could think about whenever he worked on the farm or in the snake pen was his voice. Too long it had been stilled. He would do something about it. He would go to church.

The Sunday morning he walked into the Free Baptist Church his heart beat as rapidly as if he had run to get there. His family, who had no idea that Cletis was even considering going to church, smiled to one another when they saw him sit in a pew on the far side of the room. His mother's smile came from the deep satisfaction of seeing her oldest son sitting in the Lord's house. His uncles smile came from the supposed knowledge that indeed Cletis was sparking a young gal; Yoke turned in his seat to see if he could guess who she might be. Neighbors and distant relatives, some of them almost fanatic in their beliefs, rejoiced that a lost sheep might be returning to the fold.

During the service, Cletis let nothing pass unobserved. He watched how the preacher, a wizened man of 60, chicken-necked and bald, sat facing the congregation before the service started. When he stood to announce the first hymn, his voice cracked on the first syllables. He sang into his hymnbook. Then, in reading from the Bible, his twangy voice moved in a range of only two or three notes. Hen's heads bobbed as they fought sleep. Throughout his sermon, the minister shouted when he should not have for effect and dropped his voice so law at times that even Cletis had to strain to hear him. The “amens” and “hallelujahs” with which the audience punctuated the sermon added more excitement to the talk than did anything the preacher said. And then the man's prayer went on interminably. Cletis couldn't remember anything that the old fellow said that day except something about clothing the naked.

What surprised Cletis more than anything was the number of people who had listened so intently. Several people, his aunt among them, seemed to hang on every word the preacher uttered. They never looked around them; they heard no noises; they didn't shift their positions in their seats. Occasionally, they would nod in agreement with a point expressed from the pulpit. During the prayer, their faces appeared muscleless, tension-free. They had given themselves over completely to hearing the word of the Lord.

Not all reacted that way, of course. Boredom had settled on the faces of a few. Perhaps no words, no matter how delivered, could have reached them. Nervous agitation danced in the eyes and limbs of others. Two or three men and one elderly woman slept through part of the sermon and most of the prayer. Cletis wondered whether a powerful speaker, someone like himself, would be able to reach these people if he kept preaching to them week after week.

After the service he lingered a few minutes to accept the exclamations of his family that he had come without their knowing ahead of time. They wanted him to stay for the covered-dish dinner to be held a half-hour later, but he declined, saying he wanted to go walking in the woods. Hearing that, his uncle winked at him. On his way out, Cletis heard a man tell another that Old Poling had died during the night. Cletis felt his stomach tighten with the knowlege that he had lost the truest source of information about snakes that he was likely ever to find.

That afternoon, after changing his clothes and eating some cold biscuits and ham, he picked up a Bible and hurried to his snake pen. There, all was tranquil. Scarcely anything stirred. Contented, well-fed, the snakes lay quietly, their ever-open eyes staring out of their elongated bodies.

Cletis opened the Bible, and he began to read out loud, the snakes his audience. “I hate your feasts, and you cannot please me with all your sacrifices. Take away from me the noise of your songs and your musicians. Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty river. Let every man do what is just and right and merciful, or I will destroy you utterly.” Though Cletis had started to read, by the time he came to the end of the passage he was almost declaiming. His voice rose up over the tree tops and filled the little glen with melody and echo. Some slight movement among the snakes Cletis interpreted as their having heard him speak.

If the snakes were not moved, however, Cletis was. He once again delighted in the sound of his own voice. He felt it vibrating deep within him, originating in some undefined region, perhaps even of his soul. It filled him with a sense of freedom he had never known or imagined. Shivers of excitement streaked up one side of his spine and down the other. Power filled his lungs, moved up into his throat and shaped words. Flipping the pages of the Bible open, he read again at random, proclaiming:

“Give ear, ye heavens and I will speak;

And let the earth hear the words of my mouth...

For I will proclaim the name of the Lord:

Ascribe ye greatness unto our God...

For all his ways are justice.

A God of faithfulness and without inequity,

Just and right is he.

The people had dealt corruptly with him,

They are not his children,…

They are a perverse and crooked generation.”

His voice rose and fell in lilting cadences, halting at times as he stumbled over the pronunciation of some of the words. As he read, he rocked the Bible from right to left in front of him. Then, he himself rocked back and forth as he shifted his weight from foot to foot. His voice, oboe-like and massive, broke into song. He danced as he sang and spoke, the Bible held high in both hands over his head. A surge of masculinity electrified him. He felt his penis rise and throb. Now he danced around in circles orating, “Give ear, ye heavens, and I, Cletis Chidester, will speak! And let the earth hear the words of the mouth of Cletis Chidester! For I, Cletis, will proclaim the name of the Lord!”

Faster and faster he whirled, alternating between word and song. Faster and faster and....

“CLETIS!” The name struck him dumb. He tried to slow down but turned twice more before he was able to.

“CLETIS CHIDESTER! STOP THIS BLASPHEMY!”

There, at the edge of the clearing, stood his mother, his aunt and uncle, three cousins and a neighboring couple. They evidently had been drawn to the spot by following Cletis's voice. Aware, first of all, of his erection, he lowered the Bible until he could feel it pushing into the hard flesh. Then he was aware of his mother crying and of the same look on his uncle's face as he had the day he confronted Cletis in the schoolroom. Yoke said something to the small band of on-lookers and, reluctantly, especially his mother, they turned to go. Yoke walked toward Cletis.

He spoke. “I never knowed craziness to run in this family. But somewhere you picked it up. And if you wasn't crazy, I'd thrash you, big as you are, within a minute of your life. No one, man or boy, would carry on the way you are if you wasn't crazy. And I reckon God sees that, too, else there'd been a bolt of lightning down on you in a flash.”

Cletis said nothing but stood looking his uncle directly in the eye. Yoke shook his head. Pointing behind Cletis to the snake pen, he said clearly, “Now I want this foolishness cleared out of here. Now! I don't know what the hell you have in there, but, by God, get it out. Iffen you don't, I'll kill them snakes, ever one of 'em. I mislike killing critters that'll help the farmer, but if you don't do it--and today--by gum, I'll throw kerosene on that patch and burn them to kingdom come.”

With that, Yoke turned and walked away leaving his, nephew standing looking at him. Cletis's eyes, ears, face and brain burned. For a while he couldn't think. He dropped the Bible and rushed over to the pen. He untied all the pieces of string, twine and grape vine holding the different segments of the cage together. As he did so, some of the boards pulled away from the screen and chicken wire. Using a thin board, he lifted the protective wire covering from off the top of the pen. One corner, caught on a rusty nail, held fast until Cletis worked it loose with his foot. Some of the snakes squirmed; others stuck their heads out of hiding places. Flipping the screen back behind the enclosure, Cletis then quickly pushed the standing boards to the ground. He prodded at the larger rocks, moving them so that snakes could be stirred from beneath them, and then he turned over some of the smaller logs.

The captives moved restlessly and slowly about, uncertain of the activity about them. Green, salmon, black and reddish strands of flesh emerged from rock, log, wood and earth. Sensing release, the snakes, perhaps 20 in all, darted in all directions. They seemingly paid no attention to Cletis or to any of their kind. As the thick-bodied copperhead slithered by a few feet from him, Cletis began to cry. The tears felt cool against his hot cheeks. One garter snake oozed right over the pages of the open Bible on its way toward the edge of the clearing where Cletis's family had stood. A hognose snake crawled over the tip of the young man's black shoe. Then, all the snakes gone or not yet out of hiding, the glen was silent except for the incessant beating on a hollow log of a drummer grouse.

Cletis slept.

When Will arranged with Lovey to stay with Cletis, they agreed that Tim should spend the night with the doctor at Lovey's. He didn't want the young man to drive miles and miles, maybe even back to Charleston, before he could find a bed.

Spending the entire day in Salt Hollow, he had not found anyone other than Will, Job and Hiram to talk about anything: church, snakes, but especially Cletis, Etta and Vergie. The people he encountered were civil, though reserved to the point of straddling a line between politeness and rudeness. The locals did not totally ignore him, but they did not encourage him in any way. At one point Tim wondered where the fire of religious enthusiasm came from; he had not seen even a smoldering ember of human warmth in anyone. Then the camaraderie he felt with the new of Vergie’s grave. The paradox made him more curious than he had been before he came to the valley.

After finding out from Will that Cletis's snake bite was not as serious as everyone first believed, Tim went to the general store. When he walked in, not a head turned and not a conversation lagged. Tim, with his street sense turned rural, knew that every single one of the half dozen persons in the store was very much aware he was standing by the pickling crock. Being ignored worked to his favor, though. He had a chance to look all around him, pretending to inspect the merchandise but actually closely observing the people.

How thin they are, thought Tim. He did not remember seeing a single heavy person in town except for job's deputy fatty. Doc and Lovey had a bit of excess weight, but by no one's standards would they be called fat. Must be all the hard work because it's sure not the scarcity of food, he mused as he watched some of the things the three women in the store were buying. He knew the black walnuts, nutmeg, brown sugar, baking powder and canned coffee were not so much luxuries as they were everyday supplements to the food most families provided for themselves from the land and forests.

When after several minutes Tim still was ignored, he broke into the six-way conversation and asked how to go about buying pickles and a bottle of pop. He was told to “reach down in the crock and take out what you'd be a'wantin'--two for a nickle.” Into the cool brine Tim plunged his hand and grabbed a thin, firm pickle whose inside edges felt like puckered flesh. When he put a nickle down on the counter beside the basket of one of the customers, the owner stretched out his hand and pulled the coin to the edge of the counter. He nodded in Tim's direction.

Then Tim asked if anyone there would answer a few questions about religion and snakes. Everyone stopped talking. Tim smiled at the thought of their being in a silent movie. Finally, breaking the long silence, the man behind the counter said, “We don't bother no one. We don't want no one botherin' us.”

And that was the response, spoken or unsaid, which he received all day long wherever he was. If he didn't know better, Tim would have sworn that some kind of conspiracy against him was being waged. He knew these people had nothing against him personally; they just did not trust anyone from outside their valley. Kinfolk, no matter from what part of the state they came, were accepted because of blood. Unless someone locally could trace another's kinship through the generations and in and out of blood lines, one remained as much an outsider as the fancy men and women showing off the clothes for sale in the Christmas wishbooks that lay on a display case near the rear of the general store.

Later, on the road, people “howdied” or “afternooned” him with nods and hat-touching, but no one smiled or looked back at him. The friendliest greeting of the day came from a boy of five or six who shouted, “Hi, mister! Hi, mister!” The lad was yanked into an adult stride by a grim-faced older woman who pulled him as though he were a sled.

Tim had earlier decided against trying to speak to any children. He surmised how people would take to his approaching youngsters in any way. He realized that children probably couldn't be of much help to him, though some of the older ones who had gone to school with Vergie might tell of their reactions to her death.

Now, with Cletis confined to bed and Lovey staying with him, Tim has lost his last possible source for interviews.

CHAPTER 26

It was nearing four o'clock when, feeling the frustration of the dead ends he had run into most of the day, Tim decided to go back to Will's. There he found Cletis resting. As Tim sat down with the doctor he asked, “Has it occurred to you to wonder how Chidester came to be bitten by a snake?”

“You know, I was just about to ask you the same question,” said Will.

“I've been thinking how strange it is that he'd get hit somewhere outside the church, seeing how many snakes he must've handled in his life.”

“Do you think he keeps snakes at his house?”

“Well, he keeps 'em somewhere. Why?”

“I was thinking how, knowing he isn't home, we could pay a little visit there.” Tim kept his voice down.

“Well, it's not something I'd ordinarily be inclined to do, but these aren't ordinary circumstances. Let me get my poulton to stay so Lovey can he speller and we're off.”

The preacher's house differed from the others in the valley in that it was newer, smaller and made mostly of logs. One-story, built off the ground on pilings of logs, it was almost a square. Six windows--two in front, two in back and one on each of the remaining two sides--and two doors relieved the starkness of the spruce logs. The porch on which Cletis and Lovey had sat the morning after Vergie died ran most of the width of the house. Six steps bridged the space between it and the ground. A simple lattice of strips of irregular wood criss-crossed the enclosure under the front porch. A small rectangular opening was cut in the enclosure to the right of the steps.

Will and Tim walked slowly around the little house. The first time around the windows beckoned to them, but both men gave in to the temptation to peek inside, largely because the front and back doors were open.

Standing on the stoop by the back door, they peered inside. Since the screen in the door was rather new, though, it threw the reflection of the late-afternoon sunlight into their faces. Even when they cupped their hands around their eyes and pressed their foreheads to the screen, they could see very little. To both of the men, the round knobbed handle on the door was a green light to enter. Tim rested his hand on the knob.

“Easy, easy,” said Will. “I know what's going through your mind. But we can't go in there.”

“Who's to know? It won't hurt anything.”

“It's just not right. I might get by with it, but no one would take kindly to you doing it. We don't want to bring a shotgun brigade down off the mountains.” Will tapped the underside of Tim's arm, as though to remove the man's hand from the knob.

“C'mon now, who's gonna know?”

“We'll know, that's who.”

“So?”

“So, we're not going in. We have to draw the line somewhere.”

Tim let his hand slip from the knob. His shoulders drooped as he stepped backward off the stoop. He knew Will was right, but rightness wouldn't help him get his story. Rounding the corner and walking down the side of the house, they said nothing to each other until they saw a gate cut into the lattice work under the porch.

Tim pointed to the opening. “Maybe that's where he keeps his snakes.”

Will smiled. “Well, I guess it won't hurt for you to open it and look in.”

Like a puppy let off his leash, Tim scampered toward the gate. He pulled the wooden peg out of the clasp holding it; the gate swung outward. Without hesitation, he haunched down and leaned into the dark space. A wave of spicy damp air cooled his face. Something fuzzy on legs darted past the opening.

Moving inside the enclosure, Tim crouched for a moment letting his eyes adjust to the shadowy light. Elongated diamonds of light coming through the openings in the lattice work decorated the ground.

Tim saw only a bare space. It would be the perfect spot to keep some snakes, he thought. Damn! Nothing.

“Anything there?” Will called.

“Nope, not a damn thing except dirt and bugs,” said Tim.

As he turned to get in position to move out from under the porch, though, something over in a far corner caught his eye. Very dimly reflecting light, it faded when Tim shifted his body weight. He waddled toward it since he couldn't straighten up under the confined space. The silky fuzz of a cobweb clung to his chin. He tried to brush it away, but one of the filaments stuck to the stubble on his chin.

From outside Will called again, “Tim, what the hell are you doing in there? Taking a leak?”

“Hold on just a minute or two, Doc.”

Tim bent over as far as he could to look at the object. It was something sticking out of what appeared to be loosely dug earth. Tim wished he had the flashlight he had in his car, but, without it, he reached down and pulled at the object. It felt hard and scaly yet pliable. He started to feel around on the ground but thought better of it. Chidester may not be keeping snakes there, but that didn't mean Old Mother Nature might not have led one into that spot. Still, he didn't want to leave empty-handed. He hesitated. Then he looked around, almost as though he were hunting for courage and at the same time, he grabbed the object.

As he scooted around to be able to move out of the enclosure, the opening clogged with a huge, black form. Tim's heart jumped. For a moment he couldn't think. Then, he heard Will's voice once again: “Tim! What's going on?”

“Wait now, I'm coming out.”

Emerging into the late afternoon light, Tim squinted instinctively throwing his hand up over his eyes. Granules of dirt sifted down over his face and shirt.

“Jesus! What have you been up to?” Will stood with both hands on his hips.

“Not up to--down to,” Tim said, holding out to Will” the thing he had found inside.

“What's that?”

“Well, I can see now it looks like a snake skin,” Tim said, closely examining the piece of aged skin. “And it's stuffed.”

“Let me see that,” Will said as he peered down at it. “What's that stuffing made of?”

The men held the snake skin between them. As they did a puff of dried cat-o-nine-tails seeds drifted out.

“What do you suppose that's all about?” said Will.

“I don't know, but if you have a flashlight in your car, we can have a better look under the porch. I sure wasn't about to probe around in there in the dark, especially in the hole where I found this.” He held up the snake by the tips of his fingers. “I'll put this in the trunk of your car for the time being, if you don't mind.”

When they returned with the light, both men went under the porch. They found nothing else, not even after digging awhile in the corner. Dozen of footprints zigzagged all over the soft ground. Most of them were Tim's, although heel and sole marks of several different shoes turned every which way. A few paw prints of varying size and configuration mingled with the shoe marks. Satisfied they were not going to find anything else, Will and Tim went back into the yard.

Before leaving the property, Tim turned to his now accomplice and said, “Now, can't we go inside the house?”

Will looked at him in amazement. “You just won't give up, will you?”

Later that evening, after they had gone to Lovey's place where they would spend the night, they examined the snake skin under the bright light of Lovey's reading lamp. Will's fingers kneaded the skin as though he were examining a patient. Particles of seed dust and flecks of scales fell from the skin. Will paused; then his fingers backed up, then inched forward, then once again backed up. His face was a question mark. Tim looked up at him.

“What is it, Doc? You look puzzled.”

“Somewhat puzzled, I guess. There seems to be something else inside the skin. It feels much different here. See. Feel.” Will took Tim's hand arid cupped it around the snake in one spot and, then, in another. “There's only one way to find out if anything is different and that's by taking this thing apart.”

Pulling his pen knife out of his pocket, the doctor opened it and placed the tip of the blade just under the thread binding the skin. As delicately as he would have removed sutures from an incision, he snipped the thread. As the skin gaped open, the cat-o-nine-tails stuffing spilled out. He cut several more loops of the thread. Then, the knife caught on something. So that he wouldn't cut into it, Doc brought the blade out and flicked at the strand of thread, breaking each loop individually. A piece of yellowish-white cloth swelled out of the skin like a batch of rising bread dough. Doc removed the rolled-up piece of cloth and, laid it on the table. The two men huddled over the snake skin as will continued cutting.

More cat-o-nine-tails. More stitches severed. More cat-o-nine-tails. And then, toward the end of the snake's tail, another piece of cloth. Doc extracted it and placed it beside the other one. Laying down the pen knife, he shook his hands, palms open, on the sides of his trousers. Neither he nor Tim said anything. Tim waited for Horner's next move. The soft silence of the summer night spread around them.

Doc stretched his arms in front of him and with a sweep, almost theatrical, bent and picked up the piece of material he had first taken out of the skin. He shook it and it spread open. And just as it fell to the ground, Tim whistled and under his breath said, “Christ a'mighty!” Will wanted to do both. Finally, he spoke.

“I don't know what question to ask first, but I guess it would be what is someone like Cletis doing with a pair of child's underpants under his front porch?”

“Well,” said Tim, “my question would be are they Vergie's?”

Without looking up, Tim could feel the eyes of the other man on him.

“You certainly get right to the point, young man,” said Will, rocking slightly on his feet.

“Answer my question and you're on the way to answering the others. Maybe those pants have been there a long, long time. Maybe they have nothing at all to do with Chidester.”

“He's the only person ever to live in that house. It was built about ten, maybe twelve years ago for Cletis. Of course, anyone could have come along and gone under the porch the way we did. Anyone could have buried them there.”

“In a snake skin? Who else but Cletis would do that? And I have another question: how are we going to find out whose pants they are?”

“Well, we could inquire of Etta. We could show her the pants and ask her if they belonged to Vergie,” said Will.

Tim was not sure whether the doctor was joking. Will himself was not sure.

“That'd probably be the only way. I think I'd rather meet up with a copperhead than ask that woman that question Would Hiram know if they belonged to Vergie?”

“I doubt it very much,” said Will. “Men hereabouts don't have knowledge of that kind of thing.”

“One man apparently does. Man by the name of Chidester.”

“Some folks would say Cletis possesses a great deal of knowledge about a lot of unusual things,” said Will.

“Couldn't we just show him the pants and ask him what he knows about them? And that's probably another pair right there.” Tim pointed to the second piece of cloth.

Horner reached over and picked it up. He shook it open this time with less force. It was a pair of women's muslin underpants. A hole in the side of them widened as Will held them up.

“What do you make of them, Doc?”

“Like you, I don't know what to make of anything now. They are obviously larger and I'd say older since they seem to be deteriorating.”

“Maybe Cletis has one of them fetishes you hear about. His is collecting snakes and panties.”

“You might not be that far off the track.”

“I guess maybe we'd know more if we had gone into Chidester's house today.”

“To be truthful,” said Will, “I wouldn't have minded going in myself, but we couldn't have, of course. If anyone were to go in--and even then he'd have to have a very good reason--it would have to be Job Lester.”

“The sheriff! Sure! Why didn't we think of that sooner?” said Tim. He brought a fist down on the arm of the chair.

“He can't go into someone's house just because we found pieces of clothing under a guy's porch. The man has rights, you know.” Will didn't try to hide the irritation in his voice.

“Look at it this way: there's been a death under unusual circumstances. The death occurs in a church. The preacher of the church is one Cletis Chidester, man-in-charge. He owns the snake that caused the death. Isn't that enough for what they call an accessory to a crime? Doesn't that make Chidester suspect number one? That's enough of a case for a sheriff to make a move on,” said Tim.

“It's a case now, is it?” Will interrupted with his rich laughter. “Tim, Tim, I know how frustrated you have to be, not getting anything all day toward your story. But you can't manufacture something that isn't there. I'll tell you what. Tomorrow morning we'll try to talk to Cletis. Maybe, just maybe, with the snake bite and a night of reflection on it, he'll be subdued enough to talk about himself or the church and maybe the snake. Maybe he even knows something about Vergie's grave. It's worth a try.” The doctor paused for a moment, then stood up. “Now, I'm going to take advantage of Miss Lovey's feather bed. You can turn in whenever you like; just be sure to put out the lights.”

CHAPTER 27

Etta Rollins did not sleep for the second night in a week. She lay perfectly still in her bed, the only movement the regularity of her breathing and the blinking of her eyes. The same rigidity that braced her during the daylight hours held her now during the night. Except for thinking about her mother, men dominated her thoughts.

First, there were her father and brothers, five of them. Etta wondered if things would have been different if her only sister had lived. Nannielou, six years older than Etta, died of typhoid fever when she was seven. Try as she might, Etta couldn't remember her. She recalled some of the things her sister did, but Etta couldn't associate them with a face. She realized now that she was only remembering what she had been told by her mother.

As the youngest child and girl in the family, Etta had a special place for many years. With six pairs of strong arms to toss her in the air or pull her on a sled back up a hill, she spent more hours than most children in play. If any of her brothers didn't want his sticky bun or berry cobbler, Etta very often found it bestowed upon her. If, while playing, she scraped a knee or elbow, at least two or three male kisses usually restored the girl's spirits.

But as she grew older, Etta discovered that those same arms that threw her in the air wore shirts that had to be washed and scrubbed. Lying now on the bed, she remembered what it was like to be washing and ironing clothes while her mother talked about what a woman was to do in life. She could hear her mother's nasal voice, somewhat strained as the woman lifted the heavy iron. “Do whatever your menfolks tell you to do. They's masters of the house and field. Don't backtalk, don't question. The man's the ruling rooster. You got to feed them and comfort them in the house so's they can get their work did considerable. Remember, what they says, goes.”

Once Etta asked, “Mam, do I have to do what my brothers say to do?”

Her mother's reply was a question, “They's men, ain't they?”

“They's men, ain't they” echoed through the quiet night.

They's my pa, my brothers, Hiram, Cletis. They's men, ain't they? she thought.

By the time she was 14--Lord, that's Vergie's age, she sighed--she cooked, cleaned, washed, ironed, scrubbed, mended, canned, knitted. And all for men. Their clothes came first. Their food was served first. Their sleeping time started first--and, thus, so did everyone else's.

Men prevailed. Her father and brothers were men. The sheriff, preacher and judge were men. The storekeeper, doctor and tax collector were men. Miners, loggers and farmers were men. What few car drivers and train conductors she had ever heard of were men. And, of course, her husband would be a man.

Etta couldn't remember when her mother began to harp about a husband for her and what all she should do for her man. Maybe she had always done it. “Etta, no man will abide you a'singin' whilst you work.” “Child, allays ast your man what time it will pleasure him to visit his maw.” “A man ain't a'feered of nothing in this here world.” “You been a'lookin' around for the man you'd be settin' stock in?” “Iffen you do what your man tells you to, you'll be a credit to your pa.”

“Men!” Etta said aloud.

The only woman she ever saw who had any authority or power or say in what went on was the teacher in the one-room school, Miss Keturah Homan. All day long Miss Homan made decisions, gave directions, solved problems and, when necessary, wielded a hickory stick. To Etta, she did everything a man did--and more: she taught students 'to do things, things like numbers and spelling which could help them in the world.

Once Etta stayed after school to talk to Miss Homan. “I'd surely like to be a school teacher some day,” the child told her instructor.

“I do believe you'd be a fine one,” said Miss Homan. “Why would you like to become a teacher?”

Etta's response came quickly. “So I could tell boys what to do. And there won't be no men a'tellin' me what to do.”

“Do you know what a district superintendent is, dear?”

“Soopertind? No, ma'm, I don't,” replied Etta.

“Well, he's the person in charge of me. He's my supervisor, my boss. He tells me what I can do and can't do. And, Etta, I don't know of a woman in the South who's a superintendent.”

Etta never again thought of becoming a school teacher.

If women like Miss Homan could manage in the world without a man, why couldn't other women? Etta began to observe widows, old and young, who got along all right without living with a man. True, a male family member or neighbor could be counted on to do heavy work around a homeplace, but in the day-to-day living a woman made all the important decisions.

As I look back now, thought Etta, I guess I opined that once you had a man, he would so train you that after he was gone you'd still act as though he was still around. But I wonder why. Hiss Homan never had a man. Neither did Maidey Crum. I wonder if that was her real name or was it because she was an old maid?

Maybe a teacher has too much learnin' for a man. She maybe can outsmart him, so he just won't take her on. Well, now, that ain't so with Miz Pratt, Vergie's teacher. Come to think of it, she's got three young'uns and still minds school. That's because of the times a'changin', though. I reckon by now some woman's been set in as one of them superintendents. Etta crossed her right ankle over her left one. The ticking of her clock kept her company.

From across the house she could hear light snores coming down from Hiram's attic room. He ain't a bad man, Etta mused. Since I nigh on had to have a husband, he'd be numbered amongst the best, I reckon. Had to have a husband--that was her lot as it was for all the women in the hills, and everywhere, Etta guessed. While she was growing up, Etta never questioned what would happen to her. Taking a husband was another square in the patchwork quilt of life; it followed birth, childhood sicknesses, body changes and preceded child-bearing, burying your parents, troubles, illness and, finally, your own death. Variations in the pattern sometimes surprised, sometimes delighted, but essentially life was predictable and orderly. Except for Fondabelle Linser who had become a missionary to the heathen and Nella Jute who ran off with a revenooer, Etta did not know of any woman who had not married.

She couldn't remember not knowing Hiram; he had always been around. First as a playmate to two of her brothers and then as a schoolmate of hers. The next thing she or anybody else knew, he came a'callin'--and a'callin' and a'callin'. Even now, she could hear her mother and father talking about Hiram.

“If there's a man around cornin' with more goodness, I declare I don't know who it'd be,” said Mrs. Rupert, Etta's mother.

“I reckon you're right, but I'd like to see more get up and go,” said her husband.

“You'd be meanin' to git up and go in the woods and stir up a mess of whiskey, wouldn't you?” Mrs. Rupert said..

“Wal, cain't say it wouldn't put hair on his chest and mebbe a extry chicken on his table. He might need a triflin' of both.”

“She won't be worryin' herself about gettin' whupped or havin' to borry fire.”

“You never had that kind of worriment, did you?”

“Ain't yet. Tomorrow ain't come 'round the corner.”

“'Spect Hiram Rollins would be there to take care of ye, iffen worriment set about you.”

Hiram and Etta were married the following spring. For her, it was little more than trading her place in her father's house for a place in her husband's. The man still reigned. He provided and protected but always from his place at the head of the table. He might be away from home more hours during the day than he was there, yet his presence filled the house much the way cedar or camphor did. It could be forgotten for a while, until some simple act, opening a closet door, for instance, rushed to engulf you.

“I don't know what I'd did in life without religion,” she whispered, as though she wanted whatever eavesdroppers there might be to hear her. Marrying Hiram was so every-day like. I guess that's the way people are made, to be everyday, ordinary like. Maybe that's why religion means so much. It brings feeling into, the everyday life. It's the only certain different thing I know. Excitement and peace tied up together. We need the peace to settle the troublesome waters. And we need the excitement so's we can expect something from the everyday sameness.

I reckon that's what I allays wanted. Something different to happen. I allays knowed just what was going to happen to me--and it allays did. It was the same as ever woman I knowed. Yet and still my maw allays said it was woman's lot in life to bear the heaviest cross. She never told me, howsomever, that the cross was man.

I should have knowed. I should have knowed. Ever thing pointed to it. Etta expelled a heavy sigh through her mouth and nostrils. Then, she turned on her side and extended her arm to the floor. For a moment, she groped for something. Unable to reach it, she moved her body closer to the side of the bed and reached again. She lifted a china doll to the bed. Settling back down, she lay the doll in the cradle of her arm. She stroked its forehead with two of her fingers. Under her breath she whispered Vergie.

Why didn't maw tell me what it'd be like to be with a man? She never said. I can't recollect nary a thing she hinted at 'bout what to expect. 'Course I don't know what she'd said 'bout it, other'n what I've heerd others say, 'A man'll have his way with you, no matter what.'

I s'pect something happens when men get further and further away from Jesus. That turns their character as sure as vinegar turns milk. Cletis now is on a path away from Jesus, and I don't know why.

Getting up from her bed, Etta slipped into a house dress. She picked up the doll and tiptoed out of the house. A clear, star-lit night covered the valley. The slate blue sky blackened on the horizon. A bright half-moon, lying on its side, cast delicate shadows all about. Etta walked briskly in the direction of the church. Suddenly, a racing animal, probably a deer, darted through the woods. Etta paid it no mind.

The church stood, as always, unlocked. As she went inside, she stopped beside the door to rummage in a tiny closet for a candle, but she couldn't find one. With the doll in one hand, she made her way down the aisle by grabbing the end of each pew as she went by. CLUUUNNNK. Her shoe caught the edge of something sticking out of one of the pews, and she stubbed her toe. Then, she imagined the floor was a trifle sticky. Even though she was puzzled, she did not stop to see what she had tripped over. A few feet farther down she shuffled sideways into a pew and sat down.

Etta sighed and relaxed her spine. She thought back to the time she first heard Cletis speak. In some ways, it seemed as though it had been only this week.

Etta was 17 years old. With her skin the color of a piece of fine bone china--much like the head of Lovey's doll which now sat upright in the seat with her--and her hair so russet it was brown, she was one of the comeliest girls in the valley. Taller than most girls her age and one who would argue any notion that came into her head, she caught the eye of all the men, young or old, single or married. Those eyes were all wide open the morning she walked into the Church of the Abundant God in Jesus and tip-toed right up to the second row. Since the Baptists did not approve of any woman's taking any role in the church, she had left them and come here. Her plan was somehow to find a way to prove something about women. What, she was not sure. Yet, here, here in this church, she, freed of Baptist rigidity, would find a way. Etta reached over and slid the doll closer to her.

Sitting in Cletis's congregation, she almost glowed, not only because of the way the light seemed to settle on her as it streamed through the windows but also because something spiritual radiated from her. Reverend Chidester couldn't take his eyes off her as he stood behind the pulpit.

Etta held his gaze as he exhorted. “Jesus, in your everlasting hope, yes, your Jesus, your ever, your lasting, your hope. With the fear of Jesus, wisdom begins. Spell his name--J.E.S.U.S.--now all of you, spell it so you know it. And know it to love J.E.S.U.S. Oh, Sister, you can spell it!” He pointed directly to Etta. She mouthed the spelling slowly as Cletis paused; he watched her soft lips form the unspoken letters.

Then, pulling his eyes away from that magnetic hold, he went on: “Sister, you too can spell it out. And cain't you also, brother?”

Murmurings of spelling, the sibilant “s's” producing a hissing sound, slid over the congregation.

“Now, Jesus is king of our lives and the prince of our souls, but since we don't cotton to kings and princes, Jesus is the hand on the plow, the pick in the coal mine, the axe to the pin oak tree. Be there a living soul here who won't believe that? All you who do believe, say it: 'I believe. I believe'“

A chorus filled the room. Etta's voice, though soft, reached Cletis; he could hear, or thought he could, every word she uttered.

“J.E.S.U.S. has told us our belief is to be showed in not words but what we do in his name. You know what it is. You all know what it is. You know it, Sister Talbott. You know it, Brother Bryan. You, you, you know it. And what devils have been cast out? What devils in his name?”

“The devil of strong drink,” screeched a soprano voice.

“Amen and Amen for that,” replied a woman.

“The devil of temptation,” came from the back row.

“Keep a'prayin' that away, for it allays tries to come back,” said another voice.

“The dev-vil of burning flesh,” crooned a young man.

“Oh, Jesus, we have cast out these devils and do so still in thy name. Get them all behind Satan,” shouted Cletis.

“Amen. Amen. Amen!”

“And Jesus has told us to show out faith in the healing of the sick. The laying on of hands brings us closer to Jesus. Who has healed in our midst? Who has become healed? Who needs the healing? Praise Jesus!” said Cletis.

A woman stood in her pew. “Piney Walters has the pleurisy bad. So bad she couldn't come here. Cain't we pray the healin' upon her?”

“Better she'd be standing here for the layin' on of hands,” said Cletis. “If she can't make it, then best I go to her and lay on my hands.”

“Amen, Brother Chidester,” said the woman. “I'll carry word to Piney.”

“Is there any other soul needs healing?” Cletis looked around the congregtion and let his eyes settle upon Etta. She could feel the eyes penetrating her own.

“Many needs healing, maybe all, but they'll bring their burdens another time,” said Cletis to the congregation. He closed his eyes and raised his head up, all the while holding on to the edges of the homemade pulpit which was little more than two plywood crates stacked one upon the other reinforced with planks and varnished.

“Let us pray. Oh, Lord,” he began in a strained voice. “Oh, Lord, test us now with the gift of tongues. With the unknown word, let us show that we glorify thee. Speak, speak, speak to us Jesus as you did to them at the Pentecost. Send the words forth from our tongues which should be used to speak for you, dear Jesus, the maker of the mountains.”

“Allamacorma solumnda palla palla melnicordus onanacoma sellorda'! rolled from the tongue of a middle-aged man.

“Hallelujuh! Praise Jesus mayda sabaca ruma flowda,” sang a woman.

Etta sat straight up, quelling an impulse to turn and stare. She had never heard such strange and peculiar words and sounds. She wondered how foreigners had made their way into the church. And what were they saying? One of the voices was that of a woman, so these odd ways of speaking were not something given only to men. How could she learn it?

“Trelentalla collocollo smenothca rilletata boscalla novima rousallla.”“ Was it the same woman or another? Another, Etta was certain. This time she just had to turn and look, but, when she did, she could not determine who had said what.

She lifted her head to look at Cletis. His eyes still closed, he continued to pray. She waited for him to speak the foreign tongue, but, if he did, she could not hear him. While she stared at him, he opened his eyes, fixing them on her. He noticed the puzzled look on her face. Thinking he had so entranced her, he smiled ever so slightly. She bowed her head.

Cletis spoke: “In the midst of the gift of tongues, we will drink the poison--in the name of Jesus, in the name of Jesus. Come forth in the name of Jesus. Yes, brother, show the faith to be true to the Word. Show that them that believes need not fear of anything. The sin is behind the sinner, never, to return. The poison burns the sin. In the name of Jesus, bring forth the poison. Praise Jesus. Everyone praise HIS HOLY NAME!!!”

Down the side aisle of the church ambled Luke Casto. In his mid-forties, slender, with a rather prominent nose, he carried a quart Mason jar filled with a clear liquid. It could be water, moonshine or anything, Etta thought. She could see the liquid moving back and forth against the edges of the jar as Luke walked.

She had known Luke all her life, and she knew some of the stories about his drinking pizen. They were stories which she immediately discounted as she did ones about ghosts shooting guns in the Lowry attic or black snakes twisting their bodies to spell out the name of the next person to die. Yet here stood Luke before her very eyes. Then she heard Cletis saying, “To them that believes, this strychnine is as blameless water. The poison shall be drunk. The Lord shall be believed in. In the name of Jesus Christ, drink. DRINK! This do in remembrance of him and to prove that believers have been saved. DRINK! DRINK!”

Slowly, with both hands encircling the jar, Luke Casto raised it to his lips and drank. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down with each of the four swallows of the liquid. Then, just as slowly, he lowered the container until it rested on his belt buckle. He ran his tongue lightly across his lips. Not a sound could be heard in the church. Etta realized she was holding her breath.

After a few moments Cletis clapped his hands. Etta jumped as though someone had pinched her. Luke Casto, arms raised above him and head lowed, Murmured in coherently-Two men arose out of the congregation took ahold of Luke and led him back past his seat and outside.

Cletis spoke: “And now, in His name, the kiss of fellowship.” The preacher smiled, folding his hands on his chest and after a pause, moving down into the congregation in Etta's direction.

She, meanwhile, had been greeted by several persons who knew her; they welcomed her to the church. Mrs. Ridenour the first to kiss her, whispered to her to read the last part of the last chapter of Mark in the Bible.

Then Cletis took hold of her. Etta knew whose touch it faff was before she turned to see him. She didn't remember whether he said anything before he kissed her--in the name of Jesus. Etta felt the tip of his tongue quiver on the edges of her lips. She shivered. And then he moved on up the aisle.

The memory of that kiss was so strong that Etta, sitting in the darkness, put the back of her hand lightly on her lips, as though in doing so she might seal in the kiss of so long ago. Then, abruptly, she pushed her hand down on her mouth and, with a swipe across her lips, wiped away the kiss. The memory was better sweet, now more better than sweet. She lifted the doll up and kissed it on the forehead, lowering it again-to nestle in her arm. For a brief moment she thought of her husband and low long it had been since she lost him kiss her.

Sitting there, she remembered how strange she had felt as she walked home from church after the service. Her skin tingled; tiny pinpoints of excitement danced all over her. She felt as though she had been rubbed all over with alcohol and sent out into a stirring breeze. Then balloon puffs of giddyness filled her head and chest. As she breathed deeply, almost to seek more lung space for the buoyancy, little squeaks and squeals escaped from her throat. She skipped. She hopped. She leaped. Had the foreign tongues done that do her? Or was she responding to the the miracle of Luke's drinking the poison? Or to the kiss of Rev Chuduter? Was this salvation? Or was she perhaps ill?

From that hour religion and Cletis were one for her. She had never been able to separate the two. She could never tell whether Cletis had led her to God or whether God had led her to Cletis. Never had she thought of Cletis as an extension of God, yet in earlier years she had often lain awake, even as she had earlier tonight and thought of God as a giant Cletis Chidester. That picture altered, though, after she realized she could become angry with the preacher. And, never, never, she concluded would she dare be angry with God.

The incident that first triggered some of the anger occurred about a year after Etta joined the church. In that year, Cletis had taught her what he thought she should know about the Bible, giving to her his interpretations of creation, miracle, resurrection and the Holy Ghost. Seated on one of the benches which then served as pews, they both had open Bibles, Etta's in her lap, Cletis's in his hands. Just as Cletis finished talking about the feeding of five thousand people with only a few fish and a loaf or two of bread, the door at the back of the church opened. A young man of about 20 approached them timidily.

“Ma'm, Miz Rollins. sir, Mr. Reverend Cletis, excuse me. My maw is powerful ailin' and is callin' out for you, sir,” he said.

“Well, now, Lyle, can't you see we're working with the Lord's word, here?” said Cletis, giving a slight wave of his hand as though to make the young man disappear.

“But, Mr. Chidester, reverend. She's nigh on to dyin' and in need of them words in the Bible,” Lyle said.

Cletis glanced at him and then back to the Bible.

“Can you read, boy?” Cletis asked.

“More'n a smidgen, sir,” he said.

“Well, then, you can read the first page of the Scripture to her. Mind you, practice a bit so you don't stumble whilst reading it to your maw.”

“But, but,” Lyle struggled to get the word out. “It's a preacher's readin' she needs. I already done read to her. She needs you.”

“I can't do for her now. Only Jesus can do that.”

Etta felt the blood rise through her cheeks to her forehead. Her body tightened. She could scarcely believe what she was hearing.

“Yes, sir. Just the same, sir....” Lyle's voice trailed off and he turned away. His feet were muffled thumps as he walked toward the door.

Etta stood, closing the Bible as she did. “Wait!” she called to Lyle. “Wait outside for a minute, and I'll go with you to your maw.”

Nodding, Lyle stepped out of the church.

Cletis's eyes were as large as hotcakes. His mouth parted. Before he had a chance to say a word, Etta spoke.

“'In as much as you have done it unto the least of these....' Ain't that what that there book says?” She thrust forth her finger and tapped three times on the cover of the Bible he now clutched to his chest. She squeezed past him and walked quickly up the aisle.

Outside, the young man was waiting for her. On the way to the dying woman's house, Etta, rather than dwell on what had just occurred with Cletis, thought about what she could say to Lyle's mother. Reaching her bedside, Etta stayed until the next morning, hours after the woman had died, hours before which Etta read the Bible, sang hymns, prayed, fed broth to her and held her hand as she died.

How could Cletis not go to a dying woman, especially after she had sent for him? It didn't matter who the poor soul was, he had cast her aside like scraps thrown into a pig pen. How could studying the Bible be more important than reading it to anyone, sick or well, who asked--and from a preacher? The explanation he later gave Etta had something to do with battling Satan at the very moment that Lyle had asked for help. Cletis kept mumbling, “Get thee behind me, Satan. Yes, devil, get thee behind me.”

Etta did not understand or excuse him for what he did. She allowed as how that was something a man would do. But a preacher? A preacher was different. A preacher shouldn't be like other men, if only because when he took it upon himself to be a preacher, for whatever reasons, he became different. Different in the sense he was willing to do--in kindness and understanding--what most other people were not. Otherwise, preachers were just like everyone else, and if they were, then what was there to set religion apart from every day life? The preacher had to be different because, as Etta understood religion, it helped make the good in people better by commanding their hearts. It was friendship with Jesus and trying to do what he would do.

As she sat in the pew, Etta wondered what had happened to that belief in her. Little by little, under the influence of Cletis and the members of her church, she found it more and more necessary to prove her religion, not in what she did for others but in what she did before those who already possessed belief. Her own congregation held that Mark 16:14-16 were the most important verses in the Bible. So, in order to help others in the name of Jesus, you had to prove to yourself--and to them--that you were a believer, and you did that by speaking in tongues and' handling snakes in church services.

Cletis had man-power over her; she guessed it was his lot in life. But it was not going to be her lot to accept it just like that. “No, Vergie, I'm not,” she said aloud to the doll.

Morning sounded as roosters crowed and birds whistled. Glimmers of light filtered into the church through the windows. Rising, Etta turned and started up the aisle. A dark spot on the floor caught her eye. She peered more closely at it. Then she knelt. She stretched a finger toward the floor and touched it. “Why,” she said aloud, “it's blood! The floor is covered with blood!” Looking around under a pew, she saw a basin tilted on its side with a few tablespoons of blood forming a red puddle. She lifted herself up and looked behind her on the floor. There, leading to the seat where she bad sat were red footprints.

CHAPTER 28

Hiram awakened from a sound, dreamless sleep. He opened his eyes, turned his head slightly to look out the window and then closed them, again. Vergie--dead. Vergie--dead. VERGIE WAS DEAD! His whole body made a fist as he pulled his limbs together, lowered his head and yanked the sheet up over him. For several, minutes he lay in that position, all of his muscles taut as a bowstring. Then, as he continued to lie there, the muscles seemed to turn to concrete. In fifteen minutes, he couldn't move, the heaviness anchoring him to the mattress.

“What's the point of it all?” settled on him, word by word. “No sense in going on. What for?” Each word, each syllable added ballast to the weight he felt. “It's all for naught.”

Behind closed lids, his eyes fell back into a black cavern. Facial puffiness congealed into rigidity. He could feel and hear his pulse throbbing in his temples; under the sheet it reverberated like a distant drumbeat or the drumming grouse he had heard on the night Vergie died.

Minutes passed, but Hiram paid no attention. With his head covered and his eyes closed, he could not see the sunlight filling the room. He sagged further and further down into the bed. No sigh or moan escaped him. Nothing creaked about the bed. The sun rose higher in the sky. Never in his life had Hiram stayed abed this late. Even when he had the grippe or his mine accident, he would be up sitting in a chair or wanting to go to work. Now, he just wanted to sink into the darkness and warmth of the bed.

But stinging and burning wouldn't let him. His bladder, as full as it had ever been, had to be emptied. As though the sheet weighed a hundred pounds, Hiram shoved it away from his shoulders and unraveled his arms and legs. He lumbered down to the bathroom.

Returning, he looked at the bed and started toward it. But the sunlight filling the room reminded him of Vergie and her laughter. He hesitated. A breeze lifted the white curtains away from the window; they billowed toward Hiram before they fell limp against the frame. With a glance toward his bed, the man walked over to the window. For a second, he imagined he could see his daughter running back and forth in the side yard. She disappeared in a burst of golden light. A robin pecked at the ground.

“It's the same world out there as it was when Vergie was here. Just because she ain't here now is not enough reason for me to bury myself in that bed,” he said to himself. “Bury! Bury!” And then it struck him. He remembered! Vergie's grave! It had been broken into. Yesterday. By God, how could he forget? How could he think of going back to bed? He had work to do. He would not let the sun go down on this day before he found who had disturbed his daughter's rest.

When he was shaved and dressed, Hiram went into the kitchen. Etta was nowhere about. “She must of been up and gone without me a'hearin' a sound,” he thought. After making himself a pot of coffee, he took a cup of it out onto the porch and lit a cigarette.

He felt numb, almost stone-like. The hot, steamy liquid of the coffee in his mouth and stomach had no taste. He barely felt it. The inhaled smoke did not calm him. He sat looking out past the trail running in front of his gate. So groggy was he that the question crossed his mind of whether he had tripled his weight by staying in bed so long.

A slight shimmering movement on the ground caught his eye. He stared at the path leading up to the house. A brown snake, which kind Hiram couldn't make out, slithered in the dark earth still damp from the previous day's rain. It crawled down the path almost as though it were a visitor leaving the house after a chat with Hiram. As he stared at the snake, he felt the heaviness melt away, pierced by waves of heat surging down his arms and legs. Flashes of red swirled about his eyes; the blood thumped against his ears. For a second he thought the roots of his hair singed. The snake had reached the gate. It paused, then was as still as the bark on a tree. Since it was almost camouflaged, Hiram could not tell whether it was still in the path or not. Then it twisted around and started back up the path. With slight motion, it pulled itself, skin-shrug by skin-shrug, up the walkway. Hiram flicked his cigarette in the direction of the path, but it landed on the bottom step of the porch. He bolted out of the rocker so fast that he knocked it over and spilled the half-empty cup of coffee which rested on the porch railing. He jumped down, grabbed the cigarette and crushed it out with his foot. The snake darted into the grass and disappeared, not even disturbing the blades of grass through which it passed.

Lashed now to anger, Hiram knew what he had to do. Springing back up the stairs, he went into the house to the front room closet. There, rummaging about, he took out his shotgun. Holding it up to the light streaming through the front door, he looked into the barrel; then, cocking it, he checked to see what ammunition was there. Satisfied, he leaned the gun against the sofa and went back into the closet. When he backed out of the storage space, he carried in his hand a thin package wrapped in yellow oil cloth. Unwrapping it, he pulled out a Barlow knife which he lay on the sofa.

Then, going into the kitchen, Hiram bent down under the sink, parting the calico curtains which hung there. With pans clanging and wood clunking as he moved odds and ends about, Hiram took out a can of kerosene. As he lugged it into the living room with the two fingers of his injured hand, he felt in his side pocket for matches. He set the can down on the floor beside the sofa.

He picked up the knife and rolled it back up in the oil cloth. He tried to stick it between his pants and his waist, but it was too bulky. The he unloosened his belt two notches, as far as it would go, and reclasped it. Between the pants and his belt just at the waistline, he was able to secure the knife, although somewhat unsteadily. He then picked up the shotgun with his good hand and the can of kerosene with the other. Backing out of the front door, he went down the stairs and onto the path over which the snake had slithered just a few minutes before.

Etta returned to her house at dawn after her night of restlessness and reverie. She had dressed, eaten cold corn bread and drunk some reheated coffee. She didn't know whether her husband was up nor did she bother to look. The less she encountered of any man in the flesh at the moment the happier she would be. For some reason, she wanted to be in the company of a woman for a while. She even thought she might try to find out how another woman felt about some of the things she had been pondering. She didn't know whether she could bring herself to discuss such intimacies with another person, but, sooner or later, she felt she would bring them up. Wondering if it would be too early to go over to Lovey's, she hesitated, but she knew she should at least try to apologize to her friend for what had happened at the Rollinses the evening before. So after her early; skimpy breakfast, Etta set out for Lovey's house.

After the rains of the day before, the valley and mountains gleamed with cleanliness. The film of dust which had settled on everything had been washed away. Gloss returned to the holly and the laurel leaf; sheen immersed the green tomatoes bulging on the vine; wax polished the edges of the eastern clouds pillowing the sun. Etta looked all around her at the freshness. “This is the day which the Lord hath made; let us rejoice and be glad in it,” she said aloud. A ruby-throated hummingbird, emerging from the bright red trumpet vine, buzzed past her in agreement. “Oh, the glory of the Lord!” she shouted. Thinking how Vergie would have loved such a morning, she almost stumbled on the path.

As she came around the corner that brought her in full view of Lovey's house, Etta stopped. Parked in front of the dwelling was Will Horner's car. Was Lovey sick? Etta put her right hand on her throat. “Oh, not more misery,” she mumbled. Or was Horner trying to get something out of Lovey? “That'd be more misery, too.” Forgetting what she had heard the evening before that Lovey and Will would be exchanging houses for the night on account of Cletis, Etta first thought she should go to the church or even back home. “But, whatever's a'goin' on betwixt the two of them, I'd better have some notion of,” she said, again aloud, as she straightened her back and marched right up to the front door.

“Helloooo, anybody t'home?” she said as she opened the screen door as she always did and walked into the house.

“We're in the kitchen,” came Will's voice.

“Well, why didn't Lovey answer? It's her house,” thought Etta. “Then, she is ailin'.” Etta rushed toward the kitchen.

“OH,” she gasped the second she stepped into the tiny room, for there seated at Lovey's table were Horner and the television man. “What's wrong with Lovey?” Etta asked, her breath interrupting her words.

“Nothing's wrong, I trust, Etta. She's over at my place with Cletis. Surely you knew,” said Horner, standing up to address her.

“I knowed and I didn't,” said Etta. She tugged at the sides of her dress with downward jerks. “Mebbe she did say something about it.”

“Missus Rollins, I'd like you to meet a gentleman from Charleston, Tim....”

“No gentleman, I'm sure, and nobody I'd be a'wantin' to know if he's who I think he is,” said Etta.

“Now, Etta, there's no call to be rude, no matter what,” said Horner.

Etta swallowed, remembering the Bible, “Reckon not. How do, how do,” she said as she nodded to the visitor.

“Pleased to meet you, Miz Rollins,” said Tim. “Mighty sorry about all that's happened to you.”

Etta stared at him.

“Aaahemm,” sounded Will. “Uh, won't you have some coffee, Etta?” He picked up the pot in one hand and a cup in the other.

“No, thank'ee. I'll come back when Lovey's t'horne” Etta turned to leave.

“Miz Rollins,” said Tim.

Etta stopped and slightly moved her head in the direction of Tim's voice.

“Miz Rollins,” he said, moving toward her. “Could you, m'am, please answer a few questions for us about snakes and your religion?”

“Read the Bible and you'll find out all you need to know,” said Etta, her back now turned on the two men.

“We know what's in the Bible about snakes, m'am. We just don't know how and why you put it into practice.”

“The how and why is in doin' the Lord's work.” Etta turned and looked Tim straight in the eye.

“But nobody we know seems to be doing it with the same results as you appear to have,” said Tim.

“Iffen they don't, then they're not carryin' out the demands of the Lord. “They don't have faith”. Each word was spoken with the same emphasis.

“Just how you do that, m'am, is what we'd like to know.”

“Get saved first and have this knowledge come to you by faith. Now, that is all I have to say to infidels.” This time Etta looked at Will Horner.

He smiled and nodded his head.

Tim tried again. “Please, Miz Rollins.”

Etta, acting as though she did not hear him, went out of the kitchen and into the living room.

The two men looked at each other waiting to hear the front screen door slam as Etta's parting remark. Instead, in a few moments, her voice severed the quietness of the house and the early morning hour.

“WILL HORNER! What evil have you now been up to? You and that stranger? Jesus have mercy on us all.”

Before Horner or Tim could respond, Etta called out again.

“Get in here and spew this out of Lovey Ridenour's parlor!”

As the men moved into the other room, Will knew that Etta had found the snake and panties on the end table. They found her staring down at the table and pointing.

“What in thunderation is this? What desecration have you brought in this house?” Etta, white-faced and trembling, looked at Will. Tim stood quietly behind the doctor, holding his breath. He noticed a twitch in the doctor's left ear.

“Now, Etta,” Horner began. “Don't go marching down some road you don't have directions about. Part of that is as much a mystery to us as it is to you.”

“Witchcraft more n' likely, ain't it? A'truckin' with Satan hisself,” said Etta. All the bones in her body seemed to be pulling her skin inward.

“If it's witchcraft, then you know more about it than we do,” said Will.

Etta jumped as though she had been slapped in the face. She looked from Horner to the man behind him.

“And if that's the case,” Doc went on, “then you might tell me, tell us, what its meaning is.”

“Meaning? Meaning?” asked Etta in a voice so soft the men could scarcely hear her. “How could I know any meaning for sech a concoction of a dead snake and dust stuffin's?”

“Yes, it is a snake filled with what looks to be cat-o-nine-tails. But that's not all it's been stuffed with. Don't you see there beside it those pieces of cloth? Go on, Etta, look closely,” said Will. He nodded his head toward the table.

Stooping a bit, Etta peered at the two white clumps mounded beside the snake. She squinted her eyes and bent even closer to the table. Her right hand moved toward the objects but then withdrew. Etta felt the blood flush her face, and she knew her heart fluttered, missing several beats. Again, her right hand crept toward the table, almost as if some mechanical action directed it there. This time, there was no withdrawal. Etta touched the table's edge, her fingers curving over the wood veneer. As though she were playing a child's game, she sent her fingers forward, two at a time. As they neared the cloth, they hesitated, slowed, then stopped. Then, with a quick thrust forward, Etta picked up the larger piece of cloth. Shaking it, the woman saw that it was a pair of underpants--common, everyday, women's underpants. A stinging sensation rippled through Etta's body. Her eyes burned. Her stomach felt as though it had become unmoored. She had to sit for a moment, so, turning on her heel, she let herself down on the sofa. She put the underpants up to her forehead, much in the manner of holding a hot or cold compress to the head. Suddenly, she threw them to the floor.

Will Horner sat down beside her and took hold of her wrist. She did not seem to notice.

“One hundred twenty,” said will more to himself than to Tim.

“Is there something really bad, Doc?” said Tim. “Can I help?”

“No, son, I don't think it's particularly bad, but she has had a shock, though I certainly don't know why.” He laid the back of his hand on Etta's forehead.

“Hmmmm, a bit warmer than usual but certainly nothing to get upset about. A glass of water from the kitchen, Tim?”

Tim rushed toward the kitchen. He returned quickly with the water and handed it to Doc.

“Here, Etta, drink this,” Will said, extending the water to her. She lifted her head, looked at the doctor, nodded and then took the glass. After two or three swallows, she rested the glass in her lap, wrapping both of her hands around it. Slowly, she turned her head to look again at the table. Then she fixed her gaze upon the crumpled pants on the floor.

Keeping her head bowed, Etta spoke. “Where did them things come from, Will Horner?”

“They were part of the stuffing for that snake. Along with those cat-o-niners. We found the snake under Cletis's porch yesterday afternoon,” said Will.

Etta looked up, her face pinched. “Was them things sewed in it or what?”

“Not sewed in, although the skin itself had been bound with thread. You can see for yourself where I cut through to see what was inside.” Will pointed to the snips of black thread protruding from the skin's underbelly.

Tim spoke. “Uh, m'am, there's another pair, there on the table.”

Etta jerked her head to the side. She jumped up, spilling the glass of water down the front of her dress and onto the sofa. She grabbed the rolled-up panties from the table, shaking them open and staring at them. She was as pallid as reflected moonlight. Her hands doubled into fists nearly engulfing the panties.

When Horner was sure she would not faint or have some worse reaction, he said to her, his voice almost child-like, “Etta, can you tell us anything about any of this?”

“I can tell you a'plenty! I can tell you you probably put all this paraphernalia under Cletis's porch. You likely done it to put some spell t'other on him, just to see him in a bad light. “

Etta curled her upper lip skyward as her nostrils widened. “These strangers here, these trespassers, probably brought with them all kinds of sorcery and bedevilment to torment the hearers of the Word! Voodoo, it's called! I've heerd of it! Taking animal skins and women's garments to set spells. You've went too far this time, Will Horner, triflin' with the Lord Jesus! And you know it! You know it!”

Perspiration broke out on Etta's forehead. Her eyes widened and narrowed. “Just you see! You'll see!” She spread her hands out in front of her and moved them apart, as though to push people out of the way. But the men were behind her. Without looking at them again, she went out of the house.

“Whew! Wish we could have put that on film No one would believe it otherwise. What a personality,” said Tim, staring after Etta. “But she is a troubled soul, isn't she?”

“Troubled soul, nothing,” retorted Will. “The last part of that little drama was sheer play-acting, if you ask me. She knows far more than she's telling. True, she maybe just found it out, but she sure didn't tell us what she knows. Instead, she fell back on that old saw about spells and superstition and the devil.”

“But, Doc, she was about to have a breakdown. You saw it for yourself. No one could put on an act like that, “said Tim.

“Oh, I grant you she was genuinely shocked, even scared until she drew on her willpower to get her out of that condition. The only way she knew how, though, was a tirade. Something does puzzle me, boy, and that's the emotion over the panties.”

“Maybe she's just overly embarrassed to find herself handling things like that with two men standing around her,” said Tim. He scratched at the back of his neck.

“That's possible, but I think it's more than that. I suspect that she's put out because Cletis has been dallying with such things. It's almost as though she's found the skeleton in his ecclesiastical closet.”

“Whoa, there, Doc. You're about to lose this listener with words like that,” said Tim. Both men laughed.

“Well, I'll go back to something I said last night: what if one of those is Vergie's? Maybe Etta saw that they were and that's the reason for the near-hysteria,” said Tim.

“That, too, is possible, except that she seemed to have the worse reaction with the women's pair,” said Horner.

“I think that was just her great surprise in finding them here and associating them in any way with Cletis,” said Tim.

“I hope you're right. But that woman is on her way to see Cletis. She's too upset to hold back until another time. We'd best head over to my place now and see if she confronts Chidester. But, quick, let's straighten up this mess. Spilled water, crumbling weeds, snake skin, panties. I wouldn't want Lovey to come in and find all of this.”

As though conjured up by the very mention of her name, Lovey opened the screen door and came into her living room.

“You wouldn't want Lovey to...land o'misery, Will, what kind of goin's-on have took place here?”

Lovey stood, hands on hips, and looked with dismay at the floor and then at Will. Turning to Tim, she said, “And what to you have to say for yourself?”

Tim started to reply, but Will was quicker. “Now, Lovey, things aren't what they might seem. We are....”

“Is them women's pantaloons you have in your hand? Why, Will Horner, I am shocked. Just scandalized!” The look on Lovey's face revealed she was not acting.

“Believe me, this is Cletis's doing. Yes, it is. Now, listen,” said Will.

“Why, don't tell me he stopped here instead of going to the church,” Lovey said, looking all around the room.

“Going to the church? Isn't he still at my place?” said Will.

“Miz Ridenour, did you happen to see Miz Rollins out on the road anywhere?” said Tim.

“Now wait a minute, you two. Wait a minute! There are just too many questions, mine included, flying around this room One at a a time, one at a time!” said Will.

“What in the world is going on?” said Lovey.

“We'll try to explain in the car on the way to wherever we're going,” shouted Doc. “Just answer me this, Lovey. Where's Cletis?”

“He got out of bed, said he was strong as a plow horse. Ate like one, too. Got up from your breakfast table with nary a word of thanks and said he had to go to the church to pray for restorement. When I seen there was no stoppin' him, I came here to tell you. Now, you tell me. what....”

“We'll tell you on the way,” Will said, taking hold of Lovey's shoulders and steering her toward the front door.

CHAPTER 29

At will Horner’s house, Cletis had awakened refreshed and strong and had scarcely remembered the snake bite until he noticed the bandage on his hand and arm when he stretched while yawning. Then, the swirl of the previous day's events settled on his brain. He could not wait to leave the house, but when he stood up, he staggered. Soon realizing that he was dizzy, probably from lack of food, he stayed long enough to eat the breakfast Lovey had prepared. Now on his way to the church, he shivered as though in doing so, he threw off the imprisonment he felt inside the house.

He had in mind to lay plans for a revival service where he could appear before his people every night for a week and hammer into them just what he expected from his congregation. He would insist that he, and he alone--not Etta, not Jesus, not anyone but he--was the leader of that flock. Music, prayer, fire, poison, tongues and snakes had their places, but his preaching was everything.

Through his speaking he set himself apart from others. Since they had not heard much exhorting from him lately, he would make up for it with the revival. He'd use Vergie's death as an illustration, a parable, of...of what he wasn't yet sure. But he'd make that a sermon theme. If he used that, then Etta would have to take a back seat for awhile. He reasoned that wouldn't be seemly for her, being the child's mother, to take part in a revival that centered on her daughter. True, folks hereabouts didn't make nearly as much fuss over mourning as they used to, still a mother who had lost a daughter would know her place in public.

As Chidester approached the church, he thought how small it looked. Maybe it was the way the sun shone on it, but it appeared as though it had shrunk. Maybe we need a new building, a larger one, he thought as he went inside.

The temperature dropped fifteen degrees immediately, making the inside of the church almost clammy. Yellow streamers of sun angled through the windows on the east side of the chapel. On the floor near the window closest to the pulpit lay the silhouettes of maple leaves, their three distinct parts fanned out; they looked as though they could have been picked up off the floor and placed there Cletis paused, cocking his head to determine what the sound was which he heard--either a squirrel scurrying across the roof or a field mouse scampering outside.

As he walked up the aisle, he caught the odor of something dead or dying he tightened his nostrils and once again shivered. With the next step he took, he could smell only the familiar church interior: seasoned cedar mixed with a tinge of camphor. Abruptly, Cletis stopped. Darkened, rust-colored stains marred the floor. Taking a step around them, he walked right into an underlying ware of musk. He stopped, sniffed, turned his head and sniffed again. The odor was strongest toward the front of the church. Then, he saw it--a large crock of dying flowers, their heads dropping or fallen off, their leaves yellow and brown and their stems faded and limp, the water mark.

“Damn Etta,” he said aloud. “Why hasn't she tended to her business instead of to everyone else's? And what did someone spill on the floor over there?”

He held the crock with his right hand and with the other pulled the clumps of marigolds, zinnias and roses halfway out of the container. The smell penetrated his nostrils. From the stems of the flowers clung ribbony strands of green slime; the water looked like pea soup. Cletis jammed the stems back down into the jar and walked with it to the side of the church. Opening the door, he hurled the container and its contents out into the field. He brushed the open palm of his uninjured hand up and down, up and down, to remove any debris. Then he lifted his hands to his nose. The residue of the dank water had left its smell there. Cletis groaned.

The front door of the church opened and closed. Turning toward it, Cletis saw Etta, her head and shoulders back, striding toward him. He could tell by the force in her steps that she was about to confront him with something. She did not say hello.

“Cletis Chidester, the Lord has showed his displeasure with you. Take it as a sign.”

“What are you babbling about, woman? I might say to you to hold your tongue.”

“There is what I'm babbling about,” she said, pointing to the arm bandage.

Cletis pulled his arm closer to his body. “That's no sign. It's snake bite, pure and simple like.”

“Iffen you had been conductin' your life in a Christ-like manner, there wouldn't have been no call for the serpent to strike. Your faith has been trembly-like, and now it's failed you. The signs are present.”

“A snake bit me while I was fixin' the pen which got damaged in the storm. The only sign about that is that I was danged careless. Has nothing a'tall to do with faith. That just shows the foolishness to come out of your mouth at times, Etta.”

“How much of it might have to do with your wickedness being sought out, preacher? Etta thrust her hands onto her hips.

“You're always looking for wickedness and evilness and badness, all such things. Such vigilance isn't pretty, Etta.” Cletis moved over to the front pew and sat down.

“Don't use them, fancy Chidester words with me, Cletis. They get in the way of what's tryin' to be said. What I do and say some might not see as pretty. I don't care a fig. Watchfulness is scriptural.”

“So is humbleness, and it strikes me that you've lost yours.”

“You'd have me to humble myself to you in all things, I reckon?”

“I am the preacher. I am the man.”

“Oh, there's no disputin' that, is there?”

“Seems you try to.”

“Tryin' wouldn't get me nowhere. But men are accountable too, you know.” Etta moved to the altar step and reached for the edge of the pulpit. She pulled herself up to it and moved to stand behind it.

A smirk twisted Cletis's face. He folded his arms and sat straight up in the pew. “So, that's what you want, is it? To take my place, eh? Well, give a gander at these, woman.” Cletis raised his legs and nodded to his pointed black shoes. “You or no other woman could never fill them. They'll be planted up there behind that pulpit for as long as I live, I can certify ye that.”

“Without women where do you think you'd be with this church? Most of the members is women. The people you lean on the most is women. Lovey, Tensey, Rachel. The people that brings you vittles and coal and money--the widow's mite, some of it is--is all women. Who handles snakes' most in this fellowship? A woman. Yes, a woman. And who submits to you? A woman. Or women, is it? Etta grasped the sides of the podium with both hands. Her knuckles whitened. “WOMEN, Cletis! The women of your congregation!”

The door at the back of the church opened wide enough for Lovey's head to peek through. So absorbed in Etta's outburst was he that Cletis did not hear the door. Etta, however, saw the woman. She extended her arms, hands wide open, in a beckoning welcome to Lovey and an invisible congregation, and then she brought her hands back to her bosom with a sweeping motion. Lovey slipped through the door's opening and sat down in the last pew. He eyes were wide as collection plates.

“Yes, WOMEN!” Etta pointed a finger at Cletis. “And in the name of God, one woman! Who has handled the snakes? One woman alone. Who has spoke in tongues as leader and not follower? One woman. Who has visited the sick when you slunk away from that duty? One woman. Who gave prayer to the dying? Yes, Cletis Chidester, who? And who berefted herself of her girl child? One woman! Etta Rollins!”

Cletis sat unblinking, unmoving. He might have been a statue carved out of wood. Lovey had the tips of her fingers touching and resting against her lips.

“Yes, Cletis, that woman, me, was took in by a man, a named Christian. I didn't know but what you wuz the lesser image of God, so I wuz led and directed by you on paths that I never reckoned wuz anything but righteousness and merciful. But now--Lord have pity--now, I know better.

“You put a spell on me with your voice. It was like music that I had never heerd or food that gave new sweetness. Ever word you said wuz law and prophecy to me. Words wasn't the same in your mouth as they wuz in others'. Maybe that's why they bore different meanings. Maybe that accounts for why I came under your spell, thinkin' that your words wvz made flesh, like the Bible says.”

Etta paused and looked around the church. Cletis sat mesmerized, even frightened.

“It took me a long time to divide you and God. I thought he spoke through you. I believed you when you said flesh and spirit wuz one, so iffen I was transported in ecstasy in one, it'd be the same as t'other. And as sure as you're a'settin' there and a'breathin', I let you lead me into adultery. “Into adultery against a good man in my own home.”

“Woman, watch such words in the house of the Lord,” said Cletis, rising from his seat.

“Words only name the deed. You should know that. Now, set back down there and hear me out, ever word of what I have to say.”

Cletis's shoulders drooped as he dropped back down into the pew.

“I led myself into adultery also, thinkin' that fervent prayer and shoutin' in tongues was some sort o' manifestation of the spirit. I give myself up to that and didn't pay no attention to the flesh afore it was too late. Too late meanin' realizin' what had happened.”

Etta spoke slowly, each word distinctly spoken, more in the manner of delivering a speech than in conversing or narrating.

“I might a' had some sorter excuse if I had been imbibin' strong drink, but I can't go excusin' myself. I reckon religion, took too far, can blind a person. All I know now is that something for certain bound my eyes. But light seeped in in puny ways, 'ceptin' I didn't notice what it was 'til today.

“The puny ways was all the things you did, mister, did and didn't do. You'd proclaim commandments from standin' up here and then you'd run from fulfilling them yourself. Your life is all words, Cletis, all them dauncy soundin' words. You never put the truth to them with your deeds. Or you'd blot them out by doin' the contrary. When Miz Martin lay. aldyin' and her own child come right up that pew and ast you to come with mercy for her, did you go? For certain, you blew her away like them motes o' dust a'floatin' past you right now.”

While Etta was speaking, a slant of' sunlight coming through one of the windows widened in the space between the pews and the podium. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of particles of dust danced in the light. Whenever Cletis or Etta moved, their activity stirred up hundreds more.

“As near as I can figure out, you didn't go to the and dyin' for you reckoned that you could see that you yourself wuz crippled and twisted in your soul. I guess I seen it but kept denyin' it like Peter cut off knowin, the Lord. I know now how blind I was.

“When did you ever do what you wuz bid? It wuz what you wanted, when you wanted, and weren't it allays cloaked in words from the Scripture? You're all words, Cletis just voice and words. Words that mean nothing, just like the words you quote from the Bible about drinking poison and then you give Luke Casto plain well water to swallow. Oh yes words. You blind listeners with them. Us women folks in perticular.

“I must say one woman knowed you for some of your worth. She don't hang on ever word you utter. And she has gumption to question most of your sayin's. That woman is Lovey.”

At the mention of her name, Lovey froze, daring scarcely to breathe. She noticed that Etta was looking directly at her; she wondered if Cletis could sense someone was in the church with them.

Etta continued. “What a wise treasure Lovey is, and I didn't realize that until today.”

“You seem to have realized quite a bit today, and it's still so early.” Cletis's mouth turned up at the edges as he spoke.

Etta went on as though Cletis had not said anything.

“Lovey sees things in sensible ways. She, fits her religion into ever-day life, not like some who lets religion suck the meanin' out of the ever-day. She knows I wasn't the best mother Vergie could of had. With the naming of her daughter, Etta swallowed hard. “In Lovey knows Hiram is a good man. She knows....”

“Thunderation, Etta, what's got into you?” said Cletis. “What kind of nonsense has that woman been putting in your empty head?” He sat holding his arm, for it had begun to throb.

“If my head is empty, you had a good deal to do with clearin' out of it what was sensible,” she said, staring at him. “As I wuz a'sayin', Lovey knows what's a'goin' on. If she wuz to tell what she knows of life, she'd put you and all other men to shame. And against that soul I broke another of the commandments. 'But I know she'll forgive me, and I pray that God will. I stole her little china doll what Vergie loved.”

From her pew in the back, Lovey smiled and nodded. Her forgiveness filled the church.

“You what?” said Cletis. “What in the name of God for?”

“I'd like to think it's the name of God, but it's more out of selfishness, I reckon. I guess I wanted something of Vergie, 'ceptin' I didn't know it at the time I done it. When I came out of the kitchen that day of the child's layin' out, I seen the brown paper sack a'settin' there on the couch, so I took it and put it under my bed. I've looked at it several times and more and more hit's been a comfort to me. More and more I don't know why. One thing I know is that I been able to talk to that doll the way I couldn't with my child. Maybe I calculated I had my baby with me, dead-like but still with me. I can tell her things I should of told her whilst she lived. 'Pears I gave myself no chance with her alive what with praisin' Jesus and bein' took in by you.”

“What with being led into the desires of the world is what you mean, woman,” said Cletis.

“I knowed you would say that, just as you said it was a graven image for her to play with the doll. But I noticed you had more than a eye-blink interest in it, preacher. Why would that be?” As earlier, Etta pointed a finger at Cletis. “Could it be because Vergie wuz so fond of it? Could it be because she didn't wear no underdrawers? Just like Vergie? Just like Vergie's mother?” With each question Etta's voice rose. The shaft of sunlight had expanded to include the bottom of the podium as well as Cletis's shoes and lower legs.

Cletis reddened until his face matched the color of his lips. His heartbeat galloped. The arm stopped throbbing. The soles of his feet cooled. A fuzziness clouded his eyes, and he blinked several times in an effort to remove it. Finally, his eyes focused. Etta was speaking.

“Just this morning Will Horner showed me a home made snake he and the television man found under your porch. I misdoubted them all when they told me. Then I seen what the stuffing was. Dried plants and weeds. And underdrawers. An old, old pair. They wuz mine. Ones you took of fen me when I fell under the spell of your flesh nigh on to twenty year ago. They wuz failin' apart they wuz so old. I knowed then that you had took them, but I ast God to help me put that outen my thinkin', and for years and years, I disremembered them. Then there wuz another pair of pants in that snake. When I took a'hold o'them, i knowed with the touch they wuz Vergie's. You had took them from her. Now, Cletis Chidester, I want to know what you did to get them drawers! I want to know what you done to my daughter! I want the TRUTH now!”

Cletis sat with his head dropping onto his chest. He breathed with one loud gulp of air and then said, “I did nothing, Etta, except look at her, and then I took her panties. She didn't want me near by, and she was really afraid of me. This was the night before she handled the snake in the service. I was giving her instructions about what to do. She wasn't like you, Etty. She, she was so down-to-earth about it, not caught up in ecstasy the way you were, not swooning and exhorting and praising the Holy God. With you, it was so easy. You fell right into my arms and let me do what I was led to. I thought it'd be the same with Vergie.” He lifted his head to look at Etta. Much of the color had faded from his face.

“I thought since I'd led you to God that I could lead Vergie the same way. When I saw that she wasn't ready, that she hadn't felt the descent of the Holy Spirit the way you had, I didn't know what to do. I wanted to prepare her for the service in the same way I had prepared you. But it wasn't the same.

“I was feeling the same, though. I had to use some pressure on her when I tried to look at her body. I pulled her legs apart to look, but she still held me off. All I did was look. That's all I did, I swear it. I swear afore God, and if ever I've told the truth, it's now, Etta, believe me. I just looked and then took her panties. I told her it had all been a test of God's and she was now ready to handle snakes. I swear to God that's all that happened.” Cletis dropped his head once more.

Etta closed her eyes as though in prayer. She held on to the sides of the podium for a moment or two. Then backing away from it, she stepped down and moved in front of the pulpit. She knelt down and spread her hands out in front of it.

“Oh, Vergie, you wuzn't Accountable, you wuzn't accountable. Your mother and your preacher wuz. We wuz both struck dumb with religion. One of us thought it wuz all for the everlastin' life. The other 'n reckoned it wuz for whatever he could squeeze out of it.”

Etta was silent for two or three minutes, and Cletis could not tell whether she was praying or crying. Then she said, “Oh, Jesus, what can I do for forgiveness?”

“Forgive yourself, that's what, if you believe in it! If you don't, then get on with what you were doing before you started all this self-pitiful nonsense!” Cletis's voice was strong. He stood up and walked a few steps to the podium. “Get up, Etta, and stop this! You've had your say. You've finally had a chance to 'preach' from this pulpit, and some might have thought it a pretty good speech. But it's out of your blood now, and it's over, so get up.” He reached toward her and started to take hold of her arm to pull her up.

Etta pushed his arm away and said, “How darest you say such a thing after what you've did?”

“Well, well, so you know, do you? What's so different? You just found out your daughter had the same kind of religious experience that you had twenty years ago. So what? Let's call it baptism. Let's call it revival. Let's call it whatever. But it's done, and there's nothing you can do about it.”

From the back of the church came, “There's plenty that can be done about it, Cletis Chidester. Plenty.” Lovey was coming down the aisle.

Cletis whir led around. “Lovey! Where did you come from?”

“I'd like to say I came from the Lord--that's something you'd say. But I came from that pew back there where I've given ear to everything you've said. It don't surprise me none, but it does grieve me. Now get out of my way while I help Etta to her feet.”

Lovey swept past Cletis and bent to help Etta. She placed her hands under the woman's arms and lifted her up. She threw her own arms around her friend and said, “Etty, you didn't steal from me a'tall. Since I give that doll to Vergie I give it to you also. You don't need my forgiveness, but you have it in abundance iffen you want it.”

Etta kissed Lovey and held on to her for a moment. Then Lovey said to Cletis, “Will Horner and the Charleston man brung me here whilst they went on to fetch Job Lester. They knowed something was peculiar about that snake skin. I opine Will even guessed what you just spilled out to Etty and me. Now, they'll be a'comin' back here any minute. Thank the Lord they didn't arrive sooner or we'd 've never heard your'tale and then of course nobody would of ever got it out of you. Afore they get here, I think you have some plannin' to do, Cletis.”

“Why, I don't have any planning to do accept for the revival I thought I'd have maybe week after next,” said Cletis without a tremor in his voice.

“Etta, what do you think has to be did?” said Lovey.

“Cletis has got to leave this here church,” she said.

“Damnation, woman, this church is my life. I won't leave it and don't think you can threaten me or make me.”

Etta looked at Lovey. “I reckon all I have to do is tell Hiram what you did to Vergie. That should bring the boil to a head.”

“And I reckon all I have to do is swear I heard you tell it. And I reckon Doc Horner can add his penny in with the bruises he found on Vergie's legs. They's still some suspicion about, that.”

“Bruises, what bruises? What the hell are you talking about?” asked Cletis.

“The ones we found when we wuz layin' out the child. The ones Will Horner wuz examinin' when you burst forth into the room that day, accusin' him of molestin' the child. Land of misery, I guess you'd know what molestin' wvz, yourself havin' practiced it enough.” Lovey took a deep breath.

Etta brushed her hair back from her forehead before she spoke. “I 'spect the best thing you could do, Cletis, is leave the valley. Leave out of here as soon as you can. I know afore God if Hiram was to know what you have did he would kill you. And me too for that matter. Since I carry a parcel of this blame, I guess I might deserve it. But I figure the best thing is for him never to know what Vergie when through afore she died. What's your feelin' on this, Lovey?”

Lovey put her arm around Etta's waist. “That's the most sensible idee I”ve heard you name in years. There's already been too much misery surroundin' Hiram, and, Etta, as I've tried to tell you, he's a gracious man. You'll not find a better one in this state.”

“Hhhhmmmmppphhh,” murmured Cletis.

Just then the sound of voices drifted in through the windows. Cletis jumped. Etta and Lovey looked at him and then at one another.

When, moments later, the back door of the church opened, in trooped Will, Tim, Hiram and Job Lester. Hiram carried the shotgun he had left his house with. All was silent except for the thud and clump of men's footsteps down the aisle.

Cletis shouted. “How dare you enter this hallowed sepulchre with a gun? Get it out of here right now!” He pointed to the door.

“Well, now, just keep your horses in reign, Brother Cletis,” said Job as he stopped just beside the preacher. Cletis glared, at him.

“It don't appear seemly to have it here. There's a time under the sun for ever'thing, you know,” said Lovey'.

“It ain't goin' to be a concern a'tall, Lovey. You'll see,” said Job, his voice softening.

“I'll take your word for it,” she said.

“I expect I'd better fill you and Etta--and Cletis--in on what we're up to here,” said Job.

Tim stood watching every moment anyone made. He was almost hypnotized now that he was face to face with all of the people he had tried to talk to.

“Earlier this morning,” said Job, “when I was out drivin', I seen Hiram here a'headin' down the road with that there gun, his Barlow and a can of something. Turned out later it was kerosene. He looked fierce. I don't believe he saw to the right nor to the left 'cause he didn't even signal that he seen me. I thought that was might pee-culiar and seein' Hiram totin' a gun is like seein' Free Will Baptists settin' up a still. So I went up the road a piece, parked Old Betsy and followed behind our friend here.”

Lovey spoke. “Well, if this is a'goin' to be one of them protracted tales I'm a'gettin' off my feet.” She moved toward a front pew and sat down. She motioned for Etta to sit beside her.

Job continued. “He, never knowed I was behind him. He never looked around oncet. In a few minutes, I knowed where he was a'headin'. Straight to your place, Cletis. And sure nuff, he goes right to your door and calls to you, 'Cletis Chidester, come outen your house.' Nabcherly, you wasn't home and after awhile, Hiram knows that. He circles the house a couple of times, peers in the screens of both doors. Then, he turns and heads into the woods. I follow. Afore long, he comes upon your snake pit, Cletis.”

Etta took hold of Lovey's arm, her face troubled.

“He or you nor nobody else has any right on God's green earth to be there!” said Cletis as he doubled his fists at his sides. His face flushed.

“Not a matter of rights, a'tall, Cletis,” said Job. “Maybe it's a matter of a grievin' father lookin' for the murderer of his child.”

By now Cletis's face was tomato red. His breathing became snorts.

“And that murderer was somewhere in that snake pen,” said the sheriff.

“Unless he's a'standin' right there.” Hiram speaking for the first time jerked his head twice in the direction of Cletis.

“Now, Hiram, we've already talked this out,” said will putting a hand on Hiram's shoulder. The last slant of sunlight slid out of the room.

“Leastaways, Hiram stands there in front of the snakes, stands there the longest time, a'decidin' what to do, I guess,” said Job.

“You're damned right I was! And iffen you hadn't talked to me and showed me sense I would have waited 'til this old reprobate came there and I'd a'killed him sure as I breathe.”

“Hiram!” gasped Etta.

He looked down at his wife sitting in the pew. “Set your mind still, Etta. Nothin' would be served by killin' a human, even if he is related to snakes.” In pronouncing the word “snakes,” Hiram sneered.

Job spoke. “I seen too much killin' of the so-called human snakes during the war. I sure don't want any of it in my home valley. But on with what else I seen Hiram was about to do. After studyin' a while, he unscrewed the top of the can of kerosene and started to pour it on the ground. I knowed immediately what he was about.”

So did Cletis and the two women.

“GODDAM YOU!” snarled Cletis to Hiram.

“CLETIS!” shrieked Lovey, jumping out of her seat. Etta pulled her back down.

Will Horner shook his head almost imperceptibly. The slightest trace of a smile fluttered in the corners of his lips.

Tim folded his arms and shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

Job continued. “That's when I had to step in and let my friend here know I was there. I couldn't make no sense to him for a while, but showin' him how he might start a fire in the forest broke through to his good gumption. Also, I told him there was too many good snakes cooped up in there. Some of the critters is a friend to folks as they go round eatin' insects and rats. I didn't think he wanted to see none of them snakes torched up. Finally, sense got ahold of him, and he settled down, saw my reasonin'.

“Whilst we wuz talkin', along comes Doc and this here feller.” Job gave a nod at Tim. “Evidently they wuz lookin' for me after they dropped Lovey off here at the church. They seen my car parked near Cletis's and come a'lookin' for me. We hatched this here plan and come to fetch you. Since you wuz nowhere to be found, Etta, we figured you must be here, too.”

“Yes, I've been here and I've had my say.” Etta's voice did not sound like her.

“You might say we hatched a plan ourselfs,” said Lovey, the gleam in her eyes unmistakable.

“Well, I'll tell you ours,” said Will, stepping toward the front of the center aisle and looking at Cletis. “You, Reverend, will go with us to your snake pen. There, you will release all of the non-poisonous snakes--the black, green, ribbon, garden and all such snakes. Then you will pick up the copperheads and give us all a lesson in snake handling, since you're so very, very good at finally, you will show us which rattler Vergie handled on the night she died. Hiram will shoot that snake. We thought at first that he could shoot it while you held it, but that would be a bit dicey. Any rattlers left you will kill. We tried to find some use for Hiram's knife, so you can use that instead of the gun, if you have a motion to.

Hiram looked at Etta, expecting her to jump up and run to Cletis's side or to scream her displeasure in some way. She sat there as Cletis yelled out. “All of you are out of your minds. Vipers all of you! Whited sepulchres! You won't get away with this!”

“Get away with it? What's there to get away with?” said Will.

“Them snakes is a menace to the valley,” said Job. “I'm orderin’ that they be got rid of.”

“You have no authority to do that and you know it.” Cletis took a step toward Job.

“What do you know about what authority is vested in me by the state of West Virginia?” Job asked, throwing back his shoulders.

“He'll do it, and, afterwards, he is leaving the valley,” said Lovey.

All turned toward her. Amazement showed on their faces.

“Yes,” said Etta rising from her seat. “Yes, Cletis will do exactly as we bid. Wasn't leavin' what you wuz a'fixin' to do? You just have something to carry out afore you leave.”

No one was more surprised than Hiram. At first, he couldn't believe what Etta was saying. But the tone in which she said it was one he had not heard in her in years.

Will Horner held up both hands. “Before we leave here, though, there's something I'd like to say. It's been a long time since. I've been in a church. I didn't realize how beautiful one can be, like this one, with its simplicity. There are no trappings or ornaments, no stained glass or brass or silver. Too bad faith can't be like that. It's the trappings that destroy it. That and people like you, Cletis. What is it about religion that snares people like you and brings out the worst rather than expands the goodness?”

“Don't be so almighty sanctimonious, Horner,” said Cletis. “Your slate ain't so clean, you now. I'd think twice about others when you yourself are a common fool spy a'prowlin' about the woods all the time.”

“Oh, I thought that sooner or later you'd wake up to the fact that if God weren't watching you all the time, Will Horner was,” said Will. “I'm surprised you didn't figure out that I fired the shot over your house the morning of the funeral.”

Lovey screeched. Tim's mouth fell open as Etta's hands fanned against her throat. Lovey blurted, “God have mercy! Are you daft? Whatever possessed you to do seen a thing as that? You took ten years of fen my life.”

“And probably another ten when he broke the window in Vergie's room,” said Job.

“Well, now, that just exhausts my patience,” said Lovey. “I've lived too long if things is a'headin' in directions like that.”

Etta's back stiffened. “Will Horner, you always wuz and always will be a troublemaker. You oughta be rode down the creek on a log.” Turning to Hiram she said, “And why, why are you standin' there as silent as tree bark?”

“The boys let me in on their little plan. On the way over, they tole me all about their little scheme to try and scare the be-Jesus outen of you hypochristians, as Doc names them.” Hiram laughed for the first time since Vergie's death.

“You're damned right. I tried to scare them.' I've tried everything else to get them to stop this foolishness of snake worship, poison drinking and God-knows-what-else,” said Will, his eyes glued on Cletis.

“Then it was you who left the cut-up snake spelling my name on the floor,” said Cletis. “I might have guessed it from the first!”

“Yes, I thought I'd try some of your own tricks.”

“And the basin of blood, you toted that in here, too, I suppose?” Etta tossed her head in the direction of the blood spot. Everyone but Cletis turned to look.

“Very good, Etta, very good,” said Will. “Indeed I did. You all are always talking and singing about blood—“There is a fountain filled with blood' and 'Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?'--so what better way to drive home a point to you than by bringing blood here. Real lamb's blood.”

“That is a'goin' too far, Will. I can't believe you'd bring blood into God's house and throw it on the floor,” said Lovey. She dropped her head and shook it slowly.

“Oh, I didn't throw it on the floor. I set a basin by a pew thinking whoever found it would be greatly puzzled or even take it as an omen of the sacrifice that was made by Vergie. Unfortunately, I guess someone spilled it.”

“If you must know, it was me what stumbled over it. But it don't surprise me in the least that you done it,” said Etta.

“Well, it surprises me a'plenty, I can tell you that,” said Lovey.

“Then,” said Cletis, “don't be surprised to find out he dug up Vergie's grave just so he could put the blame on me.”

“No, Cletis, that's one thing I did not do,” countered Will. )

“No, he didn't,” said Lovey. “No, Etta did that.”

A chorus of murmurs, gasps and hums blended together: “What? How? No!”

Etta slowly turned her head toward Lovey. “How did you know that?”

“By the dirt on your fingernails and shoes yesterday and blisters on your hands today. Why just look at your hands now!” Lovey reached for Etta's hands and turned them over in full view of everyone.

Job turned to Will. “I was just bidin' my time 'til you tole us that part of your scare plan was diggin' the grave. I was so sure, 'specially with the other things you wuz a'doin'.”

Hiram stared at his wife. “Why, Etta, why? Don't you know when to stop?”

“I wanted to put Lovey's doll with the child. The more I thought on it, the more it seemed fitten to do. It wouldn't hurt nothin'. I dug in the early morning light so I wouldn't look on Vergie d'rectly. But diggin' was more than I could do. I just plumb give out. I didn't even have no strength to put the dirt back. Then, later, it rained so hard I knowed 't'weren't no use goin' back. No harm was did.” Etta rocked her head back and forth.

“I guess what they said is true,” said Will. “A church is good for confession. Come on, anyone else to confess? Say, Tim, you must have something. Some secret sin. Come on, now.”

Tim hit his forehead and forced his eyes to widen. He could scarcely keep from laughing.

“No need to make light of this, Will,” said Lovey. “It'll take me quite a spell to get over your shenanigans, though I can see what you wuz a'tryin' to do.”

“Thank you for that, Lovey.”'

“Well, it will take me a long time to get over all these goin's on, if ever I do,” said Etta. “And I won't be a'stayin' 'round here to do it. I'll be a'leavin' the valley,” said Etta.

“Goin' off with Cletis. I might, of knowed.” Hiram sighed.

“I'd as soon go off with Will Horner as go off with that.” Etta stabbed the air with her finger as she pointed to Cletis.

“Where will you go? What will you do?” said Job.

“I'll go over to my cousin Idalena's for a spell, see how the land lies there. I got a lot of ruminatin' to do and best to do it away,” said Etta. She looked at Hiram

“Mebbe you're right,” said Hiram. “Mebbe so.”

“You know what you have to do.” Lovey put her hand on Etta's shoulder.

Abruptly, Horner cleared his throat and said, “Well, I think we'd better be off.”

“Cletis,” said Job. “You walk along side of me.”

“Walk along side of yourself! I-'ll walk in hell before I'll walk beside you. I'll walk by myself, thank you,” said Cletis. He started toward the door with the others falling in behind him. Job, with Lovey at his side, walked about a yard behind Cletis. For a moment neither Etta nor Hiram knew what to do. Then, almost as though on signal, they moved toward each other. Hiram looked at his wife. Etta smiled faintly and nodded. Bringing up the rear, some several feet behind the Rollinses, Will put his arm around Tim.

Speaking in a hushed tone, the doctor said, “Well, son, you have your story, but what in the world could you do with it? It's not a full story, by any means, and you'll never have that. Someday, I'll get from Lovey how she and Etta were able to get Cletis to agree to leave. I've got a pretty fair idea, but right now it's just speculation. I know, you must be burning with questions about the panties in the snake skin and about a dozen other things. Someday I might have an answer to all of those.

“Come back and see me in a year or so. Maybe I'll tell you what I know, if anything. One thing we'll never know, though, is what makes Cletis tick. We can puzzle over that, speculate, hypothesize, whatever, until Kingdom Come. I will tell you this. If I find out where he goes, I'll let you know so you can follow him. I suspect he'll stay in the state--he's too conniving at feeding on his own people to leave--and you might be able to keep him on his toes by showing up now and then at his next church or the one after that.

“Now my request to you, my very sensible and likeable young friend, is that you leave Vergie and all that's happened to Etta and Hiram right here in the valley. You can see that they deserve that, can't you? We all deserve it. But, now, get those camera ready for a damn good snake show just about to start.”