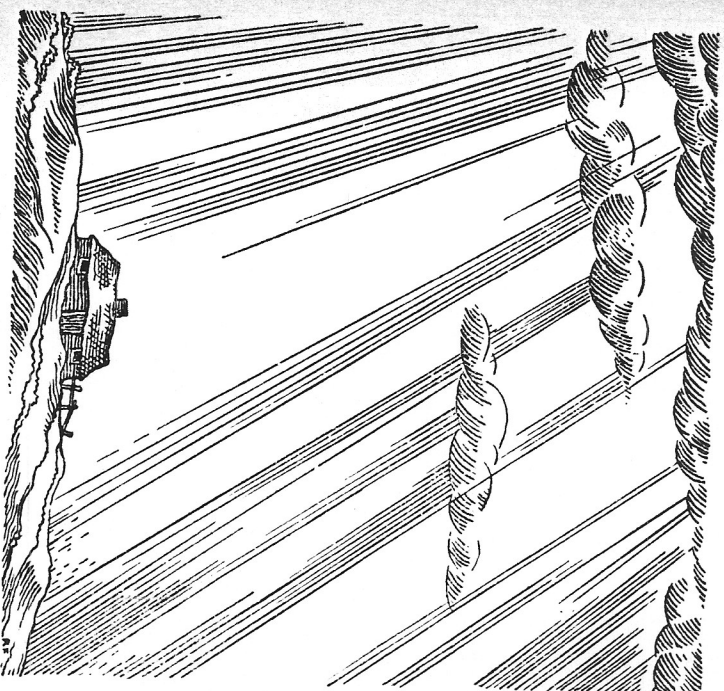


LIGHT IN AUGUST

WILLIAM FAULKNER



HARRISON SMITH & ROBERT HAAS

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SITTING beside the road, watching the wagon mount the hill toward her, Lena thinks, 'I have come from Alabama: a fur piece. All the way from Alabama a-walking. A fur piece.' Thinking *although I have not been quite a month on the road I am already in Mississippi, further from home than I have ever been before. I am now further from Doane's Mill than I have been since I was twelve years old*

She had never even been to Doane's Mill until after her father and mother died, though six or eight times a year she went to town on Saturday, in the wagon, in a mail-order dress and her bare feet flat in the wagon bed and her shoes wrapped in a piece of paper beside her on the seat. She would put on the shoes just before the wagon reached town. After she got to be a big girl she would ask her father to stop the wagon at the edge of town and she would get down and walk. She would not tell her father why she wanted to walk in instead of riding. He thought that it was because of the smooth streets, the sidewalks. But it was because she believed that the people who saw her and whom

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she passed on foot would believe that she lived in the town too.

When she was twelve years old her father and mother died in the same summer, in a log house of three rooms and a hall, without screens, in a room lighted by a bug-swirled kerosene lamp, the naked floor worn smooth as old silver by naked feet. She was the youngest living child. Her mother died first. She said, "Take care of paw." Lena did so. Then one day her father said, "You go to Doane's Mill with McKinley. You get ready to go, be ready when he comes." Then he died. McKinley, the brother, arrived in a wagon. They buried the father in a grove behind a country church one afternoon, with a pine headstone. The next morning she departed forever, though it is possible that she did not know this at the time, in the wagon with McKinley, for Doane's Mill. The wagon was borrowed and the brother had promised to return it by nightfall.

The brother worked in the mill. All the men in the village worked in the mill or for it. It was cutting pine. It had been there seven years and in seven years more it would destroy all the timber within its reach. Then some of the machinery and most of the men who ran it and existed because of and for it would be loaded onto freight cars and moved away. But some of the machinery would be left, since new pieces could always be bought on the installment plan—gaunt, staring, motionless wheels rising from mounds of brick rubble and ragged weeds with a quality profoundly astonishing, and gutted boilers lifting their rusting and un-smoking stacks with an air stubborn, baffled and bemused upon a stump-pocked scene of profound and peaceful desolation, unplowed, untilled, gutting slowly into red and choked ravines beneath the long quiet rains of autumn and

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the galloping fury of vernal equinoxes. Then the hamlet which at its best day had borne no name listed on Postoffice Department annals would not now even be remembered by the hookworm-ridden heirs-at-large who pulled the buildings down and burned them in cookstoves and winter grates.

There were perhaps five families there when Lena arrived. There was a track and a station, and once a day a mixed train fled shrieking through it. The train could be stopped with a red flag, but by ordinary it appeared out of the devastated hills with apparitionlike suddenness and wailing like a banshee, ahwart and past that little less-than-village like a forgotten bead from a broken string. The brother was twenty years her senior. She hardly remembered him at all when she came to live with him. He lived in a four room and unpainted house with his labor- and childridden wife. For almost half of every year the sister-in-law was either lying in or recovering. During this time Lena did all the housework and took care of the other children. Later she told herself, 'I reckon that's why I got one so quick myself.'

She slept in a lean-to room at the back of the house. It had a window which she learned to open and close again in the dark without making a sound, even though there also slept in the lean-to room at first her oldest nephew and then the two oldest and then the three. She had lived there eight years before she opened the window for the first time. She had not opened it a dozen times hardly before she discovered that she should not have opened it at all. She said to herself, 'That's just my luck.'

The sister-in-law told the brother. Then he remarked her changing shape, which he should have noticed some time

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before. He was a hard man. Softness and gentleness and youth (he was just forty) and almost everything else except a kind of stubborn and despairing fortitude and the bleak heritage of his blood-ride had been sweated out of him. He called her whore. He accused the right man (young bachelors, or sawdust Casanovas anyway, were even fewer in number than families) but she would not admit it, though the man had departed six months ago. She just repeated stubbornly, "He's going to send for me. He said he would send for me"; unshakable, sheeplike, having drawn upon that reserve of patient and steadfast fidelity upon which the Lucas Burches depend and trust, even though they do not intend to be present when the need for it arises. Two weeks later she climbed again through the window. It was a little difficult, this time. If it had been this hard to do before, I reckon I would not be doing it now, she thought. She could have departed by the door, by daylight. Nobody would have stopped her. Perhaps she knew that. But she chose to go by night, and through the window. She carried a palm leaf fan and a small bundle tied neatly in a bandanna handkerchief. It contained among other things thirty-five cents in nickels and dimes. Her shoes were a pair of his own which her brother had given to her. They were but slightly worn, since in the summer neither of them wore shoes at all. When she felt the dust of the road beneath her feet she removed the shoes and carried them in her hand.

She had been doing that now for almost four weeks. Behind her the four weeks, the evocation of *far*, is a peaceful corridor paved with unflagging and tranquil faith and peopled with kind and nameless faces and voices: *Lucas Burch? I don't know. I don't know of anybody by that name*

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around here. This road? It goes to Pocahontas. He might be there. It's possible. Here's a wagon that's going a piece of the way. It will take you that far; backrolling now behind her a long monotonous succession of peaceful and undeviating changes from day to dark and dark to day again, through which she advanced in identical and anonymous and deliberate wagons as though through a succession of creakwheeled and limped avatars, like something moving forever and without progress across an urn.

The wagon mounts the hill toward her. She passed it about a mile back down the road. It was standing beside the road, the mules asleep in the traces and their heads pointed in the direction in which she walked. She saw it and she saw the two men squatting beside a barn beyond the fence. She looked at the wagon and the men once: a single glance all-embracing, swift, innocent and profound. She did not stop; very likely the men beyond the fence had not seen her even look at the wagon or at them. Neither did she look back. She went on out of sight, walking slowly, the shoes unlaced about her ankles, until she reached the top of the hill a mile beyond. Then she sat down on the ditchbank, with her feet in the shallow ditch, and removed the shoes. After a while she began to hear the wagon. She heard it for some time. Then it came into sight, mounting the hill.

The sharp and brittle crack and clatter of its weathered and ungreased wood and metal is slow and terrific: a series of dry sluggish reports carrying for a half mile across the hot still pinewiney silence of the August afternoon. Though the mules plod in a steady and unflagging hypnosis, the vehicle does not seem to progress. It seems to hang suspended in the middle distance forever and forever, so in-

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finitesimal is its progress, like a shabby bead upon the mild red string of road. So much is this so that in the watching of it the eye loses it as sight and sense drowsily merge and blend, like the road itself, with all the peaceful and monotonous changes between darkness and day, like already measured thread being rewound onto a spool. So that at last, as though out of some trivial and unimportant region beyond even distance, the sound of it seems to come slow and terrific and without meaning, as though it were a ghost travelling a half mile ahead of its own shape. "That far within my hearing before my seeing," Lena thinks. She thinks of herself as already moving, riding again, thinking *then it will be as if I were riding for a half mile before I even got into the wagon, before the wagon even got to where I was waiting, and that when the wagon is empty of me again it will go on for a half mile with me still in it* She waits, not even watching the wagon now, while thinking goes idle and swift and smooth, filled with nameless kind faces and voices: *Lucas Burch? You say you tried in Pocahontas? This road? It goes to Springvale. You wait here. There will be a wagon passing soon that will take you as far as it goes* Thinking, 'And if he is going all the way to Jefferson, I will be riding within the hearing of Lucas Burch before his seeing. He will hear the wagon, but he wont know. So there will be one within his hearing before his seeing. And then he will see me and he will be excited. And so there will be two within his seeing before his remembering.'

While Armstid and Winterbottom were squatting against the shady wall of Winterbottom's stable, they saw her pass in the road. They saw at once that she was young, pregnant,

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and a stranger. "I wonder where she got that belly," Winterbottom said.

"I wonder how far she has brought it afoot," Armstid said.

"Visiting somebody back down the road, I reckon," Winterbottom said.

"I reckon not. Or I would have heard. And it aint nobody up my way, neither. I would have heard that, too."

"I reckon she knows where she is going," Winterbottom said. "She walks like it."

"She'll have company, before she goes much further," Armstid said. The woman had now gone on, slowly, with her swelling and unmistakable burden. Neither of them had seen her so much as glance at them when she passed in a shapeless garment of faded blue, carrying a palm leaf fan and a small cloth bundle. "She aint come from nowhere close," Armstid said. "She's hitting that lick like she's been at it for a right smart while and had a right smart piece to go yet."

"She must be visiting around here somewhere," Winterbottom said.

"I reckon I would have heard about it," Armstid said. The woman went on. She had not looked back. She went out of sight up the road: swollen, slow, deliberate, unhurried and tireless as augmenting afternoon itself. She walked out of their talking too; perhaps out of their minds too. Because after a while Armstid said what he had come to say. He had already made two previous trips, coming in his wagon five miles and squatting and spitting for three hours beneath the shady wall of Winterbottom's barn with the timeless unhaste and indirection of his kind, in order to say it. It was to make Winterbottom an offer for a culti-

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vator which Winterbottom wanted to sell. At last Armstid looked at the sun and offered the price which he had decided to offer while lying in bed three nights ago. "I know of one in Jefferson I can buy at that figure," he said.

"I reckon you better buy it," Winterbottom said. "It sounds like a bargain."

"Sho," Armstid said. He spat. He looked again at the sun, and rose. "Well, I reckon I better get on toward home."

He got into his wagon and waked the mules. That is, he put them into motion, since only a negro can tell when a mule is asleep or awake. Winterbottom followed him to the fence, leaning his arms on the top rail. "Y es, sir," he said. "I'd sho buy that cultivator at that figure. If you dont take it, I be dog if I aint a good mind to buy it, myself, at that price. I reckon the fellow that owns it aint got a span of mules to sell for about five dollars, has he?"

"Sho," Armstid said. He drove on, the wagon beginning to fall into its slow and mileconsuming clatter. Neither does he look back. Apparently he is not looking ahead either, because he does not see the woman sitting in the ditch beside the road until the wagon has almost reached the top of the hill. In the instant in which he recognises the blue dress he cannot tell if she has ever seen the wagon at all. And no one could have known that he had ever looked at her either as, without any semblance of progress in either of them, they draw slowly together as the wagon crawls terrifically toward her in its slow palpable aura of somnolence and red dust in which the steady feet of the mules move dreamlike and punctuate by the sparse jingle of harness and the limber bobbing of jackrabbit ears, the mules still neither asleep nor awake as he halts them.

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From beneath a sunbonnet of faded blue, weathered now by other than formal soap and water, she looks up at him quietly and pleasantly: young, pleasantfaced, candid, friendly, and alert. She does not move yet. Beneath the faded garment of that same weathered blue her body is shapeless and immobile. The fan and the bundle lie on her lap. She wears no stockings. Her bare feet rest side by side in the shallow ditch. The pair of dusty, heavy, manlooking shoes beside them are not more inert. In the halted wagon Armstid sits, humped, bleached. He sees that the rim of the fan is bound neatly in the same faded blue as the sunbonnet and the dress.

"How far you going?" he says.

"I was trying to get up the road a pieceways before dark," she says. She rises and takes up the shoes. She climbs slowly and deliberately into the road, approaching the wagon. Armstid does not descend to help her. He merely holds the team still while she climbs heavily over the wheel and sets the shoes beneath the seat. Then the wagon moves on. "I thank you," she says. "It was right tiring afoot."

Apparently Armstid has never once looked full at her. Yet he has already seen that she wears no wedding ring. He does not look at her now. Again the wagon settles into its slow clatter. "How far you come from?" he says.

She expels her breath. It is not a sigh so much as a peaceful expiration, as though of peaceful astonishment. "A right good piece, it seems now. I come from Alabama."

"Alabama? In your shape? Where's your folks?"

She does not look at him, either. "I'm looking to meet him up this way. You might know him. His name is Lucas Burch. They told me back yonder a ways that he is in Jefferson, working for the planing mill."

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"Lucas Burch." Armstid's tone is almost identical with hers. They sit side by side on the sagging and broken-sprung seat. He can see her hands upon her lap and her profile beneath the sunbonnet; from the corner of his eye he sees it. She seems to be watching the road as it unrolls between the limber cars of the mules. "And you come all the way here, afoot, by yourself, hunting for him?"

She does not answer for a moment. Then she says: "Folks have been kind. They have been right kind."

"Womenfolks too?" From the corner of his eye he watches her profile, thinking *I don't know what Martha's going to say* thinking, *I reckon I do know what Martha's going to say*. I reckon womenfolks are likely to be good without being very kind. Men, now, might. But it's only a bad woman herself that is likely to be very kind to another woman that needs the kindness' thinking *Yes I do. I know exactly what Martha is going to say*.

She sits a little forward, quite still, her profile quite still, her cheek. "It's a strange thing," she says.

"How folks can look at a strange young gal walking the road in your shape and know that her husband has left her?" She does not move. The wagon now has a kind of rhythm, its ungreased and outraged wood one with the slow afternoon, the road, the heat. "And you aim to find him up here."

She does not move, apparently watching the slow road between the cars of the mules, the distance perhaps road-carved and definite. "I reckon I'll find him. It won't be hard. He'll be where the most folks are gathered together, and the laughing and joking is. He always was a hand for that."

Armstid grunts, a sound savage, brusque. "Get up,

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mules," he says; he says to himself, between thinking and saying aloud: "I reckon she will. I reckon that fellow is fixing to find that he made a bad mistake when he stopped this side of Arkansas, or even Texas."

The sun is slanting, an hour above the horizon now, above the swift coming of the summer night. The lane turns from the road, quieter even than the road. "Here we are," Armstid says.

The woman moves at once. She reaches down and finds the shoes; apparently she is not even going to delay the wagon long enough to put them on. "I thank you kindly," she says. "It was a help."

The wagon is halted again. The woman is preparing to descend. "Even if you get to Varner's store before sundown, you'll still be twelve miles from Jefferson," Armstid says.

She holds the shoes, the bundle, the fan awkwardly in one hand, the other free to help her down. "I reckon I better get on," she says.

Armstid does not touch her. "You come on and stay the night at my house," he says; "where womenfolks—where a woman can . . . if you—You come on, now. I'll take you on to Varner's first thing in the morning, and you can get a ride into town. There will be somebody going, on a Saturday. He aint going to get away on you overnight. If he is in Jefferson at all, he will still be there tomorrow."

She sits quite still, her possessions gathered into her hand for dismounting. She is looking ahead, to where the road curves on and away, crossslanted with shadows. "I reckon I got a few days left."

"Sho. You got plenty of time yet. Only you are liable to have some company at any time now that can't walk. You come on home with me." He puts the mules into

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motion without waiting for a reply. The wagon enters the lane, the dim road. The woman sits back, though she still holds the fan, the bundle, the shoes.

"I wouldn't be beholden," she says. "I wouldn't trouble."

"Sho," Armsid says, "You come on with me." For the first time the mules move swiftly of their own accord. "Smelling corn," Armsid says, thinking, "But that's the woman of it. Her own self one of the first ones to cut the ground from under a sister woman, she'll walk the public country herself without shame because she knows that folks, menfolks, will take care of her. She don't care nothing about womenfolks. It wasn't any woman that got her into what she don't even call trouble. Yes, sir. You just let one of them get married or get into trouble without being married, and right then and there is where she secedes from the woman race and species and spends the balance of her life trying to get joined up with the man race. That's why they dip snuff and smoke and want to vote."

When the wagon passes the house and goes on toward the barnlot, his wife is watching it from the front door. He does not look in that direction; he does not need to look to know that she will be there, is there. 'Yes,' he thinks with sardonic ruefulness, turning the mules into the open gate, 'I know exactly what she is going to say. I reckon I know exactly.' He halts the wagon, he does not need to look to know that his wife is now in the kitchen, not watching now, just waiting. He halts the wagon. "You go on to the house," he says; he has already descended and the woman is now climbing slowly down, with that inward listening deliberation. "When you meet somebody, it will be Martha. I'll be in when I feed the stock." He does not watch her cross the lot and go on toward the kitchen. He

does not need to. Step by step with her he enters the kitchen door also and comes upon the woman who now watches the kitchen door exactly as she had watched the wagon pass from the front one. 'I reckon I know exactly what she will say,' he thinks.

He takes the team out and waters and stalls and feeds them, and lets the cows in from the pasture. Then he goes to the kitchen. She is still there, the gray woman with a cold, harsh, irascible face, who bore five children in six years and raised them to man- and woman-hood. She is not idle. He does not look at her. He goes to the sink and fills a pan from the pail and turns his sleeves back. "Her name is Burch," he says. "At least that's what she says the fellow's name is that she is hunting for. Lucas Burch. Somebody told her back down the road a ways that he is in Jefferson now." He begins to wash, his back to her. "She come all the way from Alabama, alone and afoot, she says."

Mrs Armsid does not look around. She is busy at the table. "She's going to quit being alone a good while before she sees Alabama again," she says.

"Or that fellow Burch either, I reckon." He is quite busy at the sink, with the soap and water. And he can feel her looking at him, at the back of his head, his shoulders in the shirt of sweatfaded blue. "She says that somebody down at Samson's told her there is a fellow named Burch or something working at the planing mill in Jefferson."

"And she expects to find him there. Waiting. With the house all furnished and all."

He cannot tell from her voice if she is watching him or not now. He towels himself with a split floursack. "Maybe she will. If it's running away from her he's after, I reckon he's going to find out he made a bad mistake when he

stopped before he put the Mississippi River between them."

And now he knows that she is watching him: the gray woman not plump and not thin, manhard, workhard, in a serviceable gray garment worn savage and brusque, her hands on her hips, her face like those of generals who have been defeated in battle.

"You men," she says.

"What do you want to do about it? Turn her out? Let her sleep in the barn maybe?"

"You men," she says. "You durn men."

They enter the kitchen together, though Mrs Armstid is in front. She goes straight to the stove. Lena stands just within the door. Her head is uncovered now, her hair combed smooth. Even the blue garment looks freshened and rested. She looks on while Mrs Armstid at the stove clashes the metal lids and handles the sticks of wood with the abrupt savageness of a man. "I would like to help," Lena says.

Mrs Armstid does not look around. She clashes the stove savagely. "You stay where you are. You keep off your feet now, and you'll keep off your back a while longer maybe."

"It would be a beholden kindness to let me help."

"You stay where you are. I been doing this three times a day for thirty years now. The time when I needed help with it is done passed." She is busy at the stove, not back-looking. "Armstid says your name is Burch."

"Yes," the other says. Her voice is quite grave now, quite quiet. She sits quite still, her hands motionless upon her lap. And Mrs Armstid does not look around either. She is still busy at the stove. It appears to require an amount of attention out of all proportion to the savage

finality with which she built the fire. It appears to engage as much of her attention as if it were an expensive watch.

"Is your name Burch yet?" Mrs Armstid says.

The young woman does not answer at once. Mrs Armstid does not rattle the stove now, though her back is still toward the younger woman. Then she turns. They look at one another, suddenly naked, watching one another: the young woman in the chair, with her neat hair and her inert hands upon her lap, and the older one beside the stove, turning, motionless too, with a savage screw of gray hair at the base of her skull and a face that might have been carved in sandstone. Then the younger one speaks.

"I told you false. My name is not Burch yet. It's Lena Grove."

They look at one another. Mrs Armstid's voice is neither cold nor warm. It is not anything at all. "And so you want to catch up with him so your name will be Burch in time. Is that it?"

Lena is looking down now, as though watching her hands upon her lap. Her voice is quiet, dogged. Yet it is serene. "I dont reckon I need any promise from Lucas. It just happened unfortunate so, that he had to go away. His plans just never worked out right for him to come back for me like he aimed to. I reckon me and him didn't need to make word promises. When he found out that night that he would have to go, he—"

"Found out what night? The night you told him about that chap?"

The other does not answer for a moment. Her face is calm as stone, but not hard. Its doggedness has a soft quality, an inwardlighted quality of tranquil and calm unreason and detachment. Mrs Armstid watches her. Lena

is not looking at the other woman while she speaks. "He had done got the word about how he might have to leave a long time before that. He just never told me sooner because he didn't want to worry me with it. When he first heard about how he might have to leave, he knowed then it would be best to go, that he could get along faster somewhere where the foreman wouldn't be down on him. But he kept on putting it off. But when this here happened, we couldn't put it off no longer then. The foreman was down on Lucas because he didn't like him because Lucas was young and full of life all the time and the foreman wanted Lucas' job to give it to a cousin of his. But he hadn't aimed to tell me because it would just worry me. But when this here happened, we couldn't wait any longer. I was the one that said for him to go. He said he would stay if I said so, whether the foreman treated him right or not. But I said for him to go. He never wanted to go, even then. But I said for him to. To just send me word when he was ready for me to come. And then his plans just never worked out for him to send for me in time, like he aimed. Going away among strangers like that, a young fellow needs time to get settled down. He never knowed that when he left, that he would need more time to get settled down in than he figured on. Especially a young fellow full of life like Lucas, that likes folks and jollifying, and liked by folks in turn. He didn't know it would take longer than he planned, being young, and folks always after him because he is a hand for laughing and joking, interfering with his work unbeknownst to him because he never wanted to hurt folks' feelings. And I wanted him to have his last enjoyment, because marriage is different with a young fel-

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low, a lively young fellow, and a woman. It lasts so long with a lively young fellow. Don't you think so?"

Mrs. Armistid does not answer. She looks at the other sitting in the chair with her smooth hair and her still hands lying upon her lap and her soft and musing face. "Like as not, he already sent me the word and it got lost on the way. It's a right far piece from here to Alabama even, and I ain't to Jefferson yet. I told him I would not expect him to write, being as he ain't any hand for letters. 'You just send me your mouthword when you are ready for me,' I told him. 'I'll be waiting.' It worried me a little at first, after he left, because my name wasn't Burch yet and my brother and his folks not knowing Lucas as well as I knew him. How could they?" Into her face there comes slowly an expression of soft and bright surprise, as if she had just thought of something which she had not even been aware that she did not know. "How could they be expected to, you see. But he had to get settled down first; it was him would have all the trouble of being among strangers, and me with nothing to bother about except to just wait while he had all the bother and trouble. But after a while I reckon I just got too busy getting this chap up to his time to worry about what my name was or what folks thought. But me and Lucas dont need no word promises between us. It was something unexpected come up, or he even sent the word and it got lost. So one day I just decided to up and not wait any longer."

"How did you know which way to go when you started?"

Lena is watching her hands. They are moving now, plaining with rapt bemusement a fold of her skirt. It is not diffidence, shyness. It is apparently some musing reflex of the hand alone. "I just kept asking. With Lucas a lively

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young fellow that got to know folks easy and quick, I knew that wherever he had been, folks would remember him. So I kept asking. And folks was right kind. And sure enough, I heard two days back on the road that he is in Jefferson, working for the planing mill."

Mrs Armstid watches the lowered face. Her hands are on her hips and she watches the younger woman with an expression of cold and impersonal contempt. "And you believe that he will be there when you get there. Granted that he ever was there at all. That he will hear you are in the same town with him, and still be there when the sun sets."

Lena's lowered face is grave, quiet. Her hand has ceased now. It lies quite still on her lap, as if it had died there. Her voice is quiet, tranquil, stubborn. "I reckon a family ought to all be together when a chap comes. Specially the first one. I reckon the Lord will see to that."

"And I reckon He will have to," Mrs Armstid says, savagely, harshly. Armstid is in bed, his head propped up a little, watching her across the footboard as, still dressed, she stoops into the light of the lamp upon the dresser, hunting violently in a drawer. She produces a metal box and unlocks it with a key suspended about her neck and takes out a cloth sack which she opens and produces a small china effigy of a rooster with a slot in its back. It jingles with coins as she moves it and upends it and shakes it violently above the top of the dresser, shaking from the slot coins in a meagre dribbling. Armstid in the bed watches her.

"What are you fixing to do with your eggmoney this time of night?" he says.

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"I reckon it's mine to do with what I like." She stoops into the lamp, her face harsh, bitter. "God knows it was me sweated over them and nursed them. You never lifted no hand."

"Sho," he says. "I reckon it ain't any human in this country is going to dispute them hens with you, lessen it's the possums and the snakes. That rooster bank, neither," he says. Because, stooping suddenly, she jerks off one shoe and strikes the china bank a single shattering blow. From the bed, reclining, Armstid watches her gather the remaining coins from among the china fragments and drop them with the others into the sack and knot it and reknit it three or four times with savage finality.

"You give that to her," she says. "And come sunup you hitch up the team and take her away from here. Take her all the way to Jefferson, if you want."

"I reckon she can get a ride in from Varner's store," he says.

Mrs Armstid rose before day and cooked breakfast. It was on the table when Armstid came in from milking. "Go tell her to come and eat," Mrs Armstid said. When he and Lena returned to the kitchen, Mrs Armstid was not there. Lena looked about the room once, pausing at the door with less than a pause, her face already fixed in an expression immanent with smiling, with speech, prepared speech, Armstid knew. But she said nothing; the pause was less than a pause.

"Let's eat and get on," Armstid said. "You still got a right good piece to go." He watched her eat, again with the tranquil and hearty decorum of last night's supper, though there was now corrupting it a quality of polite and

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almost finicking restraint. Then he gave her the knotted cloth sack. She took it, her face pleased, warm, though not very much surprised.

"Why, it's right kind of her," she said. "But I won't need it. I'm so nigh there now."

"I reckon you better keep it. I reckon you done noticed how Martha aint much on being crossed in what she aims to do."

"It's right kind," Lena said. She tied the money up in the bandanna bundle and put on the sunbonnet. The wagon was waiting. When they drove down the lane, past the house, she looked back at it. "It was right kind of you all," she said.

"She done it," Armstid said. "I reckon I can't claim no credit."

"It was right kind, anyway. You'll have to say good-bye to her for me. I had hoped to see her myself, but . . ."

"Sho," Armstid said. "I reckon she was busy or something. I'll tell her."

They drove up to the store in the early sunlight, with the squatting men already spitting across the heelnawed porch, watching her descend slowly and carefully from the wagon seat, carrying the bundle and the fan. Again Armstid did not move to assist her. He said from the seat: "This here is Miz Burch. She wants to go to Jefferson. If anybody is going in today, she will take it kind to ride with them."

She reached the earth, in the heavy, dusty shoes. She looked up at him, serene, peaceful. "It's been right kind," she said.

"Sho," Armstid said. "I reckon you can get to town now." He looked down at her. Then it seemed an interminable

while that he watched his tongue seek words, thinking quiet and swift, thought fleeing *A man. All men. He will pass up a hundred chances to do good for one chance to meddle where meddling is not wanted. He will overlook and fail to see chances, opportunities, for riches and fame and well-doing, and even sometimes for evil. But he won't fail to see a chance to meddle* Then his tongue found words, he listening, perhaps with the same astonishment that she did: "Only I wouldn't set too much store by . . . store in . . ." thinking *She is not listening. If she could hear words like that she would not be getting down from this wagon, with that belly and that fan and that little bundle, alone, bound for a place she never saw before and hunting for a man she ain't going to ever see again and that she has already seen one time too many as it is* "—any time you are passing back this way, tomorrow or even to-night . . ."

"I reckon I'll be all right now," she said. "They told me he is there."

He turned the wagon and drove back home, sitting hunched, bleached, on the sagging seat, thinking, "It wouldn't have done any good. She would not have believed the telling and hearing it any more than she will believe the thinking that's been going on all around her for . . . It's four weeks now, she said. No more than she will feel it and believe it now. Setting there on that top step, with her hands in her lap and them fellows squatting there and spitting past her into the road. And not even waiting for them to ask her about it before she begins to tell. Telling them of her own accord about that durn fellow like she never had nothing particular to either hide or tell, even when Jody Vanner or some of them will tell her that that

fellow in Jefferson at the planing mill is named Bunch and not Burch; and that not worrying her either. I reckon she knows more than even Martha does, like when she told Martha last night about how the Lord will see that what is right will get done.'

It required only one or two questions. Then, sitting on the top step, the fan and the bundle upon her lap, Lena tells her story again, with that patient and transparent recapitulation of a lying child, the squatting overalled men listening quietly.

"That fellow's name is Bunch," Varner says. "He's been working there at the mill about seven years. How do you know that Burch is there too?"

She is looking away up the road, in the direction of Jefferson. Her face is calm, waiting, a little detached without being bemused. "I reckon he'll be there. At that planing mill and all. Lucas always did like excitement. He never did like to live quiet. That's why it never suited him back at Doane's Mill. Why he—we decided to make a change: for money and excitement."

"For money and excitement," Varner says. "Lucas aint the first young buck that's throwned over what he was bred to do and them that depended on him doing it, for money and excitement."

But she is not listening apparently. She sits quietly on the top step, watching the road where it curves away, empty and mounting, toward Jefferson. The squatting men along the wall look at her still and placid face and they think as Armstid thought and as Varner thinks: that she is thinking of a scoundrel who deserted her in trouble and who they believe that she will never see again, save his

coatrails perhaps already boardflat with running. 'Or maybe it's about that Sloane's or Bone's Mill she is thinking,' Varner thinks. 'I reckon that even a fool gal don't have to come as far as Mississippi to find out that whatever place she run from ain't going to be a whole lot different or worse than the place she is at. Even if it has got a brother in it that objects to his sister's nightprowling,' thinking *I would have done the same as the brother; the father would have done the same. She has no mother because fatherblood hates with love and pride, but motherblood with hate loves and cohabits*

She is not thinking about this at all. She is thinking about the coins knotted in the bundle beneath her hands. She is remembering breakfast, thinking how she can enter the store this moment and buy cheese and crackers and even sardines if she likes. At Armstid's she had had but a cup of coffee and a piece of cornbread: nothing more, though Armstid pressed her. 'I et polite,' she thinks, her hands lying upon the bundle, knowing the hidden coins, remembering the single cup of coffee, the decorous morsel of strange bread; thinking with a sort of serene pride: 'Like a lady I et. Like a lady travelling. But now I can buy sardines too if I should so wish.'

So she seems to muse upon the mounting road while the slowspitting and squatting men watch her covertly, believing that she is thinking about the man and the approaching crisis, when in reality she is waging a mild battle with that providential caution of the old earth of and with and by which she lives. This time she conquers. She rises and walking a little awkwardly, a little carefully, she traverses the ranked battery of maneyes and enters the store, the clerk following. 'I'm a-going to do it,' she thinks, even while

ordering the cheese and crackers; 'I'm a-going to do it,' saying aloud: "And a box of sardines." She calls them *sour-deens*. "A nickel box."

"We ain't got no nickel sardines," the clerk says. "Sardines is fifteen cents." He also calls them *sour-deens*.

She muses, "What have you got in a can for a nickel?"

"Aint got nothing except shoelacking. I dont reckon you want that. Not to eat, noway."

"I reckon I'll take the fifteen cent ones, then." She unties the bundle and the knotted sack. It requires some time to solve the knots. But she unites them patiently, one by one, and pays and knots the sack and the bundle again and takes up her purchase. When she emerges onto the porch there is a wagon standing at the steps. A man is on the seat.

"Here's a wagon going to town," they tell her. "He will take you in."

Her face wakes, serene, slow, warm. "Why, you're right kind," she says.

The wagon moves slowly, steadily, as if here within the sunny loneliness of the enormous land it were outside of, beyond all time and all haste. From Varner's store to Jefferson it is twelve miles. "Will we get there before dinner time?" she says.

The driver spits, "We mought," he says.

Apparently he has never looked at her, not even when she got into the wagon. Apparently she has never looked at him, either. She does not do so now. "I reckon you go to Jefferson a right smart."

He says, "Some." The wagon creaks on. Fields and woods seem to hang in some inescapable middle distance,

at once static and fluid, quick, like mirages. Yet the wagon passes them.

"I reckon you don't know anybody in Jefferson named Lucas Burch."

"Burch?"

"I'm looking to meet him there. He works at the planing mill."

"No," the driver says. "I don't know that I know him. But likely there is a right smart of folks in Jefferson I don't know. Likely he is there."

"I'll declare, I hope so. Travelling is getting right bothersome."

The driver does not look at her. "How far have you come, looking for him?"

"From Alabama. It's a right far piece."

He does not look at her. His voice is quite casual. "How did your folks come to let you start out, in your shape?"

"My folks are dead. I live with my brother. I just decided to come on."

"I see. He sent you word to come to Jefferson."

She does not answer. He can see beneath the sunbonnet her calm profile. The wagon goes on, slow, timeless. The red and unhurried miles unroll beneath the steady feet of the mules, beneath the creaking and clanking wheels. The sun stands now high overhead; the shadow of the sunbonnet now falls across her lap. She looks up at the sun. "I reckon it's time to eat," she says. He watches from the corner of his eye as she opens the cheese and crackers and the sardines and offers them.

"I wouldn't care for none," he says.

"I'd take it kind for you to share."

"I wouldn't care to. You go ahead and eat."

She begins to eat. She eats slowly, steadily, sucking the rich sardine oil from her fingers with slow and complete relish. Then she stops, not abruptly, yet with utter completeness, her jaw stilled in midchewing, a bitten cracker in her hand and her face lowered a little and her eyes blank as if she were listening to something very far away or so near as to be inside her. Her face has drained of color, of its full, hearty blood, and she sits quite still, hearing and feeling the implacable and immemorial earth, but without fear or alarm. 'It's twins at least,' she says to herself, without lip movement, without sound. Then the spasm passes. She eats again. The wagon has not stopped; time has not stopped. The wagon crests the final hill and they see smoke. "Jefferson," the driver says.

"Well, I'll declare," she says. "We are almost there, ain't we?"

It is the man now who does not hear. He is looking ahead, across the valley toward the town on the opposite ridge. Following his pointing whip, she sees two columns of smoke: the one the heavy density of burning coal above a tall stack, the other a tall yellow column standing apparently from among a clump of trees some distance beyond the town. "That's a house burning," the driver says. "See?"

But she in turn again does not seem to be listening, to hear. "My, my," she says; "here I ain't been on the road but four weeks, and now I am in Jefferson already. My, my. A body does get around."

BYRON BUNCH knows this: It was one Friday morning three years ago. And the group of men at work in the planer shed looked up, and saw the stranger standing there, watching them. They did not know how long he had been there. He looked like a tramp, yet not like a tramp either. His shoes were dusty and his trousers were soiled too. But they were of decent serge, sharply creased, and his shirt was soiled but it was a white shirt, and he wore a tie and a stiffbrim straw hat that was quite new, cocked at an angle arrogant and baleful above his still face. He did not look like a professional hobo in his professional rags, but there was something definitely rootless about him, as though no town nor city was his, no street, no walls, no square of earth his home. And that he carried his knowledge with him always as though it were a banner, with a quality ruthless, lonely, and almost proud. "As if," as the men said later, "he was just down on his luck for a time, and that he didn't intend to stay down on it and didn't give a damn much how he rose up." He was young. And Byron watched him standing there and looking at the men