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## *Why Do the Heathen Rage?*

TILMAN had had his stroke in the state capital, where he had gone on business, and he had stayed two weeks in the hospital there. He did not remember his arrival home by ambulance but his wife did. She had sat for two hours on the jump seat at his feet, gazing fixedly at his face. Only his left eye, twisted inward, seemed to harbor his former personality. It burned with rage. The rest of his face was prepared for death. Justice was grim and she took satisfaction in it when she found it. It might take just this ruin to wake Walter up.

By accident both children were at home when they arrived. Mary Maud was driving in from school, not realizing that the ambulance was behind her. She got out—a large woman of thirty with a round childish face and a pile of carrot-colored hair that seeped about in an invisible net on top of her head—kissed her mother, glanced at Tilman and gasped; then, grim-faced but flustered, marched behind the rear attendant, giving him high-pitched instructions on how to get the stretcher around the curve of the front steps. Exactly like a schoolteacher, her mother thought. Schoolteacher all over. As the forward attendant reached the porch, Mary Maud said sharply in a voice used to controlling children, "Get up, Walter, and open the door!"

Walter was sitting on the edge of his chair, absorbed in the proceedings, his finger folded in the book he had been reading before the ambulance came. He got up and held open the screen door, and while the attendants carried the stretcher across the porch, he gazed, obviously fascinated, at his father's face. "Glad to see you back, capt'n," he said and raised his hand in a sloppy salute.

Tilman's enraged left eye appeared to include him in its vision but he gave him no sign of recognition.

Roosevelt, who from now on would be nurse instead of yard man, stood inside the door, waiting. He had put on the white coat that he was supposed to wear for occasions. He peered forward at what was on the stretcher. The bloodshot veins in his eyes swelled. Then, all at once, tears glazed them and glistened on his black cheeks like sweat. Tilman made a weak rough motion with his good arm. It was the only gesture of affection he had given any of them. The Negro followed the stretcher to the back bedroom, snuffling as if someone had hit him.

Mary Maud went in to direct the stretcher bearers.

Walter and his mother remained on the porch. "Close the door," she said. "You're letting flies in."

She had been watching him all along, searching for some sign in his big bland face that some sense of urgency had touched him, some sense that now he had to take hold, that now he had to do something, anything—she would have been glad to see him make a mistake, even make a mess of things if it meant that he was doing something—but she saw that nothing had happened. His eyes were on her, glittering just slightly behind his glasses. He had taken in every detail of Tilman's face; he had registered Roosevelt's tears, Mary Maud's confusion, and now he was studying her to see how she was taking it. She yanked her hat straight, seeing by his eyes that it had slipped toward the back of her head.

"You ought to wear it that way," he said. "It makes you look sort of relaxed-by-mistake."

She made her face hard, as hard as she could make it. "The responsibility is yours now," she said in a harsh, final voice.

He stood there with his half smile and said nothing. Like an absorbent lump, she thought, taking everything in, giving nothing out. She might have been looking at a stranger using the family face. He had the same noncommittal lawyer's smile as her father and grandfather, set in the same heavy jaw, under the same Roman nose; he had the same eyes that were neither blue nor green nor gray; his skull would soon be bald like theirs. Her face became even harder. "You'll have to take over and manage this place," she said and folded her arms, "if you want to stay here."

The smile left him. He looked at her once hard, his expression

empty, and then beyond her out across the meadow, beyond the four oaks and the black distant tree line, into the vacant afternoon sky. "I thought it was home," he said, "but it don't do to presume."

Her heart constricted. She had an instant's revelation that he was homeless. Homeless here and homeless anywhere. "Of course it's home," she said, "but somebody has to take over. Somebody has to make these Negroes work."

"I can't make Negroes work," he muttered. "That's about the last thing I'm capable of."

"I'll tell you everything to do," she said.

"Ha!" he said. "That you would." He looked at her and his half smile returned. "Lady," he said, "you're coming into your own. You were born to take over. If the old man had had his stroke ten years ago, we'd all be better off. You could have run a wagon train through the Bad Lands. You could stop a mob. You're the last of the nineteenth century, you're. . . ."

"Walter," she said, "you're a man. I'm only a woman."

"A woman of your generation," Walter said, "is better than a man of mine."

Her mouth drew into a tight line of outrage and her head trembled almost imperceptibly. "I would be ashamed to say it!" she whispered.

Walter dropped into the chair he had been sitting in and opened his book. A sluggish-looking flush settled on his face. "The only virtue of my generation," he said, "is that it ain't ashamed to tell the truth about itself." He was already reading. Her interview was at an end.

She remained standing there, rigid, her eyes on him in stunned disgust. Her son. Her only son. His eyes and his skull and his smile belonged to the family face but underneath them was a different kind of man from any she had ever known. There was no innocence in him, no rectitude, no conviction either of sin or election. The man she saw courted good and evil impartially and saw so many sides of every question that he could not move, he could not work, he could not even make niggers work. Any evil could enter that vacuum. God knows, she thought and caught her breath, God knows what he might do!

He had not done anything. He was twenty-eight now and, so far as she could see, nothing occupied him but trivia. He had the air of a person who is waiting for some big event and can't start any work because it would only be interrupted. Since he was always idle, she had thought that perhaps he wanted to be an artist or a philosopher or something, but this was not the case. He did not want to write anything with a name. He amused himself writing letters to people he did not know and to the newspapers. Under different names and using different personalities, he wrote to strangers. It was a peculiar, small, contemptible vice. Her father and her grandfather had been moral men but they would have scorned small vices more than great ones. They knew who they were and what they owed to themselves. It was impossible to tell what Walter knew or what his views were on anything. He read books that had nothing to do with anything that mattered now. Often she came behind him and found some strange underlined passage in a book he had left lying somewhere and she would puzzle over it for days. One passage she found in a book he had left lying on the upstairs-bathroom floor stayed with her ominously.

"Love should be full of anger," it began, and she thought, well mine is. She was furious all the time. It went on, "Since you have already spurned my request, perhaps you will listen to admonishment. What business have you in your father's house, O you effeminate soldier? Where are your ramparts and trenches, where is the winter spent at the front lines? Listen! the battle trumpet blares from heaven and see how our General marches fully armed, coming amid the clouds to conquer the whole world. Out of the mouth of our King emerges a double-edged sword that cuts down everything in the way. Arising finally from your nap, do you come to the battlefield! Abandon the shade and seek the sun."

She turned back in the book to see what she was reading. It was a letter from a St. Jerome to a Heliodorus, scolding him for having abandoned the desert. A footnote said that Heliodorus was one of the famous group that had centered around Jerome at Aquileia in 370. He had accompanied Jerome to the Near East with the intention of cultivating a hermitic life. They had separated when Heliodorus continued on to Jerusalem. Eventually he returned to Italy,

and in later years he became a distinguished churchman as the bishop of Altinum.

This was the kind of thing he read—something that made no sense for now. Then it came to her, with an unpleasant little jolt, that the General with the sword in his mouth, marching to do violence, was Jesus.