

William Faulkner



*Absalom,
Absalom!*



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ABSALOM, ABSALOM!



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ABSALOM, ABSALOM!





ONE

FROM A little after two o'clock until almost sundown of the long still hot weary dead September afternoon they sat in what Miss Coldfield still called the office because her father had called it that—a dim hot airless room with the blinds all closed and fastened for forty-three summers because when she was a girl someone had believed that light and moving air carried heat and that dark was always cooler, and which (as the sun shone fuller and fuller on that side of the house) became latticed with yellow slashes full of dust motes which Quentin thought of as being flecks of the dead old dried paint itself blown inward from the scaling blinds as wind might have blown them. There was a wistaria vine blooming for the second time that summer on a wooden trellis before one window, into which sparrows came now and then in random gusts, making a dry vivid dusty sound before going away; and opposite Quentin, Miss Coldfield in the eternal black which she had worn for forty-three years now, whether for sister, father, or nothusband none knew, sitting so bolt upright in the straight hard chair that was so tall for her that her legs hung straight and rigid as if she had iron shinbones' and ankles, clear of the floor with that air of impotent and static rage like children's feet, and talking in that grim haggard amazed voice until at last listening would renege and hearing-sense self-confound and the long-dead object of her impotent yet indomitable frustration would appear, as though by outraged recapitulation evoked, quiet inattentive and harmless, out of the biding and dreamy and victorious dust.



Her voice would not cease, it would just vanish. There would be the dim coffin-smelling gloom sweet and oversweet with the twice-bloomed wistaria against the outer wall by the savage quiet September sun impacted distilled and hyperdistilled, into which came now and then the loud cloudy flutter of the sparrows like a flat limber stick whipped by an idle boy, and the rank smell of female old flesh long embattled in virginity while the wan haggard face watched him above the faint triangle of lace at wrists and throat from the too tall chair in which she resembled a crucified child; and the voice not ceasing but vanishing into and then out of the long intervals like a stream, a trickle running from patch to patch of dried sand, and the ghost mused with shadowy docility as if it were the voice which he haunted where a more fortunate one would have had a house. Out of quiet thunderclap he would abrupt (man-horse-demon) upon a scene peaceful and decorous as a schoolprize water color, faint sulphur-reek still in hair clothes and beard, with grouped behind him his band of wild niggers like beasts half tamed to walk upright like men, in attitudes wild and reposed, and manacled among them the French architect with his air grim, haggard, and taller-ran. Immobile, bearded, and hand palm lifted the horseman sat; behind him the wild blacks and the captive architect huddled quietly, carrying in bloodless paradox the shovels and picks and axes of peaceful conquest. Then in the long unamaze Quentin seemed to watch them overrun suddenly the hundred square miles of tranquil and astonished earth and drag house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless nothing and clap them down like cards upon a table beneath the up-palm immobile and pontific, creating the Sutpen's Hundred, the *Be Sutpen's Hundred* like the oldentime *Be Light*. Then hearing would reconcile and he would seem to listen to two separate Quentins now the Quentin Compson preparing for Harvard in the South, the deep South dead since 1865 and people with garrulous outraged baffled ghosts, listening, having to listen, to one of the ghosts which had refused to lie still even longer than most had, telling him about old ghost-times; and the Quentin Compson who was still too young to deserve yet to be a ghost, but nevertheless having to be one for all that, since he was born and bred in the deep South the same as she was the



two separate Quentins now talking to one another in the long silence of notpeople, in notlanguage, like this: *It seems that this demon—his name was Sutpen (Colonel Sutpen)—Colonel Sutpen. Who came out of nowhere and without warning upon the land with a band of strange niggers and built a plantation—(Tore violently a plantation, Miss Rosa Coldfield says)—tore violently. and married her sister Ellen and begot a son and a daughter which—(without gentleness begot, Miss Rosa Coldfield says)—without gentleness. Which should have been the jewels of his pride and the shield and comfort of his old age, only—(Only they destroyed him or something or he destroyed them or something and died)—and died. Without regret, Miss Rosa Coldfield says—(Save by her) Yes, save by her. (And by Quentin Compson) Yes. And by Quentin Compson.*

“Because you are going away to attend the college at Harvard they tell me,” Miss Coldfield said. “So I don’t imagine you will ever come back here and settle down as a country lawyer in a little town like Jefferson, since Northern people have already seen to it that there is little left in the South for a young man. So maybe you will enter the literary profession as so many Southern gentlemen and gentlewomen too are doing now and maybe some day you will remember this and write about it. You will be married then I expect and perhaps your wife will want a new gown or a new chair for the house and you can write this and submit it to the magazines. Perhaps you will even remember kindly then the old woman who made you spend a whole afternoon sitting indoors and listening while she talked about people and events you were fortunate enough to escape yourself when you wanted to be out among young friends of your own age.”

“Yessum,” Quentin said. *Only she don’t mean that* he thought. *It’s because she wants it told.* It was still early then. He had yet in his pocket the note which he had received by the hand of a small negro boy just before noon, asking him to call and see her—the quaint, stiffly formal request which was actually a summons, out of another world almost—the queer archaic sheet of ancient good notepaper written over with the neat faded cramped script which, due to his astonishment at the request from a woman three times his age and whom he had known all his life without having exchanged a hundred words with her or perhaps to the fact that



he was only twenty years old, he did not recognize as revealing a character cold, implacable, and even ruthless. He obeyed it immediately after the noon meal, walking the half mile between his home and hers through the dry dusty heat of early September and so into the house. It too was somehow smaller than its actual size—it was of two storeys—unpainted and a little shabby, yet with an air, a quality of grim endurance as though like her it had been created to fit into and complement a world in all ways a little smaller than the one in which it found itself. There in the gloom of the shuttered hallway whose air was even hotter than outside, as if there were prisoned in it like in a tomb all the suspiration of slow heatladen time which had recurred during the forty-five years, the small figure in black which did not even rustle, the wan triangle of lace at wrists and throat, the dim face looking at him with an expression speculative, urgent, and intent, waited to invite him in.

It's because she wants it told, he thought, so that people whom she will never see and whose names she will never hear and who have never heard her name nor seen her face will read it and know at last why God let us lose the war: that only through the blood of our men and the tears of our women could He slay this demon and efface his name and lineage from the earth. Then almost immediately he decided that neither was this the reason why she had sent the note, and sending it, why to him, since if she had merely wanted it told, written, and even printed, she would not have needed to call in anybody—a woman who even in his (Quentin's) father's youth had already established herself as the town's and the county's poetess laureate by issuing to the stern and meager subscription list of the county newspaper poems, ode, eulogy, and epitaph, out of some bitter and implacable reserve of undefeat.

It would be three hours yet before he would learn why she had sent for him because part of it, the first part of it, Quentin already knew. It was a part of his twenty years' heritage of breathing the same air? and hearing his father talk about the man Sutpen; a part of the town's—Jefferson's—eighty years' heritage of the same air which the man himself had breathed between this September afternoon in 1909 and that Sunday morning in June in 1833 when he first rode into town out of no discernible past and acquired his land no one knew how and built his house, his



mansion, apparently out of nothing and married Ellen Coldfield and begot his two children—the son who widowed the daughter who had not yet been a bride—and so accomplished his allotted course to its violent (Miss Coldfield at least would have said, just) end. Quentin had grown up with that; the mere names were interchangeable and almost myriad. His childhood was full of them; his very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. He was a barrack filled with stubborn backlooking ghosts still recovering, even forty-three years afterward, from the fever which had cured the disease, waking from the fever without even knowing that it had been the fever itself which they had fought against and not the sickness, looking with stubborn recalcitrance backward beyond the fever and into the disease with actual regret, weak from the fever yet free of the disease and not even aware that the freedom was that of impotence.

“But why tell me about it?” he said to his father that evening, when he returned home, after she had dismissed him at last with his promise to return for her in the buggy; “Why tell me about it? What is it to me that the land of the earth or whatever it was got tired of him at last and turned and destroyed him? What if it did destroy her family too? It’s going to turn and destroy us all some day, whether our name happens to be Sutpen or Coldfield or not.”

“Ah,” Mr Compson said. “Years ago we in the South made our women into ladies. Then the War came and made the ladies into ghosts. So what else can we do, being gentlemen, but listen to them being ghosts?” Then he said, “Do you want to know the real reason why she chose you?” They were sitting on the gallery after supper, waiting for the time Miss Coldfield had set for Quentin to call for her. “It’s because she will need someone to go with her—a man, a gentleman, yet one still young enough to do what she wants, do it the way she wants it done. And she chose you because your grandfather was the nearest thing to a friend Sutpen ever had in this county, and she probably believes that Sutpen may have told your grandfather something about himself and her, about that engagement which did not engage, that troth which failed to plight. Might even have told your grandfather the reason why at the last she refused to marry



him. —And that your grandfather might have told me and I might have told you. And so, in a sense, the affair, no matter what happens out there tonight, will still be in the family; the skeleton (if it be a skeleton) still in the closet. She may believe that if it hadn't been for your grandfather's friendship, Sutpen could never have got a foothold here, and that if he had not got that foothold, he could not have married Ellen. So maybe she considers you partly responsible through heredity for what happened to her and her family through him.”)

Whatever her reason for choosing him, whether it was that or not, the getting to it, Quentin thought, was taking a long time. Meanwhile, as though in inverse ratio to the vanishing voice, the invoked ghost of the man whom she could neither forgive nor revenge herself upon began to assume a quality almost of solidity, permanence. Itself circumambient and enclosed by its effluvium of hell, its aura of unregeneration, it mused (mused, thought, seemed to possess sentience, as if, though dispossessed of the peace—who was impervious anyhow to fatigue—which she declined to give it, it was still irrevocably outside the scope of her hurt or harm) with that quality peaceful and now harmless and not even very attentive—the ogre-shape which, as Miss Coldfield's voice went on, resolved out of itself before Quentin's eyes the two half-ogre children, the three of them forming a shadowy background for the fourth one. This was the mother, the dead sister Ellen: this Niobe without tears who had conceived to the demon in a kind of nightmare, who even while alive had moved but without life and grieved but without weeping, who—now had an air of tranquil and unwitting desolation, not as if she had either outlived the others or had died first, but as if she had never lived at all. Quentin seemed to see them, the four of them arranged into the conventional family group of the period, with formal and lifeless decorum, and seen now as the fading and ancient photograph itself would have been seen enlarged and hung on the wall behind and above the voice and of whose presence there the voice's owner was not even aware, as if she (Miss Coldfield) had never seen this room before—a picture, a group which even to Quentin had a quality strange, contradictory, and bizarre; not quite comprehensible, not (even to twenty) quite right—a group



the last member of which had been dead twenty-five years and the first, fifty, evoked now out of the airless gloom of a dead house between an old woman's grim and implacable unforgiving and the passive chafing of a youth of twenty telling himself even amid the voice *Maybe you have to know anybody awful well to love them but when you have hated somebody for forty-three years you will know them awful well so maybe it's better then, maybe it's fine then because after forty-three years they can't any longer surprise you or make you either very contented or very mad.* And maybe it (the voice, the talking, the incredulous and unbearable amazement) had even been a cry aloud once, Quentin thought, long ago when she was a girl of young and indomitable unregret, of indictment of blind circumstance and savage event; but not now: now only the lonely thwarted old female flesh embattled for forty-three years in the old insult, the old unforgiving outraged and betrayed by the final and complete affront which was Sutpen's death:

"He wasn't a gentleman. He wasn't even a gentleman. He came here with a horse and two pistols and a name which nobody ever heard before, knew for certain was his own any more than the horse was his own or even the pistols, seeking some place to hide himself, and Yoknapatawpha County supplied him with it. He sought the guarantee of reputable men to barricade him from the other and later strangers who might come seeking him in turn, and Jefferson gave him that. Then he needed respectability, the shield of a virtuous woman, to make his position impregnable even against the men who had given him protection on that inevitable day and hour when even they must rise against him in scorn and horror and outrage; and it was mine and Ellen's father who gave him that. Oh, I hold no brief for Ellen: blind romantic fool who had only youth and inexperience to excuse her even if that; blind romantic fool, then later blind woman mother fool when she no longer had either youth or inexperience to excuse her, when she lay dying in that house for which she had exchanged pride and peace both and nobody there but the daughter who was already the same as a widow without ever having been a bride and was, three years later, to be a widow sure enough without having been anything at all, and the son who had repudiated the



very roof under which he had been born and to which he would return but once more before disappearing for good, and that as a murderer and almost a fratricide; and he, fiend blackguard and devil, in Virginia fighting, where the chances of the earth's being rid of him were the best anywhere under the sun, yet Ellen and I both knowing that he would return, that every man in our armies would have to fall before bullet or ball found him; and only I, a child, a child, mind you, four years younger than the very niece I was asked to save, for Ellen to turn to and say, 'Protect 'her. Protect Judith at least.' Yes, blind romantic fool, who did not even have that hundred miles of plantation which apparently moved our father nor that big house and the notion of slaves underfoot day and night which reconciled, I won't say moved, her aunt. No: just the face of a man who contrived somehow to swagger even on a horse—a man who so far as anyone (including the father who was to give him a daughter in marriage) knew either had no past at all or did not dare reveal it—a man who rode into town out of nowhere with a horse and two pistols and a herd of wild beasts that he had hunted down singlehanded because he was stronger in fear than even they were in whatever heathen place he had fled from, and that French architect who looked like he had been hunted down and caught in turn by the Negroes—a man who fled here and hid, concealed himself behind respectability, behind that hundred miles of land which he took from a tribe of ignorant Indians, nobody knows how, and a house the size of a courthouse where he lived for three years without a window or door or bedstead in it and still called it Sutpen's Hundred as if it had been a king's grant in unbroken perpetuity from his great grandfather—a home, position: a wife and family which, being necessary: to concealment, he accepted along with the rest of respectability as he would have accepted the necessary discomfort and even pain of the briars and thorns in a thicket if the thicket could have given him the protection he sought.

"No: not even a gentleman. Marrying Ellen or marrying ten thousand Ellens could not have made him one. Not that he wanted to be one, or even be taken for one. No. That was not necessary, since all he would need would be Ellen's and our father's names on a wedding license (or on any other patent of respectability) that people could look at and read



just as he would have wanted our father's (or any other reputable man's) signature on a note of hand because our father knew who his father was in Tennessee and who his grandfather had been in Virginia and our neighbors and the people we lived among knew that we knew and we knew they knew we knew and we knew that they would have believed us about whom and where he came from even if we had lied, just as anyone could have looked at him once and known that he would be lying about who and where and why he came from by the very fact that apparently he had to refuse to say at all. —And the very fact that he had had to choose respectability to hide behind was proof enough (if anyone needed further proof) that what he fled from must have been some opposite of respectability too dark to talk about. Because he was too young. He was just twenty-five and a man of twenty-five does not voluntarily undertake the hardship and privation of clearing virgin land and establishing a plantation in a new country just for money; not a young man without any past that he apparently cared to discuss, in Mississippi in 1833 with a river full of steamboats loaded with drunken fools covered with diamonds and bent on throwing away their cotton and slaves before the boat reached New Orleans—not with all this just one night's hard ride away and the only handicap or obstacle being the other blackguards or the risk of being put ashore on a sandbar, and at the remotest, a hemp rope. And he was no younger son sent out from some old quiet country like Virginia or Carolina with the surplus negroes to take up new land, because anyone could look at those negroes of his and tell that they may have come (and probably did) from a much older country than Virginia or Carolina but it wasn't a quiet one. And anyone could have looked once at his face and known that he would have chosen the river and even the certainty of the hemp rope, to undertaking what he undertook even if he had known that he would find gold buried and waiting for him in the very land which he had bought.

“No. I hold no more brief for Ellen than I do for myself. I hold even less for myself, because I had had twenty years in which to watch him, where Ellen had had but five. And not even those five to see him but only to hear at second hand what he was doing, and not even to hear more



than half of that, since apparently half of what he actually did during those five years nobody at all knew about, and half of the remainder no man would have repeated to a wife, let alone a young girl; he came here and set up a raree show which lasted five years and Jefferson paid him for the entertainment by at least shielding him to the extent of not telling their womenfolks what he was doing. But I had had all my life to watch him in, since apparently and for what reason Heaven has not seen fit to divulge, my life was destined to end on an afternoon in April forty-three years ago, since anyone who even had as little to call living as I had had up to that time would not call what I have had since living. I saw what had happened to Ellen, my sister. I saw her almost a recluse, watching those two doomed children growing up whom she was helpless to save. I saw the price which she had paid for that house and that pride; I saw the notes of hand on pride and contentment and peace and all to which she had put her signature when she walked into the church that night, begin to fall due in succession. I saw Judith's marriage forbidden without rhyme or reason or shadow of excuse; I saw Ellen die with only me, a child, to turn to and ask to protect her remaining child; I saw Henry repudiate his home and birthright and then return and practically fling the bloody corpse of his sister's sweetheart at the hem of her wedding gown; I saw that man return—the evil's source and head which had outlasted all its victims—who had created two children not only to destroy one another and his own line, but my line as well, yet I agreed to marry him.

“No. I hold no brief for myself. I don't plead youth, since what creature in the South since 1861, man woman nigger or mule, had had time or opportunity not only to have been young, but to have heard what being young was like from those who had. I don't plead propinquity: the fact that I, a woman young and at the age for marrying and in a time when most of the young men whom I would have known ordinarily were dead on lost battlefields, that I lived for two years under the same roof with him. I don't plead material necessity: the fact that, an orphan a woman and a pauper, I turned naturally not for protection but for actual food to my only kin: my dead sister's family: though I defy anyone to blame



me, an orphan of twenty, a young woman without resources, who should desire not only to justify her situation but to vindicate the honor of a family the good name of whose women has never been impugned, by accepting the honorable proffer of marriage from the man whose food she was forced to subsist on. And most of all, I do not plead myself: a young woman emerging from a holocaust which had taken parents security and all from her, who had seen all that living meant to her fall into ruins about the feet of a few figures with the shapes of men but with the names and statures of heroes—a young woman, I say, thrown into daily and hourly contact with one of these men who, despite what he might have been at one time and despite what she might have believed or even known about him, had fought for four honorable years for the soil and traditions of the land where she had been born. (and the man who had done that, villain dyed though he be, would have possessed in her eyes, even if only from association with them, the stature and shape of a hero too) and now he also emerging from the same holocaust in which she had suffered, with nothing to face what the future held for the South but his bare hands and the sword which he at least had never surrendered and the citation for valor from his defeated Commander-in-Chief. Oh, he was brave. I have never gainsaid that. But that our cause, our very life and future hopes and past pride, should have been thrown into the balance with men like that to buttress it—men with valor and strength but without pity or honor. Is it any wonder that Heaven saw fit to let us lose?”

“Nome,” Quentin said.

“But that it should have been our father, mine and Ellen’s father of all of them that he knew, out of all the ones who used to go out there and drink and gamble with him and watch him fight those wild Negroes, whose daughters he might even have won at cards. That it should have been our father. How he could have approached papa, on what grounds; what there could have been besides the common civility of two men meeting on the street, between a man who came from nowhere or dared not tell where and our father; what there could have been between a man like that and papa—a Methodist steward, a merchant who was not rich and who not only could have done nothing under the sun to advance his fortunes or



prospects but could by no stretch of the imagination even have owned anything that he would have wanted, even picked up in the road—a man who owned neither land nor slaves except two house servants whom he had freed as soon as he got them, bought them, who neither drank nor hunted nor gambled—what there could have been between a man who to my certain knowledge was never in a Jefferson church but three times in his life—the once when he first saw Ellen, the once when they rehearsed the wedding, the once when they performed it—a man that anyone could look at and see that, even if he apparently had none now, he was accustomed to having money and intended to have it again and would have no scruples about how he got it—that man to discover Ellen inside a church. In church, mind you, as though there were a fatality and curse on our family and God Himself were seeing to it that it was performed and discharged to the last drop and dreg. Yes, fatality and curse on the South and on our family as though because some ancestor of ours had elected to establish his descent in a land primed for fatality and already cursed with it, even if it had not rather been our family, our father's progenitors, who had incurred the curse long years before and had been coerced by Heaven into establishing itself in the land and the time already cursed. So that even I, a child still too young to know more than that, though Ellen was my own sister and Henry and Judith my own nephew and niece, I was not even to go out there save when papa or my aunt was with me and that I was not to play with Henry and Judith at all except in the house (and not because I was four years younger than Judith and six years younger than Henry: wasn't it to me that Ellen turned before she died and said "Protect them"?)—even I used to wonder what our father or his father could have done before he married our mother that Ellen and I would have to expiate and neither of us alone be sufficient; what crime committed that would leave our family cursed to be instruments not only for that man's destruction, but for our own."

"Yessum," Quentin said.

"Yes," the grim quiet voice said from beyond the unmoving triangle of dim lace; and now, among the musing and decorous wraiths Quentin seemed to watch resolving the figure of a little girl, in the prim skirts