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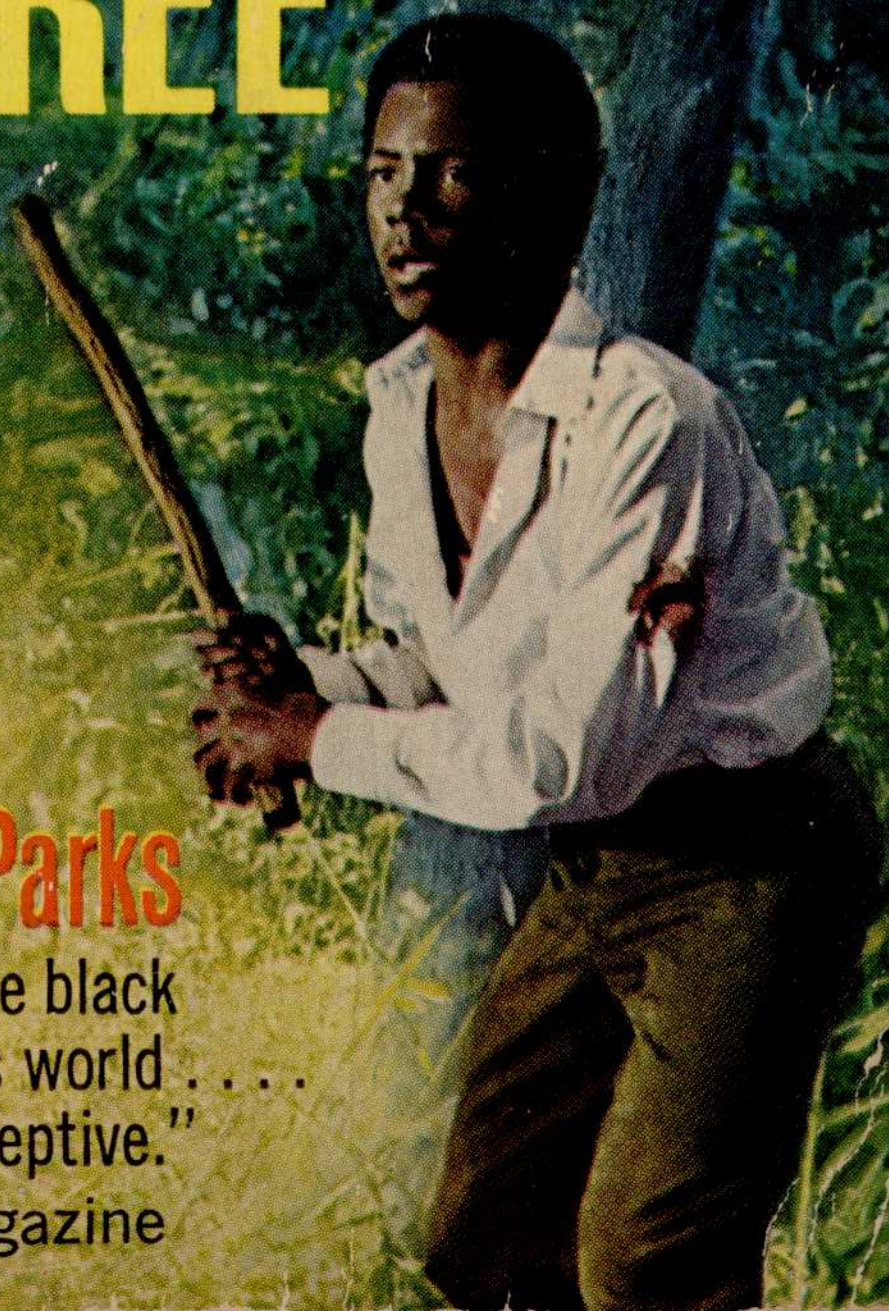
A Fawcett Crest Book

A DRAMATIC  
BESTSELLER—  
NOW A MAJOR  
MOTION PICTURE

# THE LEARNING TREE

by **Gordon Parks**

How it feels to be black  
in a white man's world . . . .  
"Violent and perceptive."  
—Life magazine





LORDS

“If you got a battle to fight, you cain’t rightfully ask the Lord to help you and not the other fella. Now can you? . . . No, son, you got to fight and hope God likes the way you’re using your fists. And that goes for the boy you’re fightin’ . . . I hope you won’t have to stay here all your life, Newt. It ain’t a all-good place and it ain’t a all-bad place. But you can learn just as much here about people and things as you can learn any place else. Cherokee Flats is sorta like a fruit tree. Some of the people are good and some of them are bad—just like the fruit on a tree. . . . No matter if you go or stay, think of it like that till the day you die—let it be your learnin’ tree.”

*So spoke Sarah Winger to her son not long before his thirteenth birthday, and this is the story of what happened to Newt Winger during his perilous climb out of childhood.*

“THE STORY . . . HAS BEEN TOLD MANY TIMES. BUT NEVER HAS IT BEEN TOLD THE WAY GORDON PARKS TELLS IT . . . WRITTEN WITH POWER, SENSITIVITY AND TIMELINESS.”

—ST. PETERSBURG TIMES



# THE LEARNING TREE



BY GORDON PARKS

A FAWCETT CREST BOOK

FAWCETT PUBLICATIONS, INC., GREENWICH, CONN.  
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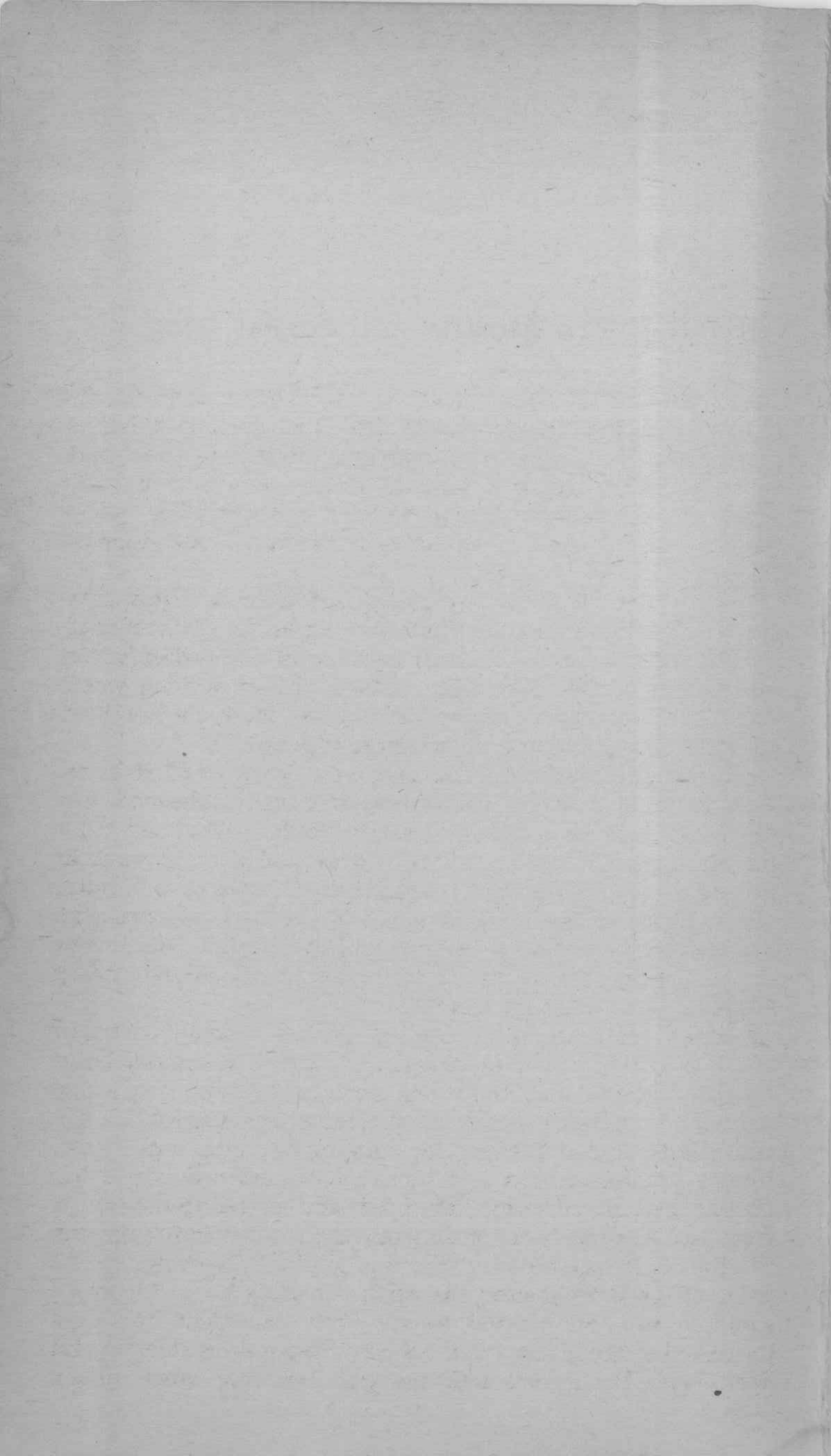
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**The characters in this novel are fictional. Any  
resemblance to persons living or dead is coincidental.**

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TO MOMMA AND POPPA





## CHAPTER 1

NEWT WINGER lay belly-flat at the edge of the cornfield, his brown chin close to the ground, his eyes glued to a hill of busy ants. He singled out one struggling with tree bark twice its size, tugging it forward then sideways then backward up the incline. Being a veteran ant-watcher, Newt tracked its course near perfect over the rough and slippery terrain.

For five of his twelve years he had watched these creatures, remembering that his father often spoke of their energy and work habits in contrast to those of the listless blacks and whites in Cherokee Flats. ("Son, the only thing worse than lazy Negroes is lazy white trash—'cause they're born white, with a God-given chance from the start.")

This anthill was a special one, and Newt liked it better than most he'd seen. The sunny side of it glittered like diamonds because a chunk of sandy earth, washed down by the morning rain and held firm by a discarded plow, stuck to this portion of the mound. Newt pressed his chin even flatter, closing one eye, for now the ant with the bark was near the top and he got a clearer view with one eye shut. He moved his blunt nose close to what now seemed a big animal pulling a tree trunk up a mountainside.

As the ant reached the top, the glitter suddenly dimmed and bits of the mound blew into Newt's eye. He blinked and brushed out the dirt, but when he looked again, the whole mound was blowing apart. At the same moment he felt the cool Kansas wind rushing in, stinging his face and throat. Newt's prairie instincts told him this was no ordinary wind. Catlike, he jumped to his naked feet and looked to the sky. A great swirling black cloud was moving toward him from the southwest. It was broad at the top, gradually narrowing to a point at the bottom near the earth—looking every bit like a spinning top. He started to run, but this sight held him transfixed in the biting wind, his bare brown arms shielding his dark face. He leaned into the gale, looking much like a



small, wiry, broad-shouldered scarecrow, his tattered shirt and bib overalls flapping from the wind.

"Neewt! Neewt! Where is you? Neewt!" It was Big Mabel's voice somewhere down the cornfield. "Neewt! Neewt—!" As he spun about to answer, his foot struck the remains of the anthill, kicking the insects in every direction.

He jerked his foot up, afraid he had killed; then, falling to his knees, he began cupping the dirt and ants with his hands in an attempt to rebuild the mound. He kept pulling the scatterings together, only to see them blown away. Then frightened and confused, he fell to the ground and placed his body in the path of the wind to protect the rest of the hill. But the wind, mixed now with pouring rain, swept over and beneath him, swirling the loose pile into nothingness.

Big Mabel reached him just before the full front of the storm struck Cherokee Flats. As she yanked him to his feet, the wind-driven rain lashed her naked parts and flattened the wet gingham dress against her body. "What you doin' here, boy? Your maw and paw and all of us was worried 'bout you! Cain't you see the big storm comin'? What's wrong with you, anyhow? What you cryin' for? Come on now, git movin'! We got to hurry, boy! Come ahead!"

Newt pulled loose for a last look at the anthill, but as he did so a gust slammed him hard against Big Mabel and they both tumbled to the ground. As they went down, the girl twisted to break her fall and Newt fell beneath her, striking his leg on the sharp edge of the plow. They struggled to their feet and started off with the wind at their backs, blowing them into a weird slippery trot.

After several yards, Newt screamed in pain and dropped to his knees. "What's the matter, boy?" Big Mabel cried. Newt groaned and lay still. "Come on, boy. We can't stop here! Come on, I'll help you! . . . My God, boy, where'd you git that slice in your leg? You bleedin' like a hog!"

Newt grimaced. "That old plow back there—shore does hurt, too."

Big Mabel looked about desperately. They were a good mile from the Winger house. Jim Pullens' place was a half mile closer, but still not close enough. She stared at the swirling blackness. "Too far to Jim's or your paw's place from here. Maybe we can make the killin' house to the other side of the field. Come on! Git on my back!"

She squatted in the mud and Newt clasped his arms about her neck, straddling her back, with his legs between her arms. She steadied him and began crawling along the edge of

the field, seeking the protection of the cornstalks. But she changed her mind when she saw them bending crazily from their roots. "Cain't make it this way. Hang on, we'll skirt round the end!" She staggered up, balanced Newt's weight, then headed for the slaughterhouse across the field.

The high winds, rotating counter-clockwise, pushed, snatched and twisted them over the violent countryside, and Newt's concern for the ants and his gashed leg gave way to fear of thunder, lightning and screaming wind.

Suddenly Big Mabel yelled, "Dammit to hell, I'm stuck—cain't move!" She was sinking ankle-deep in mud. Freeing one foot then the other, she inched her way to higher and firmer ground.

The wind was behind them again, forcing Big Mabel into a crazy lope, and within a few minutes she was rounding the edge of the cornfield, from where she could make out the blurry image of the slaughterhouse. "We'll git there soon now, Newt! Hold tighter, boy! Hold tighter!" Newt whimpered and dug his face into the back of her neck, trying desperately to keep his wet hands from slipping apart—feeling pain from the cut, and the sticky warmth of blood between his toes.

Thunder rumbled over them and within a split second, in the blinding flash that followed, Newt saw the outline of the house off to their right. "There 'tis, Mabel! There 'tis!" A deafening crash echoed the thunder. He smacked his hands against his ears and lost his balance. "Hold on! Grab—" Big Mabel's warning was late. Newt was already falling.

His head struck first. Pain jolted through his neck to his belly and shimmied out to his toes. Then he was floating on a puffy white cloud fringed with orange and purple raindrops. The wind kept curling the cloud over him like a hot blanket. He tried pushing it off, but it kept covering him, so he kicked it with his foot, which punctured the cloud. He went tumbling through space with a chunk of cloud stuck through his leg. Down . . . down . . . down he fell . . . "Help! Help! Momma, catch me! I'm fallin'—"

Big Mabel tore a strip from the bottom of her dress, bound it above the wound in his leg and began tightening. "Quiet boy, you goin' to be all right now. You is safe in the killin' house—this'll stop the bleedin'." She secured the bandage, pulled a butcher knife off a rack, wrung water from her dress onto it, then placed the flat side of the blade against the lump on his forehead. "Why you let loose I don't know—"



with just a few feet to go." She ripped another piece off her hemline and began cleaning blood from his leg.

Newt's hazy awakening assured him of safety. Big Mabel's voice, which at first had seemed far away, was closer now. Slowly he made out the dark broad forehead, high cheekbones and sullen lips as she moved above him; the bare damp shoulders glistening in the weak light, the full breasts hanging free and swaying with each motion. His eyes caught patches of light in the roof where shingles were ripping away and water splattering through—except where he lay, for directly above him were sheets of tin he and his father had placed in early spring.

"You feelin' better now, boy?"

"My head hurts—and I'm kinda cold."

"Be warmin' you up in a minute. We's lucky to be inside. We's smack in the middle of a cyclone. Everything's gonna blow away if this keeps up."

"How'd my head git hurt?"

"You acted a fool and let loose and busted the ground with that noggin of your'n. That's how." Another patch of shingles tore from the roof. "Damn shore is blowin' to hell out there!"

"What you holdin' that knife on my head for?"

"Quit askin' so many questions, boy! I know what I'm doin'. It's to take swellin' out." She placed his hands on the cracked knife handle. "Here, hold it right there for a minute—gotta find somethin' to cover us up."

She went to an adjoining room used for smoking meat and groped about in the darkness for a moment or so. "Thank God—I know'd this old quilt was here somewheres!" She returned to Newt, took the knife and threw it aside, then spread the musty cover on the floor next to him. "Roll over here, boy." Newt propped himself up on his elbows and eyed the quilt.

"That thing's dirty!" —

"You pick a hell of a time to git hinky, boy. You's cold, ain't you? Well, this'll keep you warm. Git yore little black ass over!"

Newt scooted over on his backside, carefully dragging the injured leg behind the rest of his body. Big Mabel stood with hands on her broad hips looking down on him. "Better git them wet things off, too."

"What for?"

"There you go with questions again. Boy, I'm seven years

older'n you, and I know what I'm doin'. Hadn't been for me you'd still be out there blowin' away with them damn ants!"

Newt scowled and began tugging at his overalls. Big Mabel plopped down beside him and pulled them over his feet. Then she yanked the remains of the dress over her head and flung it in a corner.

"You oughta be feelin' better soon now," she said, fixing the quilt over them and, at the same time, pulling Newt hard against her naked body. "Come closer, boy, if you want to git warm." Her voice now was husky and low—so low that he could hardly understand her words.

And soon the warmth of Big Mabel brought a glow to his own body, and a hardness to his groin—one he had never felt before. Big Mabel felt the hardness too. She rolled over on her back, pulled him on top of her.

The killing house shook all over and the shingles kept flying away, but Newt felt even warmer. And the softness of Big Mabel cushioned the shaking; calmed his fears. And though the storm blew on, it was not long before Newt completely forgot its blowing.

Yet, outside over the prairie, groundhogs and skunks, jack rabbits and opossums took flight from the flooding lowlands. And sparrows, robins, bobolinks and swallows alike, trapped in the whirling wind, darted helplessly beneath the ominous sky. In the brush, cud-chewing deer knelt close together protecting their nervous young. And the dark sky drew darker.

Meanwhile, Jack Winger and his son Pete, keeping short distances apart, struggling through wind and rain over the countryside, combed all Candy Hill for Newt. Cutting across the river road, the two powerfully built men saw at the same time a large section of the road wash out and the bobbing headlights of a truck coming toward them. They rushed to the middle of the road, waving frantically at the onrushing vehicle; but the driver spotted the washout too late, and the big truck twisted off the road, jumped a ditch and crashed against a light pole, then slid back down the incline. Jack and his son heard the cracking, saw the upper part of the pole falling away. "Watch out!" Jack shouted. The power line snapped, and at once there was a showering of sparks and a zinging sound, followed by a great splash.

They made their way over to the truck, but the driver was already out of the cab when they reached it. "Damn near killed myself!" he hollered above the screaming wind.

"You hurt?" Jack bellowed.



"Naw—but that damned power line's down over the field there!"

"You betta warn somebody—we gotta keep lookin' for my kid! Didn't see a boy down the road, did you?"

"Nope, not a soul!" The two men started off. "Hope you find him!" the trucker shouted as they trudged away.

Bending almost double in the wind, Jack and Pete pushed along the slippery bank of Flynn's River, searching every crevice and cave along the way. Finally they reached the swimming hole.

"Newt! Newt!" Jack cried out. "Newt! Newt!" There was no answer, not even an echo as the wind whipped his voice away. Then Pete was hollering, "Neewt! Neewt!" His cry was all but silenced by a loud thunderclap. Jack shook his head dejectedly. Then they turned their backs to the punishing storm and headed toward home.

They could see the truck still straddling the ditch as they went back across the road, and when they passed beyond the washout, the man stuck his head from the cab. "D'ya see any sign of the boy?"

"No luck!" Pete yelled back, and they kept moving. They were alongside Jake Kiner's ranch now, hearing the hoofs of his frightened livestock pounding in the direction of the downed power line. The two men squinted through the driving rain. A bluish flash lit the prairie and several of the steers lurched grotesquely in sputtering death. The others shied, then plunged on over the tangled wire.

Sarah Winger jumped at the banging on the door. After a quick glance at her fourteen-year-old daughter Prissy, she hastened through the parlor, jerked open the door and watched as the two drenched, exhausted men staggered in.

"Jack?" Her voice was softly urgent and questioning.

He slammed the door, took a deep breath and walked to the corner where Pete was already shedding his wet clothes. For an instant Sarah stood motionless, her heart pumping. "Oh—oh," she moaned softly, "oh, my God." Then quickly she was through the door and into the open, her long black skirt whipping in the wind. But just as swiftly Jack was out beside her, coaxing and pushing her back into the house.

Pete rushed over and pulled them both in, banged the door shut, threw the bolt in place and gently grasped his mother's shoulders. "Ain't no sense in worryin', Momma." His tone was low and positive. "Newt knows this countryside better'n a squirrel."

"Prissy."

"Yessir, Poppa."

"Fix me and your brother some hot coffee."

"Yessir," she answered, and was off to the kitchen.

Sarah moved to the window and looked out at the stormy blackness. The clock on the wall showed three, and the wanging of the lead ball against the bell, chiming the hour, sounded incongruous to her ear, as if it were coming from some far-distant place, at some far-removed time. Her husband and son stood watching her, trying to share her thoughts, wanting in some way to banish the fear that held her. Jack took a chair to her and she sat down. And she remained there for an hour and a half more while the house shook under the twisting wind. She silently prayed for the safety of Newt—forgetting all else, peering through the lightning flashes for any sort of image that might miraculously be her son.

Near five o'clock the wind suddenly died, the sky began to pale and the storm was gone.

When Newt and Big Mabel left the smokehouse they could see the heavy clouds being suctioned off by the storm, swirling now into the distant northeast. And as they walked along, frogs leaped into the open and crickets made chirping noises with their wings, rubbing away the wetness. The late sun shimmered in the rivulets snaking through the muddy fields to streams and gullies in the lowland.

"Look'it there!" Newt suddenly shouted. He pointed at what was left of Jim Pullens' house.

"Lordy," Big Mabel blurted, "good thing we didn't try for there." They cut across the field to the crumpled house, seeing that there was no longer a roof and that the wall nearest them had caved in completely. "Lordy, what a mess!"

"Think he's all right?" Newt was tagging behind now, not only because of the pain in his leg but also from a fear of what they might find in the wreckage.

"Who, Jim?"

"Yeah. Don't see nobody stirrin' about."

"Well, come on, let's see." Now Big Mabel was slowing.

"Boy, lucky we didn't git here. We'd a—"

"Shush. What's that whinin' sound?" They stopped and listened.

"I don't hear nothing'."

"Sounded like—"

"It's Collie! It's Collie!" Newt blurted, limping faster toward the sound. "He must be under the roof!" Now he was



down on his hands and knees, peeping under the fallen roof. "Here, Collie! Come on, boy! Here, Coll—" Then he recoiled in shock. "Mabel! Mabel! It's him! It's him! He's trapped under the roof."

"What? You shore, boy?"

"Yeh. Come see for yourself." Big Mabel flattened to the muddy ground, squinting beneath the tangled debris. "See?" Newt panted.

"It's Jim all right—he alive?"

"Mister Pullens, Mister Pullens!" Newt hollered. The dog whimpered and began wagging his tail. "Mister Pullens! Mister Pullens!"

"'Tain't no use, Newt. See all the blood—he's prob'ly dead."

"We better git help. Maybe he's just knocked out."

By the time Newt and Big Mabel reached the Winger house, only a gentle breeze stirred the puddles in the yard. Prissy was skimming the water with her big toe when she saw them running toward her. "Momma! Momma!" she hollered. "Here comes Newt and Big Mabel!"

Sarah heard and ran from the kitchen. Pete, having just returned, disconsolately, from another search with his father, came down the path. "Poppa!" Jack Winger was in the backyard eyeing his overturned henhouse, and the anxiety in Pete's voice made him wheel around. "Yep, boy! What is it?"

"Here's Newt and Big Mabel!" Pete called back on the run.

Prissy was already pouring questions. "Where was you? How'd you hurt your leg? Where'd you hide out?"

Before Newt could answer, he saw his mother in the doorway. The sight of her was heart-warming, and he wanted to go to her; but instead he turned to his brother. "Pete—Mister Pullens' house blowed down—he's trapped underneath it, and—and—" He was out of breath.

"He hurt bad?" Pete questioned.

"Looks to me he's—"

"Yeh," Mabel interrupted, "blood's all round his head.

Jack Winger was among them now. "What's the matter? Where you been, boy?"

"Jim's trapped under his house!" Pete burst out.

"Jim Pullens?"

"Yessir."

"Well, come on—let's git over there. Come on!" Jack shouted. Then he and Pete trotted off. Newt turned, too, and limped after them.

"Newt!" Sarah called halfheartedly.

He kept running, pretending not to hear his mother. She started to call again but changed her mind. "They may need him for somethin'. It's enough just to have him back! Thank God he's back!" She turned to Big Mabel. "Where'd you find him, Mabel?"

The girl shyly pulled the top of her torn dress together. "Up by the corn patch foolin' round a anthill. We—we made it to the smokehouse 'stead of tryin' to make it here or to Jim's."

"You was right for stoppin', girl. We was worried to death."

"Newt got his leg cut on the ole plow over in the field. I tore up my dress to stop the bleedin', and he's got a knot on his head from a fall, but he'll be all right."

"Well, come on in—you must be hungry," Sarah said calmly. Without waiting, she turned and went back into the house, mumbling and wiping her eyes.

Big Mabel turned to Prissy. "Tell your maw I ain't hungry. See yore henhouse get blowed over." Then she looked at Prissy in a peculiar way. "Tell Newt to—oh, never mind." She went on down the path.

Jim was dead.

"Pore fella didn't have a chance," Jack commented as they pulled him from beneath the house. Newt looked at the crumpled form, the bloody, lifeless face, the sad, beautiful dog still whining at his side. He had seen death for the first time, and a fear set in him—a fear of dying, like this or any other way. As he, his father and brother walked silently homeward, the image of Jim settled firmly in Newt's mind. He tried to erase it by thinking back to his own narrow escape. But this didn't work. He hobbled up closer to Pete.

"Leg hurtin', Newt?"

"Yeh, kinda."

Pete stooped. "Git on," he said. "I'll give you a lift."

Newt climbed on his brother's back, and bouncing along he studied the big, tall frame of his father walking beside them, his large hands stuffed in his faded blue jeans, his wide-brimmed, weather-beaten hat shaped to his head like a turtle's shell; his face with its strong, leathery brown lines curving up from his long, heavy mustache to his high cheekbones. He wondered what his father was thinking, what he would do next.

"What'cha gonna do now, Poppa?"

Jack's head turned toward Newt but he kept walking, his



eyes brightening beneath his bushy brows. He was looking at his son as though he had seen him for the first time since the storm. "Where you been, boy? Where was you durin' the storm?"

"Me and Big Mabel hid in the smokehouse over there."

"What's that rag doin' on your leg?"

"Cut it on your old plow in the field."

"I declare, boy—you're born for trouble, born for trouble." Jack sighed. "Gonna be the death of your mother yet."

Newt had expected this type of comment earlier. He knew too that when it finally came it would be brief. Now that it was over, he waited for the answer which he also knew his father had been forming during those few seconds of mild rebuke.

"Ain't much we can do now, boy, 'cept call the undertaker—too bad—too bad."

Newt's mind slid back momentarily to the corpse of Jim Pullens, recalling the bigness and strength of him who lay now without power to open an eye or simply to breathe. Subconsciously he compared it with the live, powerful body of Pete's that carried him so easily over the soggy field. He looked close at his brother's bullish neck, feeling the rippling force of the muscles in the back beneath him. For the first time he realized how much his brother's face resembled his father's—Pete's just looks newer, without a mustache, he decided.

As they jogged along, Newt eyed a big ball of red hanging where the prairie met the sky. The ball cut to a half; a quarter; and then it was gone beneath the earth line, leaving only a glow that shot up through feathery white specks from the dark horizon. He twisted his head, looking northeast. Dusk soaked into the very last of the storm clouds. Behind him, night began settling over Jim Pullens and Collie like a blanket.

Jack Winger was a poor man, but the supper he blessed that night was of things Newt liked best—fried chicken, yams, browned clabber gravy and cornbread. Immediately the talk centered around the big storm and its casualties.

"Jim was a fine fella, one of the best round here."

"How long'd you know him, Poppa?"

"Well on to twenty years, ain't it, Sarah?"

"Closer to twenty-three, if mem'ry serves me right—use your fork, Newt! Seems he came about two years after us."