



DAGON

Fred Chappell

Moments of Light

The Inkling

It Is Time, Lord

The Gaudy Place

DAGON

by

Fred Chappell

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Dedicated to

Those Who Cast Their Shadows Out of Time upon our days

Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn.

About 9:30 the next morning he entered the downstairs room which faced the almost painfully blue west and the tall ridge across the little valley, the room which his grandparents had used to call the “sun parlor.” He advanced into the room a way and halted, seeming to feel the whole fabric of the house tremulous with his footsteps. And he had paused to consider, well, to think about how much there actually *was* to consider. The onus of inheritance was already beginning to rub a bit.—The room was familiarly musty and the two windows, eyed and wavy, were decent in their gray gauzy curtains. Over the bisected window in the door which opened to the outside, the glass curtain was stretched tight with rods at top and bottom so that the cloth was pulled into stiff ribs, stiff as fingers of the dead. He took another step and again hesitated, hearing the quiet wary rattle of glassware somewhere. Meditating, he shifted his weight forward and back, rocking on the balls of his feet. Had all the floor timbers melted away with dry rot? He couldn’t quite bring himself to doubt, staring down frowning at the regular lines of dark oak flooring, board laid solid by board. Even the layer of dust which was spread like cheesecloth about his feet didn’t entirely dull the hard polish of the wood. He disliked thinking of these careful rows ripped up, exposing the broad rough subflooring; and then that too taken away to get at the flaking bones of the house. But there was probably no preventing it. He sighed, and as he inhaled, agitated atoms of dust pierced his nostrils brightly. Twice he sneezed, and rubbed his nose roundly with his wrist, squeezed his eyebrows in his palm. Had he really heard an echo to his sneeze? The room hardly seemed large enough to give up echoes—it was about twenty feet square with a high ceiling—but it was a room truly made for secondary presences, for reverberations. This wasn’t the whole room. Opposite him, double doors, divided into small glass rectangles, closed off what was actually the remainder of this room. In the left door his image stood, hand still over his face and he was all cut into pieces in the panes. He dropped his pale hand to his side, and in the glass the movement coruscated.

He moved toward the west wall and once again his image, larger now and darker, accosted him. His head and torso stood before him, sliced now into the pattern of an oval enclosed in roundish triangles and seemingly stacked in the shelves of the dark old writing cabinet. He shrugged, turned away. The low sofa, piled with fancy pillows and cushions, sat stolid against the opposite wall. The obese horror was draped over with a picture rug, but it was easy enough to guess how it was: covered with a vinous prickly nap and with three huge cushions laid on the springs. The wool picture rug had two fringes of red tassel and displayed a Levantine scene: in the market place the wine seller sits comfortably beneath his awning while the dark and turbaned stranger looms above him on his camel, and behind in the dusty street the woman returns from the well, her water jug shouldered. This tableau splashed with a profusion of pillows and cushions, green, red, yellow, gaudy flowers, knowing birds, birds darkly wise. In the center of the sofa were two oblong companion pillows, shouldered so closely together that they looked like the Decalogue tablets. They were white, or had been white, and painful stitches upon them with blue thread were companion mottoes, companion pictures. In the left pillow lies a girl, her long blue hair asprawl about her face, her eyes innocently shut, asleep. The motto: I SLEPT AND DREAMED THAT LIFE WAS BEAUTY. But the story continued, and on the next pillow her innocence is all torn away: there she stands, gripping a round broom; her hair now is pinned up severely and behind her sits a disheartening barrel churn. I WOKE AND FOUND THAT LIFE WAS DUTY. The pillows sat, stuffed and stiff as disapproving bishops; they could, he thought, serve as two tombstones for whole gray generations. It was in no way difficult to imagine the fingers of his grandmother, tough and knobbly, wearily working upon these wearying legends, these most speaking

epitaphs. It was more discouraging still to wonder if perhaps this task hadn't been performed by his grandmother's mother. Even without thinking he doubted that there was anything in his blood which could now fight back to that bitter use of mind; he just wasn't so tough....No; no, that wasn't true, either. Slow, wet, easy living hadn't got to his Puritan core, not *really*. He *could* hump logs together to make a house; *he* could plow the long furrow as straight as a killing arrow. It was simply that he didn't have to: the world had got easier, even the sky. All that temper was still in him and not really very hidden, and it was no strange matter that these two pillows could cause to rise in his mind narrow visions of those stringent decades. He could see his male ancestry as grainy and rough as if they had all been hacked from stone. They didn't drink, didn't smoke; they didn't read, and all books other than the great black one were efficient instruments of Sathanas. The only fun they had was what he was living evidence of.—And very probably not.—He could imagine them, his whiskery forefathers, stalking wifeward to beget, stolid, unmoved as men readying themselves to slaughter hogs. And some hint of that too. The women were no better. Their hands were pained knots, like blighted unopenable buds. Their eyes were stuffed with the opaque ice which had clenched over the fear of their hearts.... And yet, and yet there was always something faintly comforting in thinking upon the gelid principles with which his grandfathers had shored up themselves for duty, military or familial, or for the rich farming business.

He was vaguely bothered, nettled, and he turned away from contemplating the pillows. Across from him was the wide entry to a dark formal dining room, and in the near corner a complacent fat club chair. He turned round and round, feeling the windows slide over his sight and the serrated glitters of the glass doors, and found himself, in a momentary accident, face to face with the wall. It was plaster, and he could discern in its grain the sweep of the maker's trowel and swirled signs of the hair. In the morning silence the wall seemed as vocal as everything else in the room. Illumination, a gilt tin contraption which sported naked light bulbs, hung suspended from the ceiling by a gilt chain, and a thick webby electric cord sidled through the links. Before the piled sofa sat a low table, the wood mahogany-stained, with a glass top which displayed photographs that could dim, but not curl, with age: four rows of gray-and-black squares, instants of frozen miming that he would not examine. More gilt, on the wall above the sofa: a rectangular frame which enclosed a photograph in anemic —“tinted”—colors, the faces of his grandfather and grandmother. Both the progenitors seemed masked for the picture, as severe as if they had plotted beforehand to judge the photographer, to sentence him to a life of hard labor. The eyes of the grandfather were frigid blue, the color of the windwashed March sky reflected in the ice of a puddle. Somehow the tinting process, whatever it was, had made those eyes inviting targets for wishful darts. Set jaws, assured noses, ears which would admit only acquiescent sounds. The eyes of the grandmother were gray and, though doubtless resolute, the gaze was not so personally stationed. In her clear forehead and in the rather distant aiming of her eyes there was not so much of her husband's belligerent certainty; there was a hint of troubled—but still (he had to admit it)—unshaken humanity. But it was an unyielding countenance, and he found himself brushing his hand over his face as if he had just walked through a cobweb. Awkwardly he stepped back, as though he could retreat from his unrealized action or, rather, from whatever vague thought had inspired it. Nor was he delighted to see his mind so often turning upon himself.

He pawed a mass of pillows heavily aside and sat down on the sofa; fumbled in his shirt pocket for a cigarette. The odor of the sofa submerged him; it wasn't sour exactly, but rather sweet-and-sour palpable; musty, of course, but with an aura of times past so striking as almost to give an impression of freshness. The smell betokened what? Voluminous clothes kept with a sachet too old, so that its power had disappeared into the cloth. Or long dutiful Sunday afternoons spent with the Methodist

preacher over a box of stale chocolate candies. Or dripping afternoon funerals set up in this room and garnished with flowers which had very recently given up their sickly ghosts. His spirit seemed drowning in the smell of the sofa, in the swift flood of pastness it poured out. He lit the cigarette and sucked the smoke deep, as if protecting himself, almost in fact as if smoking was an act of defiance toward the past. The smoke rose slowly, the lax strands of it parting and hanging almost motionless in the air, seemingly very solid. It was himself, in fact, who seemed flimsy; even his body, whose weight the hard sofa barely accepted, felt vaporous, tenuous: there was not enough real event attached to it to force it to existence. The room was so silent that he could hear his chest rasp against the cloth of his shirt as he breathed, and for one scary moment he imagined that this sound became increasingly faint as he was dying away. He dropped the blackened paper match into a silly little ashtray, a tiny china circle with—again—gilt lines and in the center an ugly pink rose. The dead match lay across the face of the rose like a disastrous scar, and he noted it with a twinge of guilty triumph; so that almost reflexively he mashed the new cigarette into the flower, leaving there a raw streak of black ash. The small coals died immediately.

He rose and crossed the room. As he had suspected, the desk section of the dark secretary was locked, but through the glass cabinet doors he saw the small brass key lying on the middle shelf. The lock was reluctant, but the section did at last let down, exposing an interior less musty than he had imagined. There were half a dozen tight-ranked drawers and a number of bulging pigeonholes. Letter photographs, books of check stubs, a bottle in which the ink had dried to a circular black scab, a Waterman pen with a discolored yellow nib. He pulled from one of the pigeonholes a resisting envelope and shook the letter from it. The cheap paper had darkened with dust and the recalcitrant words had been formed with blunt pencil strokes, gray on gray. He held the sheet above his head and turned his back to the window. The words came dimly to his eyes: *...guess Jasper's note will be alright anyway for this year and can renew with confidence, I guess in the neighborhood of 1500.* It would of course be concerned with money. He let it drop unflattering and wiped his fingers on his trousers leg. From a closed drawer peeped the shiny corner of a snapshot, which he slipped out without opening the drawer. At first he couldn't comprehend what object was pictured, but it was, after all, merely an automobile, a Dodge or a Plymouth of the late '30's, black, hardily at repose before the immaculately vertical lines of a walnut tree. Why this photograph? He stared at it as if it were an urgent but indecipherable message, intently personal. The car was not new, had not been photographed on that account. It was perhaps no more than the thoughtless effort to finish up a roll of film so that a brother with his arm about the shoulders of an aunt or a wide-eyed distressed baby cousin might sooner see the light of day in their own white-edged squares. Yet here it was, the car, as bluntly and totally itself as if it had been invented for the purpose of perplexing. He tried to slide the snapshot back through the crack in the top of the drawer, but it encountered a hidden tightness and folded up, the brittle surface suddenly webbed with fine lines like a cracked china plate. He desisted, and let the picture loll out of the front of the desk like an idiot untasting tongue. When he once more glimpsed his darkly reflected face in the cabinet doors, his eyes looked fearful.

He turned again to the panes of glass in the double doors, this time erasing his features by bringing his face directly against one of the panes. He cupped his hands, extending them from his temples as if he were trying to see for a long distance through blinding sunlight. The interior of this room swam forward to meet him. Although there was a row of windows in the opposite wall, they were darkened by a shaggy row of fir bushes growing by the outside wall, so that this room was even dimmer than the one in which he was standing.

When he tried the knob the lock uttered an unnerving scrape, but the right-hand door swung

inward easily enough. Here was real mustiness, an odor so stuffed with unmoving time that it seemed strange the pressure of it hadn't burst the doors and windows. Entering, he left unclear tracks in the dust behind him, and the dust muted his footsteps, seemed to adhere like cobweb to his shoes. The dust seemed a huge powdery cobweb. A long low comfortless-looking lounge was pushed against the wall, and the tough ornate wood of the back of it jammed into the window sill. This sofa was undraped, but the upholstery was decorated with looping broad arabesques which suggested a badly stylized jungle. There were four identical knickknack tables on thin legs; they were cluttered with more of the tiny uninviting ashtrays and with a number of small pale wooden boxes. Against the east wall sat a black upright piano which somehow seemed sagging. He crossed to it and opened it. The keys were discolored, yellowish, cracked, and in some cases the ivory was missing almost completely. He punched gingerly at middle A, then experimented with a simple triad. Middle C sounded merely a dull thump; the E and A keys produced a dissonance. No doubt the strings had rusted, the whole guts of the instrument diseased and disordered. Again he wiped his fingers on his trousers, trying to wipe away that dust which seemed to seep into the pores of his skin. With his cold hand he brushed his face too, and the back of his neck. Over the top of the piano drooped a big elaborately embroidered doily; looked like a fishnet, a fantastic net to catch—what? Oh, whatever inhabited the surcharged air of this room. Even after he backed away from the instrument, that acrid chord seemed to hang still in his hearing; it was as if he had written indelible curse words upon something which was supposed to remain sacredly blank. He raised and dropped his shoulders in a sigh; he felt almost as if he had been working away in hard physical labor; he had never before felt his will be so ringed about, so much at bay. Never before had he realized so acutely the invalidity of his desires, how they could be so easily canceled, simply marked out, by the impersonal presence of something, a place, an object, anything vehemently and uncaringly itself....But the pastness which these two rooms (really, one room divided) enclosed was not simply the impersonal weight of dead personality but a willful belligerence, active hostility. Standing still in the center of the first room, he felt the floor stirring faintly beneath his feet and he was convinced that the house was gathering its muscles to do him harm; it was going to spring. But then he heard the sharp-heeled foot-steps which caused the quivering, and then Sheila, his blond pale pretty wife, stuck her head through the hall door.

“Come on outside, Peter,” she said. “Come away.”

I didn't have the faintest idea it was even near lunchtime," he said. Standing out here under the shiny June sky, he felt perfectly at ease to stretch his arms and shoulder muscles, as if he had just awakened from a dreary, unrefreshing sleep. He opened his mouth, tasting the bright air. It was warm; he hadn't realized how cold he had become in the house. Not far away he could hear a bird singing unstintingly pure filigree of sound. "Here," he said. "Let me take that." He lifted the big wicker basket from his wife's strained hand. "Where are we going?"

Her voice was clear and easy as water. "It's your farm; you tell me. Where is the best place on this magnificent estate to have a picnic?"

"I don't know any more about the place than you do. But maybe we'd better not go too far. They're liable to deliver our stuff today."

Sheila looked at Peter with a secret eye: her tall gangly husband, all bones and corners his body was, had already begun worrying himself. The "stuff" which was to come was mostly books and notebooks and cryptic files of index cards. Already he was concerned about finishing his book—he called it his "study"—in time. They still had about twenty-five hundred dollars left of the amount they had allowed themselves and now this nice quiet place to work, this farm willed to him by his grandparents, had dropped into their laps, and still he was worrying himself. In this warmly glowing landscape his eyes were turned inward. As they went through the sparse front lawn of the house she broke a tall stalk of plaintain off at the top and put the oozy stem end into her mouth.

He swung the basket unrhythmically as he walked. His height and boniness made him seem loping. When they came to the reddish-yellow dirt road which ran northward past the house, he hesitated. "Now which way?" he said. "We can go either way here and still be in our own domain."

It was true. The big ugly house sat almost in the center of the wide farm, the four hundred acres shaped vaguely like an open hand. It sat among smooth hills, so that if they went very far in any direction they would have to climb.

"Your wish is my command," she said.

"Well..." He gave her a look. Lightness and irony more or less sweet, that was Sheila. He shrugged a shoulder and started toward their car, the old blue Buick parked in the sloping driveway behind the house.

"But let's *do* walk," she said. "It's a warm lovely day, and walking won't take so terribly much time. It'll be soon enough you're back to your nasty old books and note cards. Surely we're not here just for you to work."

"Still, that's mostly why we're here. At least, I hope it is." But he gave over anyway, and turning suddenly to her took her hand.

As quickly, involuntarily, she almost drew away. His hand on hers was dry and cool, actually cold, and startling in the warm sunlight. "You'll have to get used to walking," she said. "Now that you're in the country, you'll have to do all sorts of rustic things. You'll have to drink fresh milk and rob the honeybees and eat wild flowers. You're going to become a happy child of nature. I'm sure you'll make a great success of it."

"Oh, that's me. A happy child of nature."

In a hundred yards or so the road had climbed, cutting along the side of the hill. A slow dark stream ran in the narrow bottom field below; serpentine, sluggish, it reflected no light through the tall weeds and bushes that crowded to its edges. Sheila pointed toward it. "Maybe we could spread our blanket by the creek down there," she said. "It looks so nice and cool."

“Do you really want to go crawling through those weeds? I bet the whole field is full of snakes and spiders. And the ground down there’ll be wet, so close to the stream.”

“Weeds won’t hurt you,” she said. She patted the smooth leg of her pink cotton slacks. “Come on, chicken heart, it’ll be very nice, bet you a pretty.” She tugged at his hand, drew him to the side of the road.

“Hold on a minute.” He shifted the basket to his other hand, and his body tilted perceptibly with the weight. “What in the world did you put in here, anyway? Heavy as lead.”

“All kinds of surprises,” she said. “Lead hamburgers, lead rolls, lead mustard...”

They got through the field without much difficulty and she was right, here by the stream it was cool. They found a circle of long cool grass, almost free of weeds, and shadowed by a stand of scrubby willow bushes. Sheila wafted a blue tablecloth over the ground and crawled over it on hands and knees to smooth it out. Then she stood and fingered her fine blond hair back from her temples. “Oh, this is lovely.” She looked at him, an anxious inquiry. “Isn’t it lovely?” The stream lapped intermittently at the banks, the dark water moved slow and dreamy through the shadows; now and again it splashed up a wink of reflected sunlight. Her face gleamed momentarily in a pure reflection of the sun. “We ought to take all our meals down here.”

“Not me,” he said. “I m not getting out of bed and wallow through weeds and mud for breakfast.”

“No, not breakfast. You don’t have to be silly about it.” She laughed. She began taking paper plates from the basket: held one up and flourished it ruefully. “These really ought to be very fine china,” she said. “I’ve decided that we’re celebrating.”

“If those had been china, I’d never have got here with the basket.”

She produced a large brown paper bag and drew a pretty baked hen from it. “Volla!” And there was wine too, a California white wine in a green bottle with a red foil wrapping over the top. And a mixed salad tied up in a little plastic bag. “The plates are just for the salad, anyway. You’ll have to be a child of nature and eat the chicken with your own crude hands. And look: I bought some ready-made dressing.” She held up a small bottle and began shaking it furiously.

He had been staring at her, awestruck. “Where did you get all this stuff? The chicken and everything...What is it we’re supposed to be celebrating?”

“There’s a little old restaurant in the town. They were just delighted to sell me a nice baked chicken. See—while you were mooning around the house all morning I kept myself busy, planning and preparing these nice things for us. Everything just to make you happy.”

He sighed. “And what is it we’re celebrating?”

“Our vacation...Or just being here in this good cool spot by the water. Or anything. Why not?”

“Mmnh.” Descending tone of regret. He felt that he had so much yet to do that even to be happy for the opportunity would be in some way to harm it, to jinx the chance for finishing.

“Anything, we’re celebrating anything you like. *Remnant Pagan Forces in American Puritanism.*”

“A bit prematurely, perhaps.” He cut his words short, isolated each of them with brief pauses. He couldn’t help it.

She pouted. “Now please don’t be a grouch. If you begin now, you’ll just be a grouch all summer and neither of us will have a good time, and you won’t get any more work done than if you’d been cheerful.”

“Sorry,” he said. But still the word was clipped.

“Look now...” She leaned carefully from her kneeling position, carefully across the spread

tablecloth and pulled his ear lobe. "Eat. Drink. Enjoy. Relax. Nothing bad has happened, and nothing bad is going to happen....And look what I got for you for after lunch." She fumbled in the basket for moment and took out a fat masculine cigar. "If you don't like it, I'll strangle you," she said. "It was the most expensive one they had."

Finally he relented, or at least his body did; he threw himself back on the grass and laughed. Sunlight spotted his chest and face, spots like shiny yellow eyes.

She was laughing too, a liquid twittering, but suddenly stopped. "I hope you're not laughing at me," she said. She blinked her eyes wide.

He only laughed the harder, laughing at both of them, laughing most of all at the hard core of stodginess in himself that he was afraid of. Unresting shadows poured down his throat, leaf shadows twinkled on his face.

"Oh, you *are*." She was going to become angry. She looked about for something to throw at his convulsed thin chest.

"I'm not laughing at you." He lifted his hand, smiled at her. "No, really, I'm not....But you're too much for me. You're simply too much."

"Yes, that's right. You're a happy child of nature. Simple. Pure. You can't understand my sophisticated complexity." She dumped salad from the moist plastic bag onto a paper plate. "Here, nature boy, eat....You're an animal."

"In a lot of ways, that's true," he said, his voice taking an unconsciously serious edge. "I am simple, and you are pretty sophisticated. Anyway, you understand both of us better than I understand myself."

She took the wine bottle, peeled away the foil, unscrewed the top and poured. "Here," she said. "Drink this down and shut up. You'll give me a headache with all that psychological talk."

He hushed and they ate in silence. He kept looking at her, at her cool blond hair so spattered with light and shadow, at the way she moved her hands so freely, at the whiteness of her throat. So pretty she was, small and womanly, clear-eyed; it was a catch in his breathing. Her emotions were so mobile—she felt and responded to the slightest movement of things about her immediately and without hindrance—that he often forgot the chromium-bright hard mind which shone in the center. She was, after all, possessed of a nice intellect, superior perhaps to his own. In the core of his throat he breathed a wistful sigh, still looking. She colored slightly under his fixed gaze; she had misinterpreted it. Ho-ho-ho: so that was the drift of the breeze, was it? Her careful picnic was really a prelude to the unaccustomed joy of making love in the open air. "In sight of God and everybody." He leaned back and got out his handkerchief and wiped at his fingers all runny with the juices of the bird. He smiled slight dark smile.

She moved again, looked away; grew fretful under his stare. "Well, what is it then?" she said. "Do you see something you haven't seen before?"

He grinned, picked up the waxed paper cup and held it toward her, "Let's have another drink."

She mimed drawing away. "I don't know," she said. "Maybe you've had enough already. Maybe too much. You've already got staring drunk." She poured the cup full.

"That's the way, baby," he said. "Lay it on me."

She put down the bottle and flung a chicken bone at him. He sprang at her—the motion exaggerated, sudden—caught her shoulder and tumbled her over. She almost wiggled loose, but he caught her forearm and held her. She tugged as hard as she could; her face was hot and scarlet. They rolled wildly over and over in the grasses and tablecloth. Finally she got his shoulder under a pink-clad knee and held him pinned fast on one side. Her voice took a hoarse false edge. "You idiot."

“Who, me?” He lay still. He touched her breast gently with his forefinger; held it cupped. “Yes, yes indeed,” he said.

“You idiot,” she said. The hard edge had melted off her voice.

He felt soft and lazy, murmuring, “Yes, yes indeed.”

Her hair had come undone; a twig and a few blades of grass were caught in the bright net of it. She loomed above him, as eminent as if she leaned out of the sky. She seemed yielding and fiercely happy. Caught in the top limbs of the undergrowth behind her was a red round flicker he had first too to be a balloon. It bobbed, disappeared.

“Stop a minute,” he said. He clasped the back of her hand, squeezed it firmly. “Wait...Let me up.”

She got off and sat, clasping her knees with her forearms. He rose and the little fat man stepped out of the alder thicket. His face was like a balloon, red as catsup from wind and sun, and his grimy grin was so fixed it might have been painted. Yellowish whisker stubble was smeared on his chin and neck. He came forward in a sort of rolling slouch, his hands balled, stuffed into the pockets of his overalls. Under the overalls he wore no shirt and the fat on his chest moved with a greasy undulation as he breathed; one nipple was not covered by the bib of the overalls and it shone, obese; it was like the breast of a girl just come to puberty. Though he wore no shirt he wore a hat, a misshapen black felt object which looked as if it had been kicked a countless number of times. He must have been in his late fifties.

“Who are you?” Peter asked. Thin and ragged query.

“Well,” he said. “I’m Ed Morgan. I live a little ways back over yonder.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder pointing north. “I was just kind of follerin’ along the creek here. I’ve got me some muskrat traps strung out along the creek, and I was just checking up on them. Course it’s a little late the day, but I been busy all morning.”

He didn’t ask the question he wanted to, but the first one that came to his mind. “Why is it late in the day?”

The fat man gave him a wide ingenuous stare. “Why,” he said, “a man ought to get down to his traps first thing in the morning. A muskrat’ll just chew off his foot and get away. Or even if he is good and drowned might be an old mongrel dog’ll come along and carry him off. I ought to get down here real early, but like I said I been busy this morning.”

“Who gave you permission to trap along here?” In the fat man’s manner there was a careless oil-geniety, an attitude of unmovable self-possession, which irked Peter, made the muscles along his shoulder blades feel as if they might begin to twitch. He gave his question a flat tone.

“Well now, I guess nobody did,” he said. “I never have thought about that. I just always have set out my traps here. My daddy did, and I reckon his daddy before him. Tell the truth, I was just getting ready to ask you folks what you was doing here. And then I thought maybe I better not.” The dingy grin never left his face, not even when he jerked his head aside to loose a spate of tobacco.

Without moving his body he drew himself up stiffly. “I’m Peter Leland,” he said. “I own this farm.”

For what seemed a long time the old man just looked at him. “Well, I declare,” he said finally. “You must be Miz Annie’s grandbaby. I don’t know how many times I’ve heard her tell all about you. She set a lot of store by you, you being a preacher and all. Law, she was just as proud of you as a peacock. I don’t believe there was ever what you’d call a whole lot of preachers in the Leland family.”

He felt the fat man’s eyes gauging him, measuring his weight, his probable worth. He would probably look at his caught muskrats in the same way. Peter felt nettled to the point of exasperation.

“Am I to understand that you live on this farm?”

“Well, honey, I reckon so. Unless you was to take a notion to put me off. As far as I ever heard tell of, us Morgans has always lived right here on the Leland farm, and even before that, back when it was the old Jimson place. And no telling how long before that, no telling how long we might’ve been here.”

His grin broadened slightly, and Peter had the impression that in the measuring of himself he had been found lacking. Not a pleasant impression. He let the muscles of his forearms relax and found, surprised, that since the little man had come he had been stifling the impulse to strike him in the face. This fat old man’s assurance bordered upon, without trespassing into, cockiness. Peter sharply resented being called honey.

“No one told me there was a tenant family on the farm. Mr. Phelps didn’t say a word about it.” Mr. Phelps was the lawyer who had made the title arrangements, had done all the legal work.

Morgan lifted his hat, scratched the back of his head. Atop his head was a perfectly circular bald spot, the size and color of the crown of a large toadstool. “Well I declare I don’t know,” he said. “I guess maybe we been here so long now that folks just takes us for granted. All I know’s we been here a long time.” His gaze shifted momentarily. “Is that your pretty little wife?”

Sheila still sat on the grass, her knees caught to her chest. Again her face reddened slightly. She gave Morgan a short jerky nod.

“Yes, this is Mrs. Leland,” Peter said. He was unwilling to say it; he felt somehow as if he were giving away an advantage.

“She sure is a pretty little thing,” he said. “I reckon she’s about the prettiest Leland woman I ever seen.”

She pulled a weed, flung it down again, a gesture of overt annoyance.

He sharpened his tone, cut through the thread of this subject. “Where do you live then? I suppose you have a house on the farm.” He felt that the brunt of her annoyance fell upon him rather than upon Morgan, and this exasperated him; it was unfair.

Again the old man jerked his thumb over his flaccid shoulder. “Just right up yonder, across the creek. You could see it from here if it wasn’t for this here thicket. You want to come on over, I’ll take you around. It ain’t much, but it’s what we’re used to, what we’ve always had.”

“I think maybe I’d better,” Peter said. “I’d better see what I’ve got into.” He turned to her. “Do you want to come along, sweetheart?”

She let drop another weed stem from her fingers. “Not this time,” she said. She rose and brushed off her slacks with ostentatious care. “I’ll go back to the house. There’s so much work I have to do.”

“I’ll be along shortly,” he said, turning from her regretfully. Morgan had already started through the underbrush, parting the branches carelessly before him, letting them slap back.

Sheila began to gather the debris of the meal, piling everything into the basket. There was still a quarter bottle of wine. She screwed the cap more tightly, looking at the bottle with an almost sorrowful expression.

He followed along clumsily in Morgan’s wake. The grass was strident with insects and an occasional saw brier clawed at his trousers legs. Once he almost tripped because the earth around the mouth of a muskrat hole crumbled under his foot. A very narrow footlog lay across the stream; the top of it was chipped flat, bore the marks of the hatchet, but worn smooth. Morgan crossed before him, his hands nonchalantly in his pockets, but Peter had to go gingerly, holding out his arms to balance himself. Once through the thicket on the other side of the creek, they could see Morgan’s house. It was a low weather-stained cabin, nudged into the side of the hill so that while the east end of the house sat

on the ground, the wall and the little porch on the west side were stilted up by six long crooked locust logs. There was a tin roof which didn't shine but seemed to waver, to metamorphose slightly, in the sunny heat. Few windows and dark, and a stringy wisp of smoke from the squat chimney. In a corner of the yard of hard-packed dirt below the house sat a darkened outhouse.

"There it is yonder," Morgan said. "I reckon you can tell it ain't much, but it's what we're used to. It'll do for us, I guess."

Before them lay what must once have been a fairly rich field of alfalfa; now it was spotted with big patches of Queen Anne's lace and ragweed, and the alfalfa looked yellow and sickly, its life eaten away at by the dodder parasite. Morgan waded through it cheerfully, obviously complacent about the condition of the crop, and Peter kept as much as possible in the fat man's footsteps. He felt that he didn't know what he might step into in that diseased field.

They went over the slack rusty barbed wire that enclosed the yard and went around the house to the low back stoop. There was a familiar kitchen clatter inside, but when Morgan stepped up on the wide slick boards all noise from inside ceased suddenly. He turned around, grinning still and even more broadly than before. "Come on in," he said. "We're just folks here."

He entered. At first he couldn't breathe. The air was hot and viscous; it seemed to cling to his hair and his skin. The black wood range was fired and three or four kettles and pans sat on it, steaming away industriously. The ceiling was low, spotted with grease, and all the heat lay like a blanket about his head. The floor was bare, laid with cracked boards, and through the spaces between them he could see the ground beneath the house. There was a small uncertain-looking table before the window on his right, and from the oilcloth which covered it large patches of the red-and-white pattern were rubbed away, showing a dull clay color. From the ceiling hung two streamers of brown flypaper which seemed to be perfectly useless; the snot-sized creatures crawled about everywhere; in an instant his hands and arms were covered with them. And through the steamy smell of whatever unimaginable sort of meal was cooking, the real odor of the house came: not sharp but heavy, a heated odor, oily, distinctly bearing in it something fishlike, sweetly bad-smelling; he had the quick impression of dark vegetation of immense luxuriance blooming up and momentarily rotting away; it was the smell of rank incredibly rich semen.

By the black range stood a woman who looked older than Morgan, her hair yellowish white, raddled here and there with gray streaks. She was huge, fatter even than Morgan, her breadth was at least half the length of the stove. She bulged impossibly in her old printed cotton dress and he shuddered inwardly at the thought of her finally bulging out of it, standing before him naked. In proportion to her great torso her arms and legs were very short and in tending her cooking she made slow short motions; she used her limbs no more than she had to, as if these were more or less irrelevant appendages. What was obviously important was the great fatness of her breasts, her belly, her thighs. She gave Peter a slow but only cursory look, turned her unmoved, unmoving gaze to Morgan. When Morgan introduced Peter she didn't acknowledge him by so much as a nod.

"This here's my wife Ina," Morgan said. "And this here's my daughter Mina. She's the only one of our young'uns that's left with us now. The rest has all gone off different places, they couldn't find nothing to stay around here for, I guess. But Mina's stayed on with the old folks."

She sat at the weak-looking table. He couldn't guess her age, maybe fourteen or fifteen or sixteen. She sat playing with a couple of sticky strands of hair as black as onyx. She leaned back in a little creaky wooden chair and gave him a bald stark gaze. He felt enveloped in the stare, which was not a stare but simply an act of the eyes remaining still, those eyes which seemed as large as eggs, so gray they were almost white, reflecting, almost absolutely still. His skin had prickled at first, he had

thought she had no nose, it was so small and flat, stretched on her face as smooth as wax. Leaned back in the chair that way, her body, flat and square, seemed as complacent as stone, all filled with calm waiting; this was her whole attitude. She played listlessly with her hair, looking at him. It was impossible. That body so stubby and that face so flatly ugly—something undeniably fishlike about it—and still, still it exercised upon him immediately an attraction, the fascination he might have in watching a snake uncoil itself lazily and curl along the ground. He couldn't believe it; maybe it was the crazy musky odor of the house, confusing all his impressions, his senses. He had to use his whole will to take his eyes off her.

“This here's Pete Leland,” Morgan said. “He's the one that owns the place now, the whole farm. He's Miz Annie's grandson, and he's a preacher. He's the only Leland I ever heard of that was a preacher.”

Mina gave a soft slow nod, still looking at him, and it was directly to him that she spoke. “You're awful good-looking,” she said. “You're so good-looking I could just eat you up. I bet I could just eat you up.” Her voice was soft and thick as cotton.

Morgan sniggered. “Don't pay her no mind,” he said. “If you pay her any mind she'll drive you crazy, I swear she will.”

But it had started and the whole while he walked back to the big brick house—going not the way he came, but following the winding red dirt road along the hillside—her flat dark face hung like a warning lantern in his mind. He couldn't unthink her image.

Peter Leland would have admitted himself that his choice of the ministry as profession had risen hazily from his soiled smoky imagination. He would have admitted that he saw the Christian religion as a singularly uncheerful endeavor, and this he would have admitted as a fault in himself, one he felt powerless to remedy. It was simply that his black imagination forced him to take everything all too seriously, and exercised a partially debilitating influence on his work. He had, for instance, no very consoling bedside manner, and his hospital visits with members of his congregation turned out invariably to be extremely awkward affairs. And a few of his sermons might vie with some of Jonathan Edwards' for gloominess, though Peter lacked that zealous fire. One symptom of his racked fancy showed itself in his fantasies about his father, who had died when Peter was so young that he could not at all remember him. His father had died when the family lived here on the farm, and Peter's mother had taken him away then to live with her and her parents in the eastern part of the state. Her family was pretty well off financially—her father owned an important electrical-appliance distributorship—and they were able to send Peter to the single large privately endowed university in the state. During his freshman year there his mother had died. Peter was shocked, grieved deeply, but he was not surprised. His mother had been long waning; she had always been a pale silent little woman, and this white quietude he had only half-consciously attributed to her grieving for his dead father. This was the one subject, at any rate, upon which she was completely reticent. The remarks of other members of her family, that before her marriage she had been very gay and lively, he hardly credited; his observation wouldn't bear them out. When he had asked her how his father had died she had absolutely refused to speak of it, had only hinted that there was a terrifying disease of some sort. So that in his dark mid-adolescence he had begun to imagine that this disease was probably hereditary, and had begun to wonder when it might overtake him also. He would imagine it as sudden and painlessly fatal, a black stifling area of wool dropped over him abruptly; or he would think of it as gradual and excruciating, a blob of soft metal dissolving in acid. And even when his adolescence was gratefully behind him he had never lost completely a secret vague conviction that his days were limited, that a deep bitter end awaited him at some random juncture of his life. This notion accounted in part for his mordant turn of mind, but still it was mainly a symptom: his whole nature was self-minatory.

And it was mostly because of this that he had become an active minister, for he would have enjoyed much more, and would have been more at ease in, a purely scholarly life. He would have much preferred the examination of Greek manuscripts and of his own looming conscience to the responsibility—he felt it a heavy responsibility—for the welfare of the souls of his little congregation of the First Methodist Church of Afton, North Carolina. His mind wouldn't let him rest in the leather-bound study. When he considered this inviting possibility a voice warning him that he was choosing a career of self-indulgence spoke in his head, and this voice he heeded without too regretful a delay. In his senior year and then during his years in the seminary he had armed himself the best he knew how to meet the world as an active, even a militant, Christian minister. That he had strange ideas about how to prepare himself to encounter the world was a consequence of his sheltered life. His mother had been understandably protective of him, and her family, curiously, had maintained her attitude. It was as if they shared some of his own premonition about his fate. They had been content somehow—they had seemed relieved—with his choice of profession and had willingly seen him through the seminary.

And despite the unworldliness of his younger life he had made a competent though hardly a thunderously successful minister. Perhaps it was the continued awareness of his own frailty which made him tolerant of the frailties of others, but his admonishment of the peccadilloes of his

congregation—and in the town of Afton they were only peccadilloes—was couched in gentle terms gravely humorous. But the scholar in him *would* come out. A lecture concerning a historical problem of theology was sometimes offered them for a sermon; and they on their side were tolerant also. Perhaps they were pleased finally at having a preacher with brains, for their tolerance actually came to something more than that. Perhaps they even interpreted the intent of these scholarly discourses correctly, as gestures he wanted to make to indicate that even on the other side, out of the competitive fight which comprised the world they knew, it wasn't easy; that a faith doesn't drop as the gentle rain from heaven but is formed in continual intellectual and spiritual agony. Also it was simple enough to give a conventional sermonizing point to such discourse, for every genuine moral problem does ultimately impinge on a man's daily life.

It was from one of his sermons, in fact, that his present project had emerged. Although the problem had at first been no more than a pretext for a sermon, when he had later pondered his own words the subject had seized him, and as much time as he could in conscience squeeze from his duties he devoted to a sketchy research. In time he decided to write a monograph, perhaps a book. He allowed himself a couple of months' vacation—the sudden inheriting of the farm was an almost unbelievable slice of luck—and from their inconsiderable savings account he had allowed himself three thousand dollars, even though he wasn't quite certain how all that money was to be utilized. “Three thousand is an outside figure,” he told Sheila. For the sermon he had taken his texts from the First Book of Samuel, “And when they arose early on the morrow morning, behold, Dagon was fallen upon his face to the ground before the ark of the Lord; and the head of Dagon and both the palms of his hands were cut off upon the threshold; only the stump of Dagon was left to him. Therefore neither the priests of Dagon, nor any that come into Dagon's house, tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod unto this day.” Then he reminded them of Samson, delivered into the hands of the Philistines by the bitch Delilah. “Then the lords of the Philistines gathered them together for to offer a great sacrifice unto Dagon their god, and to rejoice: for they said, Our god hath delivered Samson our enemy into our hand.” It was that temple of Dagon, he said, which Samson had destroyed with his hands, pulling it down with its pillars. Peter, seeming even taller in his perpendicular robe, pale and angular leaning forward in the pulpit, had informed his not very attentive audience that Dagon was simply one more of the pagan fertility deities; in Phoenicia his name was connected with the word *dagan*, meaning “corn,” though this name finally derived from a Semitic root meaning “fish.” He recalled the description by Milton in the catalogue of fallen angels:

Next came one

Who mourn'd in earnest, when the Captive Ark
Maim'd his brute Image, head and hands lopt off
In his own Temple, on the grunsel edge,
Where he fell flat, and sham'd his Worshipers:
Dagon his Name, Sea Monster, upward Man
And downward Fish.

He had noted how the figure of Dagon had attached to the sensibilities of Renaissance historians, his story being told by Selden, Sandys, Purchas, Ross, and by Sir Walter Raleigh in his history of the world. The congregation shifted from ham to ham, resentfully itchy under this barrage of verse and unfamiliar names. But Peter had continued to read from his notes, saying that the human imagination had been hard put to it to let go this crippled fertility figure. The worship of Dagon had even traveled

to America. He read to them from William Bradford's history of the Plymouth colony the story of Mount Wollaston:

After this they fell to great licentiousness and led a dissolute life, pouring out themselves into all profaneness. And Morton became Lord of Misrule, and maintained (as it were) a School of Atheism. And after they had got some goods into their hands, and got much by trading with the Indians, they spent it as vainly in quaffing and drinking, both wine and strong waters in great excess. ... They also set up a maypole, drinking and dancing about it many days together, inviting the Indian women for their consorts, dancing and frisking together like so many fairies, or furies, rather; and worse practices. As if they had anew revived and celebrated the feasts of the Roman goddess Flora, or the beastly practices of the mad Bacchanalians. Morton likewise, to show his poetry composed sundry rhymes and verses, some tending to lasciviousness, and others to the detraction and scandal of some persons, which he affixed to this idle or idol maypole. They changed also the name of their place, and instead of calling it Mount Wollaston they call it Merry-mount, as if this jollity would have lasted ever. But this continued not long, for after Morton was sent for England... shortly after came over the worthy gentleman Mr. John Endecott, who brought over a patent under the broad seal for the government of Massachusetts. Who, visiting those parts, caused that maypole to be cut down and rebuked them for their profaneness and admonished them to look there should be better walking. So they or others now changed the name of their place again and called it Mount Dagon.

Here he had closed his notes and in the few minutes remaining he preached in earnest. The worship of Dagon, he said, still persisted in America. The characteristics which had made this god attractive to men were clearly evident in the society that encircled them. Didn't the Dagon notion of fertility dominate? Frenzied, incessant, unreasoning sexual activity was invited on all sides; every entertainment, even the serious entertainment, the arts, seemed to suppose this activity as basis. This blind sexual Bacchanalia was inevitably linked to money—one had only to think of the omnipresent advertisements, with all those girls who alarmed the eye. A mere single example. And wasn't the power of money finally dependent upon the continued proliferation of product after product, dead objects produced without any thought given to their uses? Weren't these mostly objects without any truly justifiable need? Didn't the whole of American commercial culture exhibit this endless irrational productivity, clear analogue to sexual orgy? And yet productivity without regard to eventual need was, as Peter maintained, actually unproductivity, it was really a kind of impotence. This was the paradox which the figure of Dagon contained. To worship Dagon was to worship a maimed, a mutilated god, a god to whom "only the stump" remained. Dagon had lost both head and hands, only his loins remained; and below the waist he was fish, most unthinking of animals. Dagon was symbol both of fertility and infertility; he represented the fault in mankind to act without reflecting, to do without knowing why, to go, without knowing where. Was it simply coincidence that Merry-mount had changed its name to Mount Dagon after Endicott had chopped down the maypole? Or might it not be a continuation of the worship of crippled sexuality? The ruined Dagon and the chopped maypole mirrored each other too clearly, didn't they? It couldn't be coincidence. But even if these manifestations were independent they still emerged from that human sickness, the worship of uncaring physical discharge, onanism, impotence, nihilism hurtling at a superspeed. It was this unconscious regard that he wished them to root from their hearts. He insisted that a Christian life was of necessity a reflective life, that useless movement, unresting expenditure of substance and spirit,

was alien to it. He exhorted them to continual vigilance. He admitted that it wasn't an easy thing he asked.

Here he ended, and was aware for the first time of the weighty boredom his words had created.

His congregation sat before him listless as sun-bleached stones. He looked at them tiredly, then looked at Sheila sitting before him in her encouraging front pew. Her yellow hair shone bright, falling over the shoulders of her dark blue dress. She grinned. Her torso rose and fell with the burden of a heavy mock sigh. With the back of her hand she wiped away imaginary sweat from her forehead. ... Anger flooded him momentarily. If it was a dull sermon for her, tough luck. It had been for him an earnest try, he had said something that he honestly cared about. His wife, for God's sake, ought to stand with him... But the effort was too much after the long sermon and his anger evaporated. He was merely annoyed and tired. He answered her with a resigned shrug and announced the final hymn. "Let us sing number 124. 'Thou hidden love of God,'" he said. "Let us please sing only the first and last verses." He reckoned on a long afternoon of relentless teasing—half-serious—from his bright pretty wife.

And in some ways he dreaded it. As an intellectual opponent she was formidable, and once she had caught him in an awkward position she wouldn't let up. This was an attitude of hers he couldn't help resenting at times, even though he recognized that it was an attitude which his own nature needed for any kind of wholesome balance. If he had been deliberately shopping for temperaments, he couldn't have got better than Sheila's—wry, tough, at times baldly sarcastic—as an antidote for his own pessimistic nature, which was too often unwillingly pompous. Marriage with a gloomier, less sceptical nature would surely have been consummated in a suicide pact. Sheila simply refused to take him as seriously as he took himself. "All that nonsense..." He couldn't help, in a way, envying her her full generosity of movement and feeling; but he was simply not like that, he was too knotted, ponderous. She would twit him then, he took it as one takes a too-acid medicine: *it tastes so bitter, it must do some good*. He would like to have the barrier broken, that wall between him and the ordinariness of life. This he genuinely wanted, to prank and disport in the tepid waters of dailiness, of pettiness, of the trivia which comprise existences. He would like to spend hours dawdling over his morning coffee, or choosing which socks to buy or which greeting card to send. But he was as he was not even Sheila could break that down. An enervating sense of guilt drove him to study, to learn, to preach, to visit, to harass, to perform good works. He could not answer the question whether works properly good could proceed from an exaggerated feeling of guilt; neither could he suppress the question.

But there was Sheila. She had married him as soon as he was out of seminary, though their contact in those four years had been through letters almost entirely. The courtship and actual wooing had gone on before, when he was at the university where she was a student. She had lasted out the four-year wait easily enough, rather gaily; and he couldn't help wondering if her nature didn't demand of him as much as his demanded hers. His faults were the faults of solidity, and perhaps the solidity was what she needed to attach to. It might be all too easy for her free humor to fog away into frivolity. A comforting thought, her need for him; made him feel less parasitic.... She was a fine girl, would be a fine mother, but though they had been married four years—he was now thirty-two—there were no children. The childlessness bothered Peter; he felt it almost as a debt he owed and which he might be called upon to pay at any time, any moment when he would be unprepared. Simply one more instance of the way his impending fate would catch him up helpless.

"Why didn't you just read us the whole encyclopedia?" she asked. She dished out pertly the cool Sunday luncheon salad. "That really would have been entertaining."

“I’m not so sure you ought to come to church to be entertained,” he said.

“Wow. You can say that again.”

“Maybe you should come with a reasonable hope for edification.”

She peeped at him tartly. “Do you know what hell is? It’s edification without entertainment. Big mountains of boredom.”

His anger wouldn’t come back, he felt empty. “Oh, come on. It wasn’t that bad, was it?”

“I don’t know. How bad did you want it to be?”

“I didn’t want it to be bad at all. Matter of fact, I thought it was pretty interesting myself. Sort of sexy.”

“That’s because it’s an idea you found. That’s the reason you like it. I doubt if any of it applies much to people now. It all seemed so...historical. So distant.”

“But that’s the point. I don’t think it is. Didn’t you listen to the last part? I was trying to show the pertinence...”

“Yes, yes. I heard. But I don’t like it.”

She got up abruptly and left the table. He felt morose and dissatisfied. But she came back in a few minutes and poured the coffee.

“Hurry up and drink that down. I want to find out firsthand all this crazy wild endless American sex you keep talking about.”

The work wasn't coming along so easily. The idea still held him, it still seemed a valid and terrifying notion, but so far he hadn't unpacked his notes and books and papers. He would sleep late in the mornings, a habit alien to him, would lie tossing in the tall dark bed in the upstairs bedroom they had chosen. Dreams tortured him, jerking him awake sweating and with a dusty acrid taste in his mouth, but he was unable to remember these dreams; he could recall only dark queer impressions, odors. Then when he rose and had eaten—for some reason his appetite had increased; he who had never really cared for food seemed now always hungry—he wandered about the house, not speaking much, and in the afternoons he would take long walks over the farm, usually alone. Now and then, with nothing he could perceive to trigger it, the queer face of Mina would pop into his mind, and always a her image his stomach felt queasy, his skin prickly. He complained a great deal.

"Sure enough," Sheila said, "I've never seen you so restless."

"I just can't get started."

"I wouldn't worry about it so much. I've always heard that people who write things have to go a long time sometimes when they can't write. Professional writers and people, I mean."

"This isn't like that." He wished that he didn't sound so abrupt.

She shrugged. "I wouldn't worry about it too much. You deserve a nice vacation, anyway."

"Not till I've really done something."

The house managed to occupy much of his attention. It was large enough to explore: sixteen rooms in all, not counting the many closets and areaways and the tall attic. Standing in a room on another floor and at the opposite end of the building he could sense Sheila's movements; that was how alive the house was for him. The pleasure he took in poking about was rather a morose pleasure—like so many of his pleasures. He opened trunks and drawers and stood contemplating the masses of stiff gauzy dresses and dark woolen shirts and trousers. Uncomfortable as the clothing looked he had sometimes to suppress the impulse to dress himself in it, to try to find out, like a child, exactly how his grandparents had felt in it. Now it seemed to him, as he became more closely acquainted with the house, that all his surmises about his grandparents had been only partially correct, that he had missed something central, something essential about them that he could discover in himself if only he looked hard enough. It was not all just soured Puritanism, it was something even darker, if that were possible. One trunk was almost filled with correspondence and receive Christmas cards and beneath these, lying loose, about three dozen shotgun shells of varying gauges; but there was no gun in the house. In one drawer was a small tin box half filled with dynamite caps. The correspondence was impossible. Very few of the letters were signed and the writing was always illegible, always bordering upon illiteracy. "Our if i ca'nt pay that much Why then i will exspect just what You had oferd the 1st time...my lege rites ech time...the religiun you clame to profess." There were words so entirely illegible they looked almost like transliterations from some exotic tongue, ancient Pnakotic perhaps: "Nephreu," "Yogg Sothoth," "Ka nai Hadoth," "Cthulhu." The effort he spent in trying to decipher these letters tired him and he sometimes got headaches staring at the dimmed writing in bad light. He felt that the letters were obscurely responsible for the bad dreams that came on him late in the mornings. The letters coated his hands with a dust that he had almost to scrape off.

Sheila regarded his explorations with her usual amused tolerance, but this attitude of hers which he had always so needed now rankled him. He felt childish enough on his own without her rubbing it in. She found things enough to do. She kept herself busy with the house; keeping clean just the four or five rooms that they used was almost a day-long task. And she was making a dress, using the old foot

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