

HUMOR



William Faulkner

(1897-1962)

from "Red Leaves" (1930)

The two Indians crossed the plantation toward the slave quarters. Neat with whitewash, of baked soft brick, the two rows of houses in which lived the slaves belonging to the clan, faced one another across the mild shade of the lane marked and scored with naked feet and with a few homemade toys mute in the dust. There was no sign of life.

"I know what we will find," the first Indian said.

"What we will not find," the second said. Although it was noon, the lane was vacant, the doors of the cabins empty and quiet; no cooking smoke rose from any of the chinked and plastered chimneys.

"Yes. It happened like this when the father of him who is now the Man died."

"You mean, of him who was the Man."

"Yao."

The first Indian's name was Three Basket. He was perhaps sixty. They were both squat men, a little solid, burgherlike; paunchy, with big heads, big, broad, dust-colored faces of a certain blurred serenity like carved heads on a ruined wall in Siam or Sumatra, looming out of a mist. The sun had done it, the violent sun, the violent shade. Their hair looked like sedge grass on burnt-over land. Clamped through one ear Three Basket wore an enameled snuffbox.

"I have said all the time that this is not the good way. In the old days there were no quarters, no Negroes. A man's time was his own then. He had time. Now he must spend most of it finding work for them who prefer sweating to do."

"They are like horses and dogs."

"They are like nothing in this sensible world. Nothing contents them save sweat. They are worse than the white people."

"It is not as though the Man himself had to find work for them to do."

"You said it. I do not like slavery. It is not the good way. In the old days, there was the good way. But not now."

"You do not remember the old way either."

"I have listened to them who do. And I have tried this way. Man was not made to sweat."

"That's so. See what it has done to their flesh."

"Yes. Black. It has a bitter taste, too."

"You have eaten of it?"

"Once. I was young then, and more hardy in the appetite than now. Now it is different with me."

"Yes. They are too valuable to eat now."

"There is a bitter taste to the flesh which I do not like."

"They are too valuable to eat, anyway, when the white men will give horses for them."

They entered the lane. The mute, meager toys—the fetish-shaped objects made of wood and rags and feathers—lay in the dust about the patinaed doorsteps, among bones and broken gourd dishes. But there was no sound from any cabin, no face in any door; had not been since yesterday, when Issetibbeha died. But they already knew what they would find.

It was the central cabin, a house a little larger than the others, where at certain phases of the moon the Negroes would gather to begin their ceremonies before removing after nightfall to the creek bottom, where they kept the drums. In this room they kept the minor accessories, the cryptic ornaments, the ceremonial records which consisted of sticks daubed with red clay in symbols. It had a hearth in the center of the floor, beneath a hole in the roof, with a few cold wood ashes and a suspended iron pot. The window shutters were closed; when the two Indians entered, after the abashless sunlight they could distinguish nothing with the eyes save a movement, shadow, out of which eyeballs rolled, so that the place appeared to be full of Negroes. The two Indians stood in the door.

"Yao," Basket said. "I said this is not the good way."

"I don't think I want to be here," the second said.

"That is black man's fear which you smell. It does not smell as ours does."

"I don't think I want to be here."

"Your fear has an odor too."

"Maybe it is Issetibbeha which we smell."

"Yao. He knows. He knows what we will find here. He knew when he died what we should find here today." Out of the rank twilight of the room the eyes, the smell, of Negroes roiled about them. "I am Three Basket, whom you know," Basket said into the room. "We are come from the Man. He whom we seek is gone?" The Negroes said nothing. The smell of them, of their bodies, seemed to ebb and flux in the still hot air. They seemed to be musing as one upon something remote, inscrutable. They were like a single octopus. They were like the roots of a huge tree uncovered, the earth broken momentarily upon the writhen, thick, fetid tangle of its lightness and outraged life. "Come," Basket said. "You know our errand. Is he whom we seek gone?"

"They are thinking something," the second said. "I do not want to be here."

"They are knowing something," Basket said.

"They are hiding him, you think?"

"No. He is gone. He has been gone since last night. It happened like this before, when the grandfather of him who is now the Man died. It took us three days to catch him. For three days Doom lay above the ground, saying, 'I see my horse and my dog. But I do not see my slave. What have you done with him that you will not permit me to lie quiet?'"

"They do not like to die."

"Yao. They cling. It makes trouble for us, always. A people without honor and without decorum. Always trouble."

"I do not like it here."

"Nor do I. But then, they are savages; they cannot be expected to regard usage. That is why I say that this way is a bad way."

"Yao. They cling. They would even rather work in the sun than to enter the earth with a chief. But he is gone."

The Negroes had said nothing, made no sound. The white eyeballs rolled, wild, subdued; the smell was rank, violent. "Yes, they fear," the second said. "What shall we do now?"

"Let us go and talk with the Man."

"Will Mocketubbe listen?"

"What can he do? He will not like to. But he is the Man now."

"Yao. He is the Man. He can wear the shoes with the red heels all the time now." They turned and went out. There was no door in the door frame. There were no doors in any of the cabins.

"He did that anyway," Basket said.

"Behind Issetibbeha's back. But now they are his shoes, since he is the Man."

“Yao. Issetibbeha did not like it. I have heard. I know that he said to Mocketubbe: ‘When you are the Man, the shoes will be yours. But until then, they are my shoes. But now Mocketubbe is the Man; he can wear them.’”

“Yao,” the second said. “He is the Man now. He used to wear the shoes behind Issetibbeha’s back, and it was not known if Issetibbeha knew this or not. And then Issetibbeha became dead, who was not old, and the shoes are Mocketubbe’s, since he is the Man now. What do you think of that?”

“I don’t think about it,” Basket said. “Do you?”

“No,” the second said.

“Good,” Basket said. “You are wise”....

When Doom died, Issetibbeha, his son, was nineteen. He became proprietor of the land and of the quintupled herd of blacks for which he had no use at all. Though the title of Man rested with him, there was a hierarchy of cousins and uncles who ruled the clan and who finally gathered in squatting conclave over the Negro question, squatting profoundly beneath the golden names above the doors of the steamboat.

“We cannot eat them,” one said.

“Why not?”

“There are too many of them.”

“That’s true,” a third said. “Once we started, we should have to eat them all. And that much flesh is not good for man.”

“Perhaps they will be like deer flesh. That cannot hurt you.”

“We might kill a few of them and not eat them,” Issetibbeha said.

They looked at him for a while. “What for?” one said.

“That is true,” a second said. “We cannot do that. They are too valuable; remember all the bother they have caused us, finding things for them to do. We must do as the white men do.”

“How is that?” Issetibbeha said.

“Raise more Negroes by clearing more land to make corn to feed them, then sell them. We clear the land and plant it with food and raise Negroes and sell them to the white men for money.”

“But what will we do with this money?” a third said.

They thought for a while.

“We will see,” the first said. They squatted, profound, grave.

“It means work,” the third said.

“Let the Negroes do it,” the first said.

“Yao. Let them. To sweat is bad. It is damp. It opens the pores.”

“And then the night air enters.”

“Yao. Let the Negroes do it. They appear to like sweating.”

So they cleared the land with the Negroes and planted grain....

“Yao. They are nothing but a trouble and a care.”

“Maybe it will not take three days.”

“They run far. Yao. We will smell this Man before he enters the earth. You watch and see if I am not right.”

They approached the house.

“He can wear the shoes now,” Berry said. “He can wear them now in man’s sight.”

“He cannot wear them for a while yet,” Basket said. Berry looked at him. “He will lead the hunt.”

“Mocketubbe?” Berry said. “Do you think he will? A man to whom even talking is travail?”

“What else can he do? It is his own father who will soon begin to smell.”

“That is true,” Berry said. “There is even yet a price he must pay for the shoes. Yao. He has truly bought them. What do you think?”

“What do you think?”

“What do you think?”

“I think nothing.”

“Nor do I. Issetibbeha will not need the shoes now. Let Mocketubbe have them”....

“This world is going to the dogs... It is being ruined by white men. We got along fine for years and years, before the white men foisted their Negroes upon us. In the old days the old men sat in the shade and ate stewed deer’s flesh and corn and smoked tobacco and talked of honor and grave affairs; now what do we do? Even the old wear themselves into the grave taking care of them that like sweating”....

At three years of age Mocketubbe had a broad, flat, Mongolian face that appeared to exist in a complete and unfathomable lethargy, until confronted by the slippers.... Mocketubbe was already diseased with flesh, with a pale, broad, inert face and dropsical hands and feet.... He was maybe an inch better than five feet tall, and he weighed two hundred and fifty pounds. He wore a broadcloth coat and no shirt, his round, smooth copper moon of belly swelling above the bottom piece of a suit of linen underwear. On his feet were the slippers with the red heels.... Mocketubbe had not moved. His eyes were closed; upon his supine monstrous shape there was a colossal inertia, something profoundly immobile, beyond and impervious to flesh. They watched his face, squatting.

“When thy father was newly the Man, this happened,” Basket said. “And it was Issetibbeha who brought back the slave to where his father waited to enter the earth.” Mocketubbe’s face had not moved, his eyes had not moved. After awhile Basket said, “Remove the shoes.

The stripling removed the shoes. Mocketubbe began to pant, his bare chest moving deep, as though he were rising from beyond his unfathomed flesh back into life, like up from the water, the sea. But his eyes had not opened yet.

Berry said, “He will lead the hunt.”

“Yao,” Basket said. “He is the Man. He will lead the hunt”....