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Shingles for the Lord

WILLIAM FAULKNER

PAP GOT UP a good hour before daylight and caught the mule and rid down to Killegrew's to borrow the froe and maul. He ought to been back with it in forty minutes. But the sun had rose and I had done milked and fed and was eating my breakfast when he got back, with the mule not only in a lather but right on the edge of the thumps too.

'Fox hunting,' he said. 'Fox hunting. A seventy-year-old man, with both feet and one knee, too, already in the grave, squatting all night on a hill and calling himself listening to a fox race that he couldn't even hear unless they had come right up onto the same log he was setting on and bayed into his ear trumpet. Give me my breakfast,' he told maw. 'Whitfield is standing there right this minute, straddle of that board tree with his watch in his hand.'

And he was. We rid on past the church, and there was not only Solon Quick's school-bus truck but Reverend Whitfield's old mare too. We tied the mule to a sapling and hung our dinner bucket on a limb, and with pap toting Killegrew's froe and maul and the wedges and me toting our ax, we went on to the board tree where Solon and Homer Bookwright, with their froes and mauls and axes and wedges, was setting on two up-ended cuts, and Whitfield was standing jest like pap said, in his boiled shirt and his black hat and pants and necktie, holding his watch in his hand. It was gold and in the morning sunlight it looked big as a full-growed squash.

'You're late,' he said.

So pap told again about how Old Man Killegrew had been off fox hunting all night, and nobody at home to lend him the froe but Mrs Killegrew and the cook. And naturally, the cook wasn't going to lend none of Killegrew's tools out, and Mrs Killegrew was worser deaf than even Killegrew. If you was to run in and tell her the house was afire, she would jest keep on rocking and say she thought so, too, unless she began to holler back to the cook to turn the dogs loose before you could even open your mouth.

'You could have gone yesterday and borrowed the froe,'

Whitfield said. 'You have known for a month now that you had promised this one day out of a whole summer toward putting a roof on the house of God.'

'We aint but two hours late,' pap said. 'I reckon the Lord will forgive it. He aint interested in time, nohow. He's interested in salvation.'

Whitfield never even waited for pap to finish. It looked to me like he even got taller, thundering down at pap like a cloud-burst. 'He aint interested in neither! Why should He be, when He owns them both? And why He should turn around for the poor, mizzling souls of men that cant even borrow tools in time to replace the shingles on His church, I dont know either. Maybe it's just because He made them. Maybe He just said to Himself: "I made them; I dont know why. But since I did, I Godfrey, I'll roll My sleeves up and drag them into glory whether they will or no!"'

But that wasn't here nor there either now, and I reckon he knowed it, jest like he knowed there wasn't going to be nothing a-tall here as long as he stayed. So he put the watch back into his pocket and motioned Solon and Homer up, and we all taken off our hats except him while he stood there with his face raised into the sun and his eyes shut and his eyebrows looking like a big iron-gray caterpillar lying along the edge of a cliff. 'Lord,' he said, 'make them good straight shingles to lay smooth, and let them split out easy; they're for You,' and opened his eyes and looked at us again, mostly at pap, and went and untied his mare and clumb up slow and stiff, like old men do, and rid away.

Pap put down the froe and maul and laid the three wedges in a neat row on the ground and taken up the ax.

'Well, men,' he said, 'let's get started. We're already late.'

'Me and Homer aint,' Solon said. 'We was here.' This time him and Homer didn't set on the cuts. They squatted on their heels. Then I seen that Homer was whittling on a stick. I hadn't noticed it before. 'I make it two hours and a little over,' Solon said. 'More or less.'

Pap was still about half stooped over, holding the ax. 'It's nigher one,' he said. 'But call it two for the sake of the argument. What about it?'

'What argument?' Homer said.

'All right,' pap said. 'Two hours then. What about it?'

'Which is three man-hour units a hour, multiplied by two hours,' Solon said. 'Or a total of six work units.' When the WPA first come to Yoknapatawpha County and started to giving out jobs and grub and mattresses, Solon went in to Jefferson to get on it. He would drive his school-bus truck the twenty-two miles in to town every morning and come back that night. He done that for almost a week before he found out he would not only have to sign his farm off into somebody else's name, he couldn't even own and run the school bus that he had built himself. So he come back that night and never went back no more, and since then hadn't nobody better mention WPA to him unless they aimed to fight, too, though every now and then he would turn up with something all figured down into work units like he done now. 'Six units short.'

'Four of which you and Homer could have already worked out while you was setting here waiting on me,' pap said.

'Except that we didn't,' Solon said. 'We promised Whitfield two units of twelve three-unit hours toward getting some new shingles on the church roof. We been here ever since sunup, waiting for the third unit to show up, so we could start. You dont seem to kept up with these modern ideas about work that's been flooding and uplifting the country in the last few years.'

'What modren ideas?' pap said. 'I didn't know there was but one idea about work—until it is done, it aint done, and when it is done, it is.'

Homer made another long, steady whittle on the stick. His knife was sharp as a razor.

Solon taken out his snuffbox and filled the top and tilted the snuff into his lip and offered the box to Homer, and Homer shaken his head, and Solon put the top back on the box and put the box back into his pocket.

'So,' pap said, 'jest because I had to wait two hours for a old seventy-year man to get back from fox hunting that never had no more business setting out in the woods all night than he would 'a' had setting all night in a highway juke joint, we all three have got to come back here tomorrow to finish them two hours that you and Homer——'

‘I aint,’ Solon said. ‘I dont know about Homer. I promised Whitfield one day. I was here at sunup to start it. When the sun goes down, I will consider I have done finished it.’

‘I see,’ pap said. ‘I see. It’s me that’s got to come back. By myself. I got to break into a full morning to make up them two hours that you and Homer spent resting. I got to spend two hours of the next day making up for the two hours of the day before that you and Homer never even worked.’

‘It’s going to more than jest break into a morning,’ Solon said. ‘It’s going to wreck it. There’s six units left over. Six one-man-hour units. Maybe you can work twice as fast as me and Homer put together and finish them in four hours, but I dont believe you can work three times as fast and finish in two.’

Pap was standing up now. He was breathing hard. We could hear him. ‘So,’ he said. ‘So.’ He swung the ax and druv the blade into one of the cuts and snatched it up onto its flat end, ready to split. ‘So I’m to be penalised a half a day of my own time, from my own work that’s waiting for me at home right this minute, to do six hours more work than the work you fellers lacked two hours of even doing a-tall, purely and simply because I am jest a average hard-working farmer trying to do the best he can, instead of a durn froe-owning millionaire named Quick or Bookwright.’

They went to work then, splitting the cuts into bolts and riving the bolts into shingles for Tull and Snopes and the others that had promised for tomorrow to start nailing onto the church roof when they finished pulling the old shingles off. They set flat on the ground in a kind of circle, with their legs spraddled out on either side of the propped-up bolt, Solon and Homer working light and easy and steady as two clocks ticking, but pap making every lick of hisn like he was killing a moccasin. If he had jest swung the maul half as fast as he swung it hard, he would have rove as many shingles as Solon and Homer together, swinging the maul up over his head and holding it there for what looked like a whole minute sometimes and then swinging it down onto the blade of the froe, and not only a shingle flying off every lick but the froe going on into the ground clean up to the helve eye, and pap setting there wrenching at it slow and steady and hard, like he jest wished it would try to hang on a root or a rock and stay there.

‘Here, here,’ Solon said. ‘If you dont watch out you wont have nothing to do neither during them six extra units tomorrow morning but rest.’

Pap never even looked up. ‘Get out of the way,’ he said. And Solon done it. If he hadn’t moved the water bucket, pap would have split it, too, right on top of the bolt, and this time the whole shingle went whirling past Solon’s shin jest like a scythe blade.

‘What you ought to do is to hire somebody to work out them extra overtime units,’ Solon said.

‘With what?’ Pap said. ‘I aint had no WPA experience in dickering over labor. Get out of the way.’

But Solon had already moved this time. Pap would have had to change his whole position or else made this one curve. So this one missed Solon, too, and pap set there wrenching the froe, slow and hard and steady, back out of the ground.

‘Maybe there’s something else besides cash you might be able to trade with,’ Solon said. ‘You might use that dog.’

That was when pap actually stopped. I didn’t know it myself then either, but I found it out a good long time before Solon did. Pap set there with the maul up over his head and the blade of the froe set against the block for the next lick, looking up at Solon. ‘The dog?’ he said.

It was a kind of mixed hound, with a little bird dog and some collie and maybe a considerable of almost anything else, but it would ease through the woods without no more noise than a hant and pick up a squirrel’s trail on the ground and bark jest once, unless it knowed you was where you could see it, and then tiptoe that trail out jest like a man and never make another sound until it treed, and only then when it knowed you hadn’t kept in sight of it. It belonged to pap and Vernon Tull together. Will Varner give it to Tull as a puppy, and pap raised it for a half interest; me and him trained it and it slept in my bed with me until it got so big maw finally run it out of the house, and for the last six months Solon had been trying to buy it. Him and Tull had agreed on two dollars for Tull’s half of it, but Solon and pap was still six dollars apart on ourn, because pap said it was worth ten dollars of anybody’s money and if Tull wasn’t going to collect his full half of that, he was going to collect it for him.

‘So that’s it,’ pap said. ‘Them things wasn’t work units a-tall. They was dog units.’

‘Jest a suggestion,’ Solon said. ‘Jest a friendly offer to keep them runaway shingles from breaking up your private business for six hours tomorrow morning. You sell me your half of that trick overgrown fyce and I’ll finish these shingles for you.’

‘Naturally including them six extra units of one dollars,’ pap said.

‘No, no,’ Solon said. ‘I’ll pay you the same two dollars for your half of that dog that me and Tull agreed on for his half of it. You meet me here tomorrow morning with the dog and you can go on back home or wherever them urgent private affairs are located, and forget about that church roof.’

For about ten seconds more, pap set there with the maul up over his head, looking at Solon. Then for about three seconds he wasn’t looking at Solon or at nothing else. Then he was looking at Solon again. It was jest exactly like after about two and nine-tenths seconds he found out he wasn’t looking at Solon, so he looked back at him as quick as he could. ‘Hah,’ he said. Then he began to laugh. It was laughing all right, because his mouth was open and that’s what it sounded like. But it never went no further back than his teeth and it never come nowhere near reaching as high up as his eyes. And he never said ‘Look out’ this time neither. He jest shifted fast on his hips and swung the maul down, the froe done already druv through the bolt and into the ground while the shingle was still whirling off to slap Solon across the shin.

Then they went back at it again. Up to this time I could tell pap’s licks from Solon’s and Homer’s, even with my back turned, not because they was louder or steadier, because Solon and Homer worked steady, too, and the froe never made no especial noise jest going into the ground, but because they was so infrequent; you would hear five or six of Solon’s and Homer’s little polite chipping licks before you would hear pap’s froe go ‘chug!’ and know that another shingle had went whirling off somewhere. But from now on pap’s sounded jest as light and quick and polite as Solon’s or Homer’s either, and, if anything, even a little faster, with the shingles piling up steadier than I could stack them, almost; until now there was going to be more than a plenty of them for Tull and the

others to shingle with tomorrow, right on up to noon, when we heard Armstid's farm bell, and Solon laid his froe and maul down and looked at his watch too. And I wasn't so far away neither, but by the time I caught up with pap he had untied the mule from the sapling and was already on it. And maybe Solon and Homer thought they had pap, and maybe for a minute I did, too, but I jest wish they could have seen his face then. He reached our dinner bucket down from the limb and handed it to me.

'Go on and eat,' he said. 'Dont wait for me. Him and his work units. If he wants to know where I went, tell him I forgot something and went home to get it. Tell him I had to go back home to get two spoons for us to eat our dinner with. No, dont tell him that. If he hears I went somewhere to get something I needed to use, even if it's jest a tool to eat with, he will refuse to believe I jest went home, for the reason that I dont own anything there that even I would borrow.' He hauled the mule around and heeled him in the flank. Then he pulled up again. 'And when I come back, no matter what I say, dont pay no attention to it. No matter what happens, dont you say nothing. Dont open your mouth a-tall, you hear?'

Then he went on, and I went back to where Solon and Homer was setting on the running board of Solon's school-bus truck, eating, and sho enough Solon said jest exactly what pap said he was going to.

'I admire his optimism, but he's mistaken. If it's something he needs that he cant use his natural hands and feet for, he's going somewhere else than jest his own house.'

We had jest went back to the shingles when pap rid up and got down and tied the mule back to the sapling and come and taken up the ax and snicked the blade into the next cut.

'Well, men,' he said, 'I been thinking about it. I still dont think it's right, but I still aint thought of anything to do about it. But somebody's got to make up for them two hours nobody worked this morning, and since you fellers are two to one against me, it looks like it's going to be me that makes them up. But I got work waiting at home for me tomorrow. I got corn that's crying out loud for me right now. Or maybe that's jest a lie too. Maybe the whole thing is, I dont mind admitting here in private that I been outfigured, but I be dog if I'm going

to set here by myself tomorrow morning admitting it in public. Anyway, I aint. So I'm going to trade with you, Solon. You can have the dog.'

Solon looked at pap. 'I dont know as I want to trade now,' he said.

'I see,' pap said. The ax was still stuck in the cut. He began to pump it up and down to back it out.

'Wait,' Solon said. 'Put that durn ax down.' But pap held the ax raised for the lick, looking at Solon and waiting. 'You're swapping me half a dog for a half a day's work,' Solon said.

'Your half of the dog for that half a day's work you still owe on these shingles.'

'And the two dollars,' pap said. 'That you and Tull agreed on. I sell you half the dog for two dollars, and you come back here tomorrow and finish the shingles. You give me the two dollars now, and I'll meet you here in the morning with the dog, and you can show me the receipt from Tull for his half then.'

'Me and Tull have already agreed,' Solon said.

'All right,' pap said. 'Then you can pay Tull his two dollars and bring his receipt with you without no trouble.'

'Tull will be at the church tomorrow morning, pulling off them old shingles,' Solon said.

'All right,' pap said. 'Then it wont be no trouble a-tall for you to get a receipt from him. You can stop at the church when you pass. Tull aint named Grier. He wont need to be off somewhere borrowing a crowbar.'

So Solon taken out his purse and paid pap the two dollars and they went back to work. And now it looked like they really was trying to finish that afternoon, not jest Solon, but even Homer, that didn't seem to be concerned in it nohow, and pap, that had already swapped a half a dog to get rid of whatever work Solon claimed would be left over. I quit trying to stay up with them; I jest stacked shingles.

Then Solon laid his froe and maul down. 'Well, men,' he said, 'I dont know what you fellers think, but I consider this a day.'

'All right,' pap said. 'You are the one to decide when to quit, since whatever elbow units you consider are going to be shy tomorrow will be yourn.'

‘That’s a fact,’ Solon said. ‘And since I am giving a day and a half to the church instead of jest a day, like I started out doing, I reckon I better get on home and tend to a little of my own work.’ He picked up his froe and maul and ax, and went to his truck and stood waiting for Homer to come and get in.

‘I’ll be here in the morning with the dog,’ pap said.

‘Sholy,’ Solon said. It sounded like he had forgot about the dog, or that it wasn’t no longer any importance. But he stood there again and looked hard and quiet at pap for about a second. ‘And a bill of sale from Tull for his half of it. As you say, it wont be no trouble a-tall to get that from him.’ Him and Homer got into the truck and he started the engine. You couldn’t say jest what it was. It was almost like Solon was hurrying himself, so pap wouldn’t have to make any excuse or pretense toward doing or not doing anything. ‘I have always understood the fact that lightning dont have to hit twice is one of the reasons why they named it lightning. So getting lightning-struck is a mistake that might happen to any man. The mistake I seem to made is, I never realised in time that what I was looking at was a cloud. I’ll see you in the morning.’

‘With the dog,’ pap said.

‘Certainly,’ Solon said, again like it had slipped his mind completely. ‘With the dog.’

Then him and Homer drove off. Then pap got up.

‘What?’ I said. ‘What? You swapped him your half of Tull’s dog for that half a day’s work tomorrow. Now what?’

‘Yes,’ pap said. ‘Only before that I had already swapped Tull a half a day’s work pulling off them old shingles tomorrow, for Tull’s half of that dog. Only we aint going to wait until tomorrow. We’re going to pull them shingles off tonight, and without no more racket about it than is necessary. I dont aim to have nothing on my mind tomorrow but watching Mr Solon Work-Unit Quick trying to get a bill of sale for two dollars or ten dollars either on the other half of that dog. And we’ll do it tonight. I dont want him jest to find out at sunup tomorrow that he is too late. I want him to find out then that even when he laid down to sleep he was already too late.’

So we went back home and I fed and milked while pap went down to Killegrew’s to carry the froe and maul back and to borrow a crowbar. But of all places in the world and

doing what under the sun with it, Old Man Killegrew had went and lost his crowbar out of a boat into forty feet of water. And pap said how he come within a inch of going to Solon's and borrowing his crowbar out of pure poetic justice, only Solon might have smelled the rat jest from the idea of the crowbar. So pap went to Armstid's and borrowed hisn and come back and we et supper and cleaned and filled the lantern while maw still tried to find out what we was up to that couldn't wait till morning.

We left her still talking, even as far as the front gate, and come on back to the church, walking this time, with the rope and crowbar and a hammer for me, and the lantern still dark. Whitfield and Snopes was unloading a ladder from Snopes' wagon when we passed the church on the way home before dark, so all we had to do was to set the ladder up against the church. Then pap clumb up onto the roof with the lantern and pulled off shingles until he could hang the lantern inside behind the decking, where it could shine out through the cracks in the planks, but you couldn't see it unless you was passing in the road, and by that time anybody would 'a' already heard us. Then I clumb up with the rope, and pap reached it through the decking and around a rafter and back and tied the ends around our waists, and we started. And we went at it. We had them old shingles jest raining down, me using the claw hammer and pap using the crowbar, working the bar under a whole patch of shingles at one time and then laying back on the bar like in one more lick or if the crowbar ever happened for one second to get a solid holt, he would tilt up that whole roof at one time like a hinged box lid.

That's exactly what he finally done. He laid back on the bar and this time it got a holt. It wasn't jest a patch of shingles, it was a whole section of decking, so that when he lunged back he snatched that whole section of roof from around the lantern like you would shuck a corn nubbin. The lantern was hanging on a nail. He never even moved the nail, he jest pulled the board off of it, so that it looked like for a whole minute I watched the lantern, and the crowbar, too, setting there in the empty air in a little mess of floating shingles, with the empty nail still sticking through the bail of the lantern, before the whole thing started down into the church. It hit the floor and

bounced once. Then it hit the floor again, and this time the whole church jest blowed up into a pit of yellow jumping fire, with me and pap hanging over the edge of it on two ropes.

I dont know what become of the rope nor how we got out of it. I dont remember climbing down. Jest pap yelling behind me and pushing me about halfway down the ladder and then throwing me the rest of the way by a handful of my overhalls, and then we was both on the ground, running for the water barrel. It set under the gutter spout at the side, and Armstid was there then; he had happened to go out to his lot about a hour back and seen the lantern on the church roof, and it stayed on his mind until finally he come up to see what was going on, and got there jest in time to stand yelling back and forth with pap across the water barrel. And I believe we still would have put it out. Pap turned and squatted against the barrel and got a holt of it over his shoulder and stood up with that barrel that was almost full and run around the corner and up the steps of the church and hooked his toe on the top step and come down with the barrel busting on top of him and knocking him cold out as a wedge.

So we had to drag him back first, and maw was there then, and Mrs Armstid about the same time, and me and Armstid run with the two fire buckets to the spring, and when we got back there was a plenty there, Whitfield, too, with more buckets, and we done what we could, but the spring was two hundred yards away and ten buckets emptied it and it taken five minutes to fill again, and so finally we all jest stood around where pap had come to again with a big cut on his head and watched it go. It was a old church, long dried out, and full of old colored-picture charts that Whitfield had accumulated for more than fifty years, that the lantern had lit right in the middle of when it finally exploded. There was a special nail where he would keep a old long nightshirt he would wear to baptise in. I would use to watch it all the time during church and Sunday school, and me and the other boys would go past the church sometimes jest to peep in at it, because to a boy of ten it wasn't jest a cloth garment or even a iron armor; it was the old strong Archangel Michael his self, that had fit and strove and conquered sin for so long that it finally had the same contempt for the human

beings that returned always to sin as hogs and dogs done that the old strong archangel his self must have had.

For a long time it never burned, even after everything else inside had. We could watch it, hanging there among the fire, not like it had knowed in its time too much water to burn easy, but like it had strove and fit with the devil and all the hosts of hell too long to burn in jest a fire that Res Grier started, trying to beat Solon Quick out of half a dog. But at last it went, too, not in a hurry still, but jest all at once, kind of roaring right on up and out against the stars and the far dark spaces. And then there wasn't nothing but jest pap, drenched and groggy-looking, on the ground, with the rest of us around him, and Whitfield like always in his boiled shirt and his black hat and pants, standing there with his hat on, too, like he had strove too long to save what hadn't ought to be created in the first place, from the damnation it didn't even want to escape, to bother to need to take his hat off in any presence. He looked around at us from under it; we was all there now, all that belonged to that church and used it to be born and marry and die from—us and the Armstids and Tulls, and Bookwright and Quick and Snopes.

'I was wrong,' Whitfield said. 'I told you we would meet here tomorrow to roof a church. We'll meet here in the morning to raise one.'

'Of course we got to have a church,' pap said. 'We're going to have one. And we're going to have it soon. But there's some of us done already give a day or so this week, at the cost of our own work. Which is right and just, and we're going to give more, and glad to. But I dont believe that the Lord——'

Whitfield let him finish. He never moved. He jest stood there until pap finally run down of his own accord and hushed and set there on the ground mostly not looking at maw, before Whitfield opened his mouth.

'Not you,' Whitfield said. 'Arsonist.'

'Arsonist?' pap said.

'Yes,' Whitfield said. 'If there is any pursuit in which you can engage without carrying flood and fire and destruction and death behind you, do it. But not one hand shall you lay to this new house until you have proved to us that you are to

be trusted again with the powers and capacities of a man.' He looked about at us again. 'Tull and Snopes and Armstid have already promised for tomorrow. I understand that Quick had another half day he intended——'

'I can give another day,' Solon said.

'I can give the rest of the week,' Homer said.

'I aint rushed neither,' Snopes said.

'That will be enough to start with, then,' Whitfield said. 'It's late now. Let us all go home.'

He went first. He didn't look back once, at the church or at us. He went to the old mare and clumb up slow and stiff and powerful, and was gone, and we went too, scattering. But I looked back at it. It was jest a shell now, with a red and fading core, and I had hated it at times and feared it at others, and I should have been glad. But there was something that even that fire hadn't even touched. Maybe that's all it was—jest indestructibility, endurability—that old man that could plan to build it back while its walls was still fire-fierce and then calmly turn his back and go away because he knowed that the men that never had nothing to give toward the new one but their work would be there at sunup tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that, too, as long as it was needed, to give that work to build it back again. So it hadn't gone a-tall; it didn't no more care for that little fire and flood than Whitfield's old baptising gown had done. Then we was home. Maw had left so fast the lamp was still lit, and we could see pap now, still leaving a puddle where he stood, with a cut across the back of his head where the barrel had busted and the blood-streaked water soaking him to the waist.

'Get them wet clothes off,' maw said.

'I dont know as I will or not,' pap said. 'I been publicly notified that I aint fitten to associate with white folks, so I publicly notify them same white folks and Methodists, too, not to try to associate with me, or the devil can have the hindmost.'

But maw hadn't even listened. When she come back with a pan of water and a towel and the liniment bottle, pap was already in his nightshirt.

'I dont want none of that neither,' he said. 'If my head wasn't worth busting, it aint worth patching.' But she never paid no mind to that neither. She washed his head off and dried it and

put the bandage on and went out again, and pap went and got into bed.

‘Hand me my snuff; then you get out of here and stay out too,’ he said.

But before I could do that maw come back. She had a glass of hot toddy, and she went to the bed and stood there with it, and pap turned his head and looked at it.

‘What’s that?’ he said.

But maw never answered, and then he set up in bed and drew a long, shuddering breath—we could hear it—and after a minute he put out his hand for the toddy and set there holding it and drawing his breath, and then he taken a sip of it.

‘I Godfrey, if him and all of them put together think they can keep me from working on my own church like ary other man, he better be a good man to try it.’ He taken another sip of the toddy. Then he taken a long one. ‘Arsonist,’ he said. ‘Work units. Dog units. And now arsonist. I Godfrey, what a day!’