Chapter Eighteen

There was a mild sky and a mild wind. Mrs. McBee cupped her hands to the window to test the swaying of the pine trees. Only the slightest motion at the topmost branches showed the wind to be from the South. It would be a good day. The grounds were ablaze with color: reds, deeper red, yellows, a faint green.

High days before the winter.

Turning from the window, she was gratified that at least nature was to give a little cheer. She
had not gone to the Flemming funeral. For one thing she had her ideas what it would be like; and then another: she had taken to her bed the day after her call on Mrs. Flemming. The headache and dizziness had returned, and this time it seemed more than she could cope with.

Mary Hughes had called while she was in bed. She had read about T. J. Flemming in the newspapers. Mrs. McBee had not bothered to tell her she was ill. She said she was "out of sorts"; that was all. But it would not have made any difference anyway; Mary Hughes was too interested in what had happened next door. "Sociologically," she said. She wondered if Mrs. Flemming would mind if she came and made "a little study" of the case. She had to make a report before the L.S.A., a local group in Lawson devoted to the study of Appalachia.

Mrs. McBee had not accustomed herself to the new terms: Cities meaning Negroes; Appalachia, poor whites; blacks, a term she absolutely refused to use because it sounded as if she were trying to put on airs. But Mary Hughes was up-to-date on all of that, sprinkling her talk with terms and initialized organizations Mrs. McBee had never heard of.
At least she had not mentioned her garage, and for that Mrs. McBee was thankful. Besides in all the tragedy of the last few days she had seen a ray of light; Mrs. Flemming would be returning to her old job.

The other and main reason she had not gone to the funeral was that John Bedford had loaned the Flemmings their station wagon and she had no way to get to the church. But she had watched it all from her window: a procession of big black borrowed automobiles with Mrs. Flemming, grieving in elegance, leading the way and John Bedford, surprisingly, bringing up the rear in the battered station wagon crowded with funny-looking relatives.

Locally the tragedy had boiled down to more of a sick joke than anything else. And there were rumors. At a cocktail party somebody had said that T. J. Flemming's leg had ended up at the Weatherby's country house, brought there by a dog, and that Aileen Weatherby had watched the dogs thinking they were merely at play.

It was untrue, of course, but it was cause for some hilarity, the idea of rich pretty Aileen Weatherby sweetly watching her playful dogs. There had also been a picture in the newspaper of poor crazed Tilda Flemming
as she was taken to the county jail by two armed deputies. A large woman with a red face and short bobbed haircut, she was shown happily smiling as she entered the jail-courthouse. Underneath the picture was a quote: "Never did care much for my brother anyhow."

Mrs. McBee herself came in for some attention. Because of where she lived there had been one telephone call after another. Friends. "...Letitia dear, you poor thing. Simply unspeakable. Well, it certainly has put Ayushton on the map...."

Indeed it had. For the second time since its founding Ashton had made world news. The other, though less eventful, time occurred when a group of Senators' wives from Washington came to march down the main street of the town with some fifty or more local Negroes who wanted "freedom". But T. J. Flemming, in death, had commanded the blacker headlines. And with it there was an odd kind of pride: Local-Man-Makes-Good sort of thing.

All that, however, was last week. Today was a new day, a scarlet day, and the morning shimmered with yesterday's rain.

It was to be a busy day. Since it was Saturday
Mrs. McBee had to arrange memorial flowers for Sunday's church service, and she wanted to do that early because she had promised Margaret Ewing she would join her bridge foursome at two o'clock. They were to play at the country club because Margaret was having her house painted. And that meant getting some sort of ride because Mrs. McBee didn't like driving up to the country club in a worn-out taxi with one of those funny-looking drivers.

She was looking forward to the afternoon. She had had all she could take of the Flemmings. She half-believed that was the cause of the headache and the dizziness. She wanted to clear her mind, relax, be with her own kind for a change. She had concentrated so long on what had happened next door she was beginning to believe there was no life outside that insane grief-stricken world.

At breakfast she decided to approach John Bedford about a possible ride to town.

"It won't take but a few minutes to fix the flowers and the drive to the club is so pretty now with the Gingko trees turning."

"The car's got a flat," he said, covering his piece
of toast with strawberry preserves.

"A flat? When did that happen?"

"At the funeral. Damn near didn't make it home."

Mrs. McBee began to drum her fingers. "Don't know why you felt you had to go to that anyway."

"That," he said, putting down the preserve knife, "isn't even worth discussing."

"I didn't say I wanted to discuss it. I don't want to hear anything about any of that anymore." She took up her napkin and slapped it back in her lap.

"Well, can't you get the tire fixed this morning?"

"Don't know who can fix it."

"Why, I declare. You don't know who can fix it? I'd be ashamed. A grown man and he doesn't even know how to change a tire."

He crunched down on the toast. "I write in the morning. Remember?"

She sat there watching him chewing. "That's horrid, John Bedford. A simple little request and-- You can go out there right this minute and fix that tire. You've got the rest of the morning to type on the typewriter."

He took another piece of toast. "Just so you can play cards."
Mrs. McBee rose from the table. "I'm not going to beg you to take me. Takes too much out of me. But--" She leaned down and pointed her finger right in front of his chewing face. "Some day, Mister, you'll be sorry. Some day."

"Some day," he said, not looking up at her, "Some day you'll be glad."

"Glad of what?"

He took up his napkin and tossed it on the table. "Oh, for Chrisakes."

"Glad of what?" she asked again. "Just what will I be glad of? I can't imagine."

He opened the breakfast room door, then turned to her with excited bloodshot eyes. "Glad I didn't waste my time. Glad I kept at things, didn't let some fool woman's card game interrupt my time." He slammed the door. "Some day," his voice came sarcastic behind the door, "you might even be--" She couldn't hear the last word but she thought it was "proud."

Mrs. McBee sat back down at the table, her head in her hands. A simple little request, she was saying to herself. Glad. What she would be glad of was if he would quit writing; start acting like a man and looking
like one. A whole year and a half. Nothing but piddling and sulking and never once, not once, thinking of her, what she had to do.

But it was too late now. She had done everything she could. Maybe some day he would come to his senses. Just what it would take to do that she still did not know. It would have to be something pretty powerful. And what that was she did not know either. If she did know she would make it happen, hunt it down, find it, sacrifice everything, if necessary....

Wearily she got up from the table. None of this was getting the morning's work done. She had to cut the cherry laurel leaves before the sun got higher. She was planning to use the leaves with yellow and white chrysanthemums. The leaves made the colors of the chrysanthemums show up better in the church. She might even include some stock.

By noon she was standing on the highway in her dark blue suit, the basket of flowers at her side. The bus was late again, which meant she would have to hurry with the altar flowers, then call a taxi. And the Lord only knew how long she would have to wait for one to come. Hurry, hurry, hurry. If she
had her life to live over again that was the first thing
she would rid herself of. Time. She would throw out
every clock in sight and never hurry, or wait, or glance
at a time piece again.

She kept looking toward the rise in the highway.
There was nothing in sight and she was already fifteen
minutes late. The headache was returning and her arms
had an odd tingling sensation. Tomorrow, she was think-
ing, she would stay in bed all day, not even go to
church. It was this balancing everything at once that
was making her nervous.

"Now just take one thing at a time, Letitia,"
her father used to say. Well, she had never been able
to do that. Besides she never remembered a time when
there was just one thing to do; there were always a
hundred things.

The flowers were to memorialize old Mr. Postlesthwaite.
He had as much business being memorialized as that
swine hog out there in the back woods. A cheat and a
liar and everything else you could think of. He died
during the depression, leaving two daughters who carried
his name and six others who did not. Lived like a
king through the whole depression and after he died
Bessie and Ruby had to take in sewing.

If it weren't for Ruby, she was thinking. But behind her she heard the clank of the mailbox. She turned quickly.

"Oh, John Bedford! You startled me." She put her gloved fingers to the side of her neck.

"Sorry," he said, taking out the mail.

She turned from him. "Well, you ought not to sneak up that way."

"I wasn't aware I was sneaking."

In the distance she saw the bus coming. "Here it comes. I hope you're satisfied." She reached down to pick up the basket of flowers, purposely making the task look more difficult than it was.

"Have a good afternoon," he mumbled.

"I'd be ashamed," she said. The door to the bus hissed open. The driver bent down to help her with the flowers, and she looked back at John Bedford as if to say: At least there are some gentlemen left in the world. But he was concentrating on the mail and did not see her.

Once settled in the seat she gazed down on him. He was reading a letter. Another rejection slip, she
thought idly and turned her attention to the driver and the road ahead.

She noticed the woman and the man in the seat ahead of her turn their heads, and then the man craned his neck looking at the road behind.

The bus began to move. The man turned around to Mrs. McBee. "Hey, lady, that man out yonder. He somebody of your 'n?"

"My son," she said, closing her eyes.

"He sure was agitated 'bout something."

"Yes, I know," she said wearily.

"Look to me like he wanted the bus to stop or something."

"No, I don't think so," she said.

"Looked mighty excited to me, like he was waving a letter or something. Kept running after the bus."

Mrs. McBee turned around. John Bedford was standing in the middle of the highway, and in the distance he looked like a small spot. She kept looking until the spot faded. Whatever it was she would learn tonight. She turned back, sighing heavily.

The room off from the church where she was to arrange the flowers was chilled and right away Mrs.
McBee saw the brass containers had not been polished. She glanced at her watch. Only twenty-five minutes to fix the flowers and get to the country club. She glowered at the two containers. "It's not my business to polish the brass!" That was the business of the altar guild. But she took out the polish anyway and began rubbing with a half-dirty cloth.

Young people, she thought disgustedly. The altar guild was made up mostly of young matrons, most of whom never came to church; they went to the luncheons, the bazaars and all the social functions. But they were too lazy on Sunday morning to go to the actual service. Next time, she was thinking, she would just leave the vases dirty.

She placed the flowers, first clipping the stems and arranging and rearranging the laurel leaves. She wanted the green only as a background, and she didn't want the flowers to look stiff like some common florist's arrangement. Flowers should look natural, the way they grew in a garden.

When she finished she lugged the vases into the church and placed them on the altar, careful that not a drop of water should spill. Her hands were trembling,
and there was an unusual fatigue in her arms. As long as she had been arranging flowers she could never remember her hands shaking.

It's just been too much, she thought. Last week and now the little incident with John Bedford. But the whole year with John Bedford had been too much; just drained her, that's all. If only he knew, she thought. If only....

She stood back, gazing at the flowers. "All right, Mr. Postlethwaite," she mumbled, "now you're all fixed up." You old buzzard, she added. But she did not say the latter aloud, and as soon as the words formed she regretted them. She shook her head nervously and ran her hand alongside her left arm. The odd tingling was still with her.

Before she left she turned to take one last cursory glance at the altar. But her gaze rested on the stained glass window above instead, the image of Christ with his sorrowful face and blue robe seeming to command her vision. Then, somehow, looking, she was remembering Mrs. Flemming, the way she lay on her bed with her dolls, crying out her faith to the ceiling.

The church was dark and the window glowed from
the afternoon sun behind it. Mrs. McBee stared at it fiercely. "Lord?" she said timidly. She stood there for some minutes. Then she turned to go, not knowing what she wanted to say really. It was ten of two. She had to call a taxi. It would never arrive on time.

She instructed the driver to let her out a block from the club's entrance.

"I kin drive you on in there, lady. Won't cost you nothin."

She said she needed the walk, and then hugging the empty garden basket she dug into her purse for the fare. But in the confusion the entire content of the purse spilled to the pavement: a package of seeds, a pencil, folded pieces of paper with notes on them, a pair of garden scissors, a powder puff, loose change, a safety pin, and a buckeye she carried for good luck.

"Look out thar now," said the driver, not bothering to get out and help her. She squatted down, carefully refilling the purse. The buckeye was underneath the car. She frowned up at the driver and a lock of hair fell into her eyes.

"Drive on," she commanded the driver, waving her arm furiously. "Go on."
She picked up the buckeye, dropped it free into the purse and tried to pat her hair into shape.

She felt like weeping. She was out of breath. Everything was too hard. She had wanted to give herself plenty of time so she wouldn't be ruffled, and here she was with her hair coming undone and her heart racing like a hawk's.

Mrs. McBee had never been a member of the country club. Her father had been one of its original members. But after she married there wasn't any money and she was too busy anyway. Except for occasional card games and weddings she rarely entered its doors.

The truth of the matter was the place rather frightened her. Times had changed and so many had money now, people in the early days she would never even have known. She didn't know how people dressed when they went there nowadays; and she didn't like parading in front of all those women who sat about playing cards and gossiping.

Just remember who you are, she kept saying to herself as she made her way up the curving drive. She caught herself frowning as she eyed the heavy double doors of the club's entrance. The dark blue suit was a spring suit; she didn't have a fall one.
Blessedly, the rooms were fairly empty of people. At the far end of the lounge, near the porch, she saw her table. They were all there: Margaret Ewing, Julia Davis, Dorothy Crutchfield, dressed in simple wool dresses. Margaret was wearing a rose-colored dress with long sleeves and cuffs. She was faintly smiling at the others, completely poised, calm.

Mrs. McBee frowned up to the table, dropped her garden basket by the vacant chair, plopped into the chair, folded her arms and let out a loud sigh:

"Whewww!"

"Why, Letitia," laughed Julia Davis. "You look like you've just come in out of a storm."

Mrs. McBee eyed her cagily. Tactless. She had never liked Julia Davis; she was always having her toenails manicured at the beauty parlor.

"They didn't polish the brass at the church and the cloth was dirty," said Mrs. McBee, sighing again and gazing at the two shiny decks of cards.

"Have you been to the church, Letitia?" asked Margaret Ewing.

"Arranging the altar flowers."

Dorothy Crutchfield patted her hand. "No one does them any better than you."
Mrs. McBee withdrew her hand. "It's been a terrible week. Terrible."

Margaret Ewing began shuffling the cards. "Did you see that picture in the newspaper of that woman?"

They all tittered. They could afford to. So far removed, so safe from the grotesqueries of the world. Spending their days leaning over card tables, season after season, unseeing, their faces growing old, tittering.

Mrs. McBee picked up her cards. "It's all been just too much."

"Oh, of course, Letitia," chirped Julia Davis. "Those people were your neighbors out there, weren't they?"

"The wife helped me in my greenhouse."

"They must have been awful people," said Julia Davis.

"I rather like the wife," said Mrs. McBee. The room was overheated, and she could feel little beads of perspiration break free on her forehead.

"It's your bid, Letitia," said Margaret Ewing.

Mrs. McBee leaned back and took a second look at her hand. She was still a bit miffed at Julia Davis.
for saying she looked as if she had just come in out of a storm, then saying in that insinuating way: "Those people were your neighbors, weren't they?" Her hands were still trembling. She bid one club.

"Paa-yas," said Julia Davis.

"I'll say one diamond," said Margaret Ewing, glancing at Mrs. McBee as if in some sly way she was trying to inform her partner.

"Paa-yas," said Dorothy Crutchfield.

"All right," said Mrs. McBee. "You bid one diamond? I'll bid a heart."

"Paa-yas," said Julia Davis.

Margaret Ewing bid three hearts and Mrs. McBee passed. She didn't have the count to go higher, but more than that she wanted to be dummy. She was still in confusion and she wanted to sit for a moment, get command of herself.

The next hand she played herself and went down two tricks.

"If you had played your trumps, Letitia," said Julia Davis, "you would have made it." Julia Davis liked to relive each game, recount failures, instruct. She and her husband were tournament players; they
travelled to other cities matching their wits against professionals. Socially, she felt it her duty to point out errors.

Half through the afternoon Mrs. McBee asked for a glass of water. An unusual thirst had taken hold of her. She was not playing well. It had been so long since she had played. And there were distractions. All afternoon people had been wandering through the lounge, golfers, young girls.

But more than that she had been distracted by the scene out the picture window. She had never seen the golf course so green or the hills beyond so filled with color. It looked almost as if some amateur artist had painted the scene, chosen too vivid colors, too green, too yellow, too red.

She had loved those hills, watching them turn season after season, tender green, then lush with summer's growth, autumn, bare at winter. But now— She had never seen the colors so intense. Perhaps it was the slant of the sun. But the colors were so vivid she wondered if it were her own eyes at fault. She had been all over those hills: walked with her father, explored them as a child. She and John
Bedford, Senior had often taken walks there, discovered giant rock formations, pretended they owned land at a special place, would some day build a house. It had been years since she had walked there. And gazing now out the window it was almost as if the hills were beckoning, calling her to once more feel the ground under her feet, smell the odor of pine and bark.

"Wasn't that Irene Des Champs?" asked Julia Davis, leaning over her cards.

Mrs. McBee glanced up. A rather pretty blonde young woman was walking through the lounge to the bar. She was wearing tweed pants and a small red scarf over her hair.

"You know about them, don't you?" asked Dorothy Crutchfield.

"Yеееes, I heard," said Julia Davis. She looked at Mrs. McBee. "They're getting a divorce."

"No, it's final," said Dorothy Crutchfield.

"Oh, it is?" said Julia Davis. "How saa-yad."

Her eyes were bright with excitement.

"It's your bid, Letitia," said Margaret Ewing. Mrs. McBee had not even picked up her cards. She had finished the glass of water but the thirst
was still with her. She tried to arrange the cards but they kept slipping from her hand. She scanned the faces quickly; no one seemed to notice. She bid a heart.

"Paa-yas," said Dorothy Crutchfield.

"Two clubs," said Margaret Ewing, frowning down at her hand.

"Paa-yas," said Julia Davis.

"Two clubs?" said Mrs. McBee, glancing out at the hills again. She began drumming her fingers.

"All right. Three diamonds."

"Five spades," said Margaret Ewing triumphantly. Mrs. McBee felt her heart begin to beat faster. She could scarcely hold the cards. "Six spades," she said, not even looking at her hand. She would never make the bid. But she didn't care. Something...

She leaned forward, listening. No, she must be mistaken. Outside, on the porch, she heard someone singing. Then it grew louder. It couldn't be. Mrs. Flemming here? Singing? It was Mrs. Flemming.

Louder and louder and LOUDER:

WASHED. WASHED. WASHED.
BLOOD. BLOOD.
LAMB.
Something exploded in her mind. There was the terrible trembling. The cards fell to the floor.

"Letitia?" She heard the far voice of Margaret Ewing. "What is it? Get a doctor! Somebody..."

What a beautiful voice Mrs. Flemming had. She had never realized. Why, she could have been an opera singer. Great hills, turning in their season.

"Washed in the Blood of the...."

Blackness.

She lay crumpled on the floor, a smile on her half-twisted face. Frail she was with the pathetic cards lying about her on the floor. So frail.

But, yes, brothers and sisters, in her way:

Washed -- in the blood of the Lamb.