The Last Cotton Boll
By Jimmie von Tungeln
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You asked about Ferd Starling and, though it breaks my heart to even say the name, I will tell you what I know of that sad and gentle man. I will tell you first to keep his name alive, but then for personal solace too. Who knows what good might come from praising saintly men?

I did him some small favors once. So I can say that I knew him, probably as well as anyone around here did—not in a personal sense, but from trying to help him, as Christians should, one to another. That includes trying to do something about what happened and I tried hard, considering my position, which is not one involving a great deal of power. Most likely, though, you will want to know how I came to know him and what I know about the events that led to that awful day. Perhaps you can make some sense of it. I can't.

It was a quiet time, shortly before so many of our young men were to perish in Europe and in the South Pacific. Good times, you might say—the farms around Armistead, Arkansas were productive and hiring again. There seemed to be jobs for everyone who wanted to work. So it was that I met the man you asked about.

Ferd—his Christian name was Ferdinand—worked for Thomas Easter. Mr. Easter always had a goodly number of hired hands but Ferd was, I think, more or less in charge of the others. I understand that he was a good and dependable worker, one of the reasons why Mr. Easter took it so hard—as anyone with a soul would have.

But, as to what I know:

Mr. Easter and I attended the same church and in passing some small talk one Sunday, I commented that I had been busy all summer getting the library ready. Some people think I just sit there all day, day after day and watch the children come through. They don't consider the work involved, but I am used to it.

Anyway, I mentioned having a pile of junk that needed to be hauled to the dumping pit and how it was too much for me to carry.

"What does it consist of?" he asked.

"Just trash, and some worn-out books," I said, "Too worn out even for the colored school." Then I added "You can't believe what children do to books that are paid for with tax money." I wanted to make sure that he knew I understood my responsibilities.

"I have a hired hand," he said. Then he told me that this man seemed a little better than most and that he had come down from north of here and he — Mr. Easter — had heard that the new man could lay brick and had put him on for the summer several years back.

Then he said, "Turned out he couldn't, or wouldn't, lay brick. I never quite knew which. He just told me, 'I can't do that no more.' And that was that. I taken a chance on him anyway and it worked out fine. Good worker, and respectful." He finished by saying he would send him by with a wagon later that week.

So that was how Ferd happened to come to the library some days later to pick up trash. Otherwise I would have never known him, even as casually as I did. He drew up in one of Mr. Easter's wagons while I was on the porch of the library and at first I couldn't imagine who he might be. He was tall and sat straight as a light-pole on that wagon

seat—didn't have that slumped-over look that so many of them have. Then I realized that he was here for the trash.

When he stopped at the back door, I waited for a decent interval and then asked what he wanted.

"Mr. Easter told me to come," he said.

It provoked me, the way he said it. I mean he said it like I should have expected him—like he was in on some conversation that had passed between me and Mr. Easter. I let it pass, but not completely. People should show respect.

"Did he say why?"

"Something about some junk to be hauled away."

It still wasn't completely satisfactory but I moved on. I said "There are some boxes of trash and discarded books that need to go."

He turned sharply, almost frightening me. I have never seen eyes that could take a person in the way his did. I was close to taking offense when he said, very politely, "Missus, could I ask what kind of books they is?'

"What an odd question," I thought. "Why just some old books with broken binders that the children have mistreated," I said, adding "And there are some that nobody has ever touched all these years that were just taking up space."

"I see," was all he said as he descended from the wagon.

While he was tying the horses, I propped the back door open and then I walked to the edge of the porch. I stood and waited.

"It's all in boxes just inside the door," I said, and he just said "Yessum" and walked inside. I noticed that he stopped and took a long, deep breath, touched his hand to his eye and moved toward the boxes, but slowly. That didn't seem strange in itself—they never want to work too fast in front of you. But there was something dreamy about the way he moved. If you ask me, I think he was trying to prolong the experience.

It was a late June day in the Delta, if you know what that means. I had forgotten my hat but I couldn't go back in for it while he was in there. So I shielded my head from the sun with a magazine that I had been about to file. When he walked by with the first box, I noticed how strong he was. He wore a faded short-sleeved work shirt and a pair of worn but clean, pressed trousers of some long forgotten color. He picked up a box of books like it had been a bouquet of flowers and walked out with it. I had just barely been able to slide it across the room, but he picked it up as if it were nothing.

Though he had just started to work, his arms were already covered with perspiration and I couldn't help notice the muscles. He was a powerful man.

That's when I realized just how hot it was. I had just the faintest twinge of dizziness, and began fanning myself with the magazine.

He must have noticed, for he stopped on his way back in and asked me if I was alright. "I'm fine," I said, "You just load the trash," and he said "Yessum."

I would say he worked slowly but efficiently. We spoke no more while he was loading the trash. I fanned myself and looked toward Main Street. It was mid-morning of a Saturday just before cotton-chopping and the street was beginning to fill with cars and trucks from out in the county. Although it was a slow time of year and few people had money, downtown Armistead was still the place to be on Saturday. Whole families would unload from a wagon or pile out of an old Ford, the men in pressed khakis and the women in their second-best clothes licking a handkerchief and trying to clean some

imaginary spot on the face of a small boy whose face had already been polished to a high sheen under oiled and roached-up hair. A sister would giggle and smirk. Then they would all trot off, hoping that some new mystery had been added to Main Street since last Saturday. I tried to appear absorbed by it all but I kept an eye on Ferd's progress.

In those days the library was in a separate building behind the rest of the school. It doubled as a town library for those few from town who wanted to use it. The porch where we were working faced Main Street and I was sure the folks there could see that I was taking care of public business. Of course some of them would say that it was a pity that I had nothing better to do of a Saturday than to tend the library, but let them talk. I didn't care as long as they could see I was on duty.

I was imagining some of their conversations when Ferd brought me back to the job at hand.

"Finished Missus," he said. I walked to the door and looked in just to be sure. I turned and, reaching in to the pocket of my frock, produced a dime and tried to hand it to him with my arm fully extended. I thanked him.

He ignored my hand and said, "Does it have to happen, Missus?"

"Why what do you mean?" I said, surprised. I thrust the dime toward him again. He looked past it and straight at me.

"Must they be thrown away if a person could use them?"

It puzzled me briefly. I returned the twice-rejected dime to my pocket. Then I said, "Why, do you mean the books?"

"Yessum."

"What's your name, boy?" I asked.

"Hit's Ferd, Missus. Ferd Starling."

"Well then, Ferd. What would you do with all those books?"

"Not all, Missus, just some."

"Can you read?"

"Just a little" Then he asked me again, "Must it happen?"

"Well, they aren't picture books, you know. There are some math books that the boys defaced. And we finally changed the history books—those old ones stop with the first Mr. Roosevelt and here we are well into the second. I don't have to tell you what a struggle it has been to get these books in these hard times."

"No Ma'am."

I thought through the possibilities. "You take what you might could use and don't be strewing them all over the county, understand?"

"I understand. Just some I might use." He had removed his hat and was twisting it as he stared toward his feet. Neither of us spoke for what seemed a long time.

"That's all, then" I said. He started to turn and, surprisingly, I heard myself say: "And in that big box are some nearly used-up writing tablets and pencil stubs that you can have if you won't scatter them all over the place."

He turned back toward me and smiled. "Much obliged," he said. And then he left.

I thought no more about it and spent the next few weeks straightening up the library from the last school year and getting it ready for the next. I liked to have all that done by the time the crops were laid by.

Those were busy weeks in the delta. I don't see how people survived. It would seem that every man, woman and child would be laboring either in the fields or preparing

for those who did from sunup until sundown. They were hard times –backbreaking, spirit-killing times. Trucks covered with canvas and fitted with rude benches would collect the cotton-choppers of a morning and, after a quick stop at a grocery store to purchase food for their dinner, spread them amongst the farms. In the evening they would reverse the process with another stop for the purchase of supper and breakfast. Then the process would repeat itself in the never-ending, slow heartbeat of cotton country.

In families that could afford it, a mother would remain home in a tin-roofed house, cooking and washing as the heat poured mercilessly through the ceiling and wrapped around everything it could reach, like a transparent snake that oozed steam from every scale. Babies would suffer and cry from heat rash. Old people would sit just as still as they could so as not to taunt the heat. Dust would settle in every corner—a gagging, suffocating dust that a person couldn't defeat. The very sun itself would seem to stop of an afternoon to prolong the suffering. It was a time when folks spoke very little to one another, just worked and hoped. And of course the really poor—the coloreds I mean—had it even worse.

Then one day it would change. The crops would be laid by and work would shift to cutting hay and wood for the winter. This was the worrying time. From rain and hail to blight and boll weevils, there was more than plenty to threaten the future as summer lengthened, stifling day by stifling day into fall. Then the pace would quicken and the morning trucks would reappear, this time to gather pickers for the cotton crop.

With luck—no doubt nurtured by all that worrying—the crops would be gathered and it would seem that everyone had a little money to spend. Downtown Armistead would flourish, even on a weekday. The County Fair would come and go and folks would settle in, hoping for a mild winter. Those were the days I liked best. School would start and thus my busy time of the year. Children whose family had turned a good crop or had stayed employed all summer would fairly crackle with new clothes and shoes. Even the students were bright and alert and ready for new experiences. And it lasted such a short time. It was a rare period of transition in a world that usually changed very little from one day to the next.

That's when I saw Ferd for the second time. You can imagine my surprise when he just appeared one Friday afternoon. Knocking at the back door, standing as far from it as his reach would allow, his hat twisted in one hand and his eyes directed toward the floor.

I asked what and wasn't he one of Mr. Easter's boys and he said "Yessum." Then I said wasn't he the one called Ferd and he said "That's right."

"Did Mr. Easter send you?" I asked. He told me no, that he had come on this own.

"What for?"

"Hoped there might be more, Missus," he said.

"More what?" I asked and then he told me.

"Thought you might have some more books to haul off and then I could be some help." He said this while still looking down, almost as if he were ashamed and was trying to see right through the planks of the porch and to the ground below.

It all came perfectly clear to me then. I thought for a moment. "I only clean them out once a year. I won't throw anymore away until next summer."

"Yessum," he said softly. He turned to go and I heard myself speak, but like it really wasn't myself —just someone with my voice.

"I do have maybe one," I said. "It takes way too much space and I don't think anyone has ever touched it. Then I heard myself saying that I didn't think anyone ever would and that it was full of pictures. "Wait here," I told him.

He waited on the porch while I walked back into the coolness of the library. I retrieved the volume in question and returned to where he was waiting. This time he wasn't looking down but staring straight at it. I knew he was trying to read the title.

"It's called *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*, by Sir Bannister Fletcher, I said. "Someone left it here years ago and I'm afraid it's been wasted in Armistead."

I handed him the book.

He took it and flipped through a few pages. He closed it gently and held it to his chest and looked toward me. I looked back, but I realized he was looking through me at something far, far away. He closed his eyes, almost as if in prayer, still clutching the book. Then he looked down and opened it toward the middle and flipped a few more pages. I could see page after page of small drawings—buildings and parts of buildings. There were also photographs of buildings. He turned them, one after another, for a moment and then stopped. It was then that I saw his hands were shaking.

"Why Ferd," I said. "Your hands tremble so, are you ill?"

They stopped. He closed the book reverently and smiled. "No, Missus. I'se fine."

Whatever he had must have been catching for I could imagine my hands trembling as well.

From then on, I would see him on occasion—that is until it happened. It was odd, but I even started to sense when he might show up. A student would drop a book into the water while crossing the bayou, or one of the older boys would write something vulgar and impossible to erase or I would find a partly used Big Chief tablet left on a library table and a small stack of things would begin to build up in the closet. That's when I would start thinking he might come and I would look out the window of a long summer day when the heat had broken for a short spell. That's when I would see him walking the long road leading to Main Street, or driving Mr. Easter's wagon into town on some errand. I would turn and go sit at the check-out desk and pretend to be busy until he had knocked several times.

I always acted surprised to see him.

"Why aren't you Mr. Easter's boy?" I would ask and he would say yes and tell me his name again and I would pretend to remember and then would ask what he wanted although I knew and I knew that he knew by now that I did. Rituals are important when you have so little.

I will go ahead and tell it now that so much time has passed since it happened and dare anyone to say a word about it. I probably slipped him a few books during that time that hadn't really reached the proper stage for discarding. But I had discovered the kinds he liked and those were the very ones that were wasted in the Armistead High School Library. When I would offer an old volume of paintings or illustrated history, it would always produce that strange trembling in his hand and I would derive a great deal of enjoyment from the act. Let a person begrudge me that and I will invite them to have my job. I am weary now and wouldn't mind.

The last time he came by was a year or so before Pearl Harbor, if I remember correctly. It seemed that Mr. Roosevelt had maybe brought the country through the worst

of things and we didn't yet know about the awful times ahead. It was one of the happy times I recall. There have been so precious few of them.

I asked him if Mr. Easter would keep him on full-time during the winter and he said "No, the last boll is picked. Just part-time work for the winter. I have some time now"

I had saved a partial set of *John Stoddard's Lectures*, which contained an extraordinary amount of photographs. He seemed particularly pleased and said something rather odd about it filling in the missing pieces of something or other. We were standing on the back porch and folks were filing steadily by. The fair had just finished and people were still feeling festive. I suppose I was, as well, for I suddenly asked him "Ferd, what do you do all winter way out in that little house all by yourself? Do you ever feel lonesome on those long, cold evenings with no family and nothing to do?"

He turned to me and smiled.

"No, Missus," he said. "I keeps busy."

He left and I walked back into the library. It was dark there, and cool. I sat behind a desk and thought about a person living alone in a shack in the middle of a cotton field all winter. After awhile the image rose and expanded like smoke on a clear autumn day and it didn't seem so bad. I imagined the satisfaction of knowing the last cotton boll had been picked, and the world was at rest outside your door. I could almost smell the stirrings of a fire in an ancient iron stove blending with the older smell of things a person truly loved. Contentment has many faces, I think, including a solitary winter. One may look at it however he chooses, either as a stifling loneliness or as a chance to prepare for springtime in the world. It was nice to know that Ferd was at peace with it. I can hear it now, so many years later, as if he had just this very second looked at me and walked away smiling.

"I keeps busy." I think that was Ferd's only dream.

II

Sure, I can tell you about the one that they called Ferd Starling. Where should I start? Maybe by stating upfront that I knew him before it happened just enough to recognize him. I knew which of the "shotgun shacks" was his and that's why I knew him. When Daddy and Momma first got married they lived in that house for awhile until they could afford to move over on the Taylor place and that's where we were living when I saw him the first time.

He drove up in one of Mr. Easter's wagons one day while I was in the front yard chopping wood. I don't think he looked any different than any other—a little bigger maybe. There was something about him that made you think he was a little smarter. I don't know what it was, just a feeling or something in the way he talked. He stopped the wagon and I stopped chopping and he asked me if I was the Hinson boy. It come to me to ask why he wanted to know, but instead I just said that yes I was Timmie and could I help.

Was it my folks that used to live on the Easter place he asked and I said that was what I understood but I was not born there. I was born on this place.

Come over here he said and again it come to me to ask why but instead I walked over. He reached under his seat and pulled out a greasy paper sack and handed it to me and I looked inside. There wasn't anything in it but an old brown curved woman's comb and I looked back at him, probably with a question on my face.

He said he found it behind the cook-stove in the house and since we had been the only family lived there in anyone's memory that had a lady in the house he thought it might belong to my Momma. It's tortoise shell he said and asked me if I knew what that meant and I said no and he said it was made from a turtle shell, only turtles around here weren't big enough to make them from and this had been made from some turtle that lived a long way from here. He asked me if I had ever been out of Arkansas.

I said no and then thanked him and said I would ask Momma if it was hers. I wasn't much interested in women's stuff and I guess he knew that for then he asked me if I wanted to see something. When I didn't answer, he reached under the seat and pulled out the prettiest 22-rifle I had ever seen in my life. Every inch of it was polished like it just came out of the box. I whistled and he asked if I wanted to hold it and of course I said yes I would.

He pulled the bolt back and checked the chamber and handed it down to me. I knew that I never had, and thought that I probably never would, hold anything that pretty in my hands, ever again. If I had owned that whole farm that Momma and Daddy were helping to sharecrop, I would have traded it to him for that rifle. Where did he get it I asked and he just said that a man who taught him a trade and other things left it to him when he died.

It is a beauty I said and handed it back to him real slow. He put it back under the seat and then reached behind him and pulled up three dead squirrels tied with a string. He handed them down to me and said give them to Momma along with the comb and she could cook up a meal that had come from that gun. I thanked him and then he said maybe I'll see you again sometime and I said maybe so and he drove off.

It turned out it was Momma's comb and it had belonged to her grandmother and probably was bought at Memphis when they were moving west. She said it was a nice

thing for him to do. She had never expected to see it again and had been real bothered by that. She wouldn't cook the squirrels, though, for she said she didn't know where they had been nor how long they had been shot but I wasn't to tell him that if I saw him again —just thank him for the comb and that was all.

I did see him again not long after that... He walked by one day in early fall carrying that rifle and a bag and saw me in the front yard and of course I stared straight at the gun.

He called me over and said he was going to Beauford's Bayou to hunt squirrels. It was a kind of misty day with not much of a breeze and he said it was just the right weather for "still hunting." Then he thought for a second and said that I might ask my folks if I could go. I said they and my little brother had all gone with my Momma's uncle to Pine Bluff to visit and wouldn't be back home 'til after dark.

He just nodded and started to walk away. Then I yelled after him that I was sure it wouldn't bother them. So he said come on then, let's go.

We walked along together and he asked if I had hunted much. I said some but my Daddy worked so hard we had but little time. He asked if I had my own rifle and I said we didn't have but one and it was an old one that had some rusty spots. But it shot pretty straight and hard, I thought, for such an ancient gun.

Well sometimes old things is good he said and we could always learn from them. We were to the bayou by then and didn't talk much more. We walked out of the sunlight and into the dark woods along the muddy stream. It was only a little ways from the road and the cotton fields but it seemed like a different world. I always liked it there. We found a likely spot and sat down so any breeze would carry behind us. After a while, the woods just seemed to forget we were there. The mist settled on us real slow but it wasn't enough to get you wet before it dried. I tried not moving a single muscle and thought about how some Indian probably hunted once in this very spot. I don't know what Ferd thought about. He just stared out into the forest and nodded his head every once in awhile.

Sure enough, before long a whole family of squirrels came out to play and once they had climbed a giant oak, we moved into place. I didn't even dare ask him but I suppose he knew what I was thinking for he whispered and asked if I wanted to shoot one. Sure I whispered back. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a few greasy looking shells along with a couple of matches and a pocket knife. He picked one of the shells and loaded into the rifle and handed it to me. He pointed to a large squirrel that had heard us by now and had frozen in perfect sight along a huge limb. I took careful aim and I'm sure I rushed it too much for we saw the bark fly a good foot or so behind the squirrel.

To my surprise it didn't move and I handed the rifle back to Ferd. He said no, it was my squirrel and to try again. Don't jerk it this time, boy, he said. Take your aim and then just pull your whole body tight all at one time like you was trying to make yourself small. I did just what he said at we both smiled when we saw the squirrel tumble off the limb and fall and then hit the ground with that thud that any squirrel hunter loves to hear. He said I would be a real hunter.

Neither of us had a way of knowing that four years later I would show a boy from New Jersey how to shoot Germans the same way.

We shot three more and then started home. I thanked him for the trip and said that Momma thanked him for the comb and he said take the squirrels with me. I tried to say no but he just said he was going to be too busy to cook any squirrels and I should take them. I didn't want them to go to waste but I couldn't help but remember the last time, though I didn't tell.

Then he said something that struck me as odd. He said he really wasn't that interested in hunting for squirrels. He was just out observing how trees were formed and he needed an excuse to be in the woods alone. His ways were different, I suppose.

It turned out that after I vouched for the squirrels, Momma did cook them although she was upset about the fact that I took off without telling anybody. She knew I was growing up, though, and she could tell it had been a real good time for me and she went ahead and let me enjoy the thought of it for she said folks like us didn't have enough good times in life. I've thought many times, after it happened, that she was so right.

It started out innocent enough as most things do. It was a few weeks later and we were using up one of those fall Saturdays. It was me and the two Cooper boys and Bobby Skinner and of course Ricky Pickens who had got the whole trip up and who, as everyone knows by now, was responsible for what happened although others suffered for what he done.

We were what we called hunting although really we were just wandering through the cotton fields looking for something to shoot. The crops were all in and we walked through the dead, empty stalks. They would rattle when the wind blew and it was a little spooky like they were cotton-stalk ghosts trying to talk to one another. We were spread out, each with a rifle though the Cooper boys only had one between them so they had to take turns. They would get to arguing about whose time it was and Ricky would have to stop us and straighten it out. Goddamn it he would yell, you are scaring off any game within twenty miles so one of you take the goddamn gun till we get halfway across this field and then the other take it the other half. It wasn't working too well, however, for they would start to argue again before we went fifty yards.

So Ricky was in a bad mood and it threatened to ruin the whole day and I was really getting ready to go back home. It helped a little when we found an empty Yellowstone Whiskey bottle. Ricky made us take turns throwing it up in the air while we tried to shoot it but none of us could. I tried a couple of times but didn't have but a few bullets and didn't want to use them up on such an impossible shot as that. So I quit and pretty soon so did the others except Ricky who seemed to have taken it on as a personal trial and kept shooting and making us, one after the other, throw it up for him.

We soon got tired and said that we weren't going to throw it up for him anymore and that seemed to make him madder than ever. He called us a bunch of sissies and said we weren't coming next time and that he would just bring some girls along and we could all go straight to hell. He had a mean street like that and that was the cause of our little run-in a year later on the main street in Armistead. But, back to that day, he was already in a bad mood when we reached the edge of the field and came out right up from Ferd's house.

It sat there like every other shack up and down the road. It did have one old oak tree in front that had never been cut down. On the other sides, though, the cotton had been planted right up to the house except for a well and outhouse in back. It almost

looked like it had grown right up out of the ground, along with the cotton. In the back it looked like he had at least two cords of wood cut up and stacked. He was ready for the winter.

Ricky said he was thirsty and let's go make him get us a drink but I said I had to get home. He said he couldn't make it home without a drink of water first and asked the others if they wasn't thirsty too. Naturally they said yes and Ricky started off toward the cabin yelling for Ferd to come outside.

Nobody came and then Ricky went up to the door and knocked. Still nobody came so he opened the door. There wasn't anyone there so he just walked in. I figured he would take a quick look and leave but then he hollered look at this shit, just come and look and the others walked toward the door.

I yelled Ricky let's go but the others walked in too and they started yelling come look at this. It suddenly occurred to me that they might have found the gun so I walked in too.

It took a second or two to see in the dark room but I could see what they were talking about. There was a kitchen in back and a front room where Ferd stayed and that's where we were. I knew we were in violation but I could no more move than the rest of them. There on one whole wall were pictures drawn on writing paper that were prettier than any book I ever saw. Buildings mostly—but buildings like none I had ever seen before. I didn't know it then but they were cathedrals like they have in France and Italy. I've seen them since, but standing there that day I had never seen any thing like it. The sheets were tacked to the wall with roofing nails and in some places there would be six of them put together for one big drawing. Building after building seeming to be held the ground by little stone webs coming from the top and arching to the ground. Some of the sheets had small drawings of how stones and bricks fit together and notes written in the neatest handwriting I had ever seen.

I looked around and then I saw the books—row upon row. Ferd had made shelves from bricks and some old barn lumber and there were rows of books stacked against one wall. There was a table made of bricks and an old door covered with a piece of cardboard. And there in one corner was a bed made up as neat as you please. It was the strangest thing. In the other corner was an old stuffed chair and a wood heater and between them was an ancient table with a coal oil lamp on it.

We were stunned. The room got still and all we could hear was the sound of our breathing. It was deathly quiet.

Then we heard a loud thump and nearly jumped out of our skin. I was closest to the door and hated like anything in the world to look but I knew I had to. I turned and looked at the front door. There was nobody there. I walked to the door and down the steps and heard the knocking again. It was coming from the side of the house so I walked around and then I saw it. A large cotton boll, dried up and never opened, was swaying from a stalk in the wind and knocking against the side of the house. Just a cotton boll, that's all it was and I yelled inside and told them and said let's go.

They didn't come out and I yelled again and then I heard Ricky say you son of a bitch you goddamned son of a bitch, who do you think you are? I yelled back and said what's wrong and he kept yelling you son of a bitch. Then I heard a loud noise and I ran to the steps and looked in. Ricky was swinging something against the wall with the pictures on it and I yelled stop.

He just kept swinging as the pictures started flying off the wall. He said you sorry son of bitch , I'll be goddamned if you do this and he kept on swinging and then he told Bobby to turn the goddamned table over and he started to do it and I yelled stop and started in and then he turned on me. Either help or get the hell out he said and I said stop this right now and said I would tell the Sheriff and he said we'll be through before the Sheriff can come and go right on and tell him.

I'll stop you myself I said and started in. That's when they all turned to face me and I saw Ricky had a poker in his hand and the others all had a brick.

Come ahead Ricky said and we will fix you too. Now help or get the hell out he said and the others looked at me too. Looks of hate and anger ran down their faces like drool from a mad dog's.

I said once more let's get out and they all took a step towards me at the same time.

I backed down the steps and Bobby stood watch at the door while the others started in laughing and tearing the place up. I heard books hit the floor and sound of paper tearing. Please Bobby I said, you know this aint' right I told him again but he just said get the hell on and it won't concern you.

Oh no Ricky don't do that I heard one of the Cooper boys say and I heard the splashing of water. I felt sick to my stomach and Bobby said get the hell on again.

I think about that decision a lot. There were four of them and one of me and we were a mile from the nearest house. We had stacked our rifles against the Oak tree and I backed up to where they were and picked mine up without turning around. I didn't trust Bobby in this mood.

I held my rifle and looked at the house again. The knocking about had stopped and then I heard one of the Cooper boys laughing and yelling oh my god Ricky and then they both squealed and I backed up to the road and turned and left them there. I remember thinking I hope they don't find his rifle but of course it turned out they didn't and I went back home.

I told the Sheriff my side of the story and even the rest of them agreed I wasn't in on it but to me that never meant I wasn't as guilty as the rest. He—the Sheriff—was asking lots of questions about it but I heard that Mr. Pickens came to see him and the questions stopped. I never had anything to do with the rest of them after that except for beating up Ricky Pickens in the Main Street of Armistead a year later which made a reputation for me in town and it wasn't a bad one. It was over mistreating a shoeshine boy though, and didn't have anything to do with what they did to Ferd. At least I don't suppose it did.

Ferd taught me some things and for that I am grateful. Those were different times back then, when colored people didn't have what you might call rights or anything. They had to be so careful. So I wasn't his friend or anything. Even if I had known him better, there would have been this wall between us. He just taught me some things, that's all. I've always tried to learn from people whenever I could.

That's about what I know about the affair, or what I care to remember. There was this one other thing. Years and many experiences later, after the storm of 1947, I was farming near Ferd's old place and I found a crumpled sheet of paper that had blown into the hollow of a tree, laying there like it was a treasure map or something. I guess it blew there in all the commotion. It was faded and stained and almost fell apart in my hands.

But I was able to unfold it and recognized the drawing and handwriting as Ferd's. It was a part of one of the pictures of a church he had drawn. He had written on it:

"The glorious buttress! So far to soar for man."

Someone had taken a pencil and changed it to:

"The glorious butt! So fart for man."

I guess they thought that was funny.

III

My official report on Ferd Starling has been public record for years now so the basic facts are known. I neither hid anything nor added to it; perhaps the information seems cold and dry but that's what a Sheriff's report is for—to report the facts and never to praise or condemn. Any other information I can add has faded with time, but I will state, and it may come as a surprise, that I knew him before it happened. Why, you might ask, do I remember him and I would answer because he could be a hard-headed fool when he wanted to be.

The report is dated the 21st of October, 1940, just before the year that it hardly rained all summer. But the two years before had been good ones, cotton as tall as a man's shoulder and everyone had made some money. The depression was over and people were standing up straight again for the first time in years. We even dared to hope that we might make it through after all. I still say thank the Lord for Franklin Roosevelt and I don't care who hears me say it.

Things looked so good that I decided we could add that section on to the jail that we had needed so long. Saturday nights got pretty wild in the juke joints around Armistead County back then and some of the boys always ended up spending Sunday with us, sometimes longer depending on how much the devil had begun to move in their lives. I never was one of those Sheriffs who derived a lot of pleasure from mistreating those boys. If they hadn't stolen anything and had only cut one another up, why I would release them to their farms on Monday morning.

I had to be there early because right after sunup you would see the wagons pulling into town to pick up the misbehavers, each heading back to his own place of employment. We called it "Emancipation Day" and would even have a little fun with it if the weekend hadn't been too bloody. There was always a simple-minded one or two in the crowd and sometimes we would tell them their boss didn't want them anymore so they would just stay in jail. They would generally fail to see the benefits of a free room and meals without chopping or picking cotton and begin to wail piteously until we would tell them that we would try to intercede on their behalf if they would take the pledge to re-dedicate their lives to Jesus, which they would always do with many tears and supplications. It usually lasted a couple of weeks but one time it took and the fellow ended up preaching all over the county for years until he died a highly respected man, among white and black alike. They say he saved enough souls to populate a black Armistead County in Heaven. You just never know.

It was during these times that I knew Ferd, not that he ever stayed over as a guest. No, not Ferd, but he would bring a wagon in to fetch a hand or two that belonged to Mr. Thomas Easter if he heard we had them. I would always ask about Mr. Easter's health and make sure that Ferd knew to tell him I asked. A vote is a vote but the good will of the richest man in the county is worth a whole lot more.

So, we needed some extra room and Charlie Baswell had started framing it up. We just needed one great big holding cell which amounted to a long, narrow room and a place to load and unload prisoners. One Emancipation Day, Ferd had been leaning against the wagon waiting for his boys and watching the work on the roof when I brought Mr. Easter's hands out to the wagon. He was watching the work with more than a passing

amount of interest. He had a match in his hand, working it up and down against his teeth. He wore some ancient hat that had lost its shape years ago. I noticed he had a pencil in his shirt pocket and thought that was odd. Otherwise, he was dressed like any other field hand you would have seen in those days. Except for one thing: I would swear someone had pressed his pants. There wasn't a wrinkle in them.

I said to him: "Here you go Ferd, two boys with a sorrowful tale but not the worse for wear."

He didn't even look at us. He just kept working that match stick up and down and watched Charlie framing that new cell. "Hit ain't gonna hold," he said. "She'll sag for sure."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I asked. I motioned the boys to get in the wagon and turned around. I didn't see anything.

"The span is too long," he said. "Those timbers won't hold it.."

"Are you a carpenter?" I asked.

"Don't know for sure," he said. "But I do know that span is too long for that much wood."

I called Charlie over. "Ferd here said that section may sag." I pointed to the long, center section.

Charlie looked at me. Then he looked at Ferd. Then he looked at the section.

"Bullshit."

"Nawsir," Ferd said. "That beam ain't deep enough to go that far."

"How the hell would you know?" Charlie asked. He wasn't a man to be questioned about his judgment on building.

"Just do, sir. That ain't enough wood."

"Hell, it's eight inches acrost," Charlie said. "That would hold up a fat lady and her two sisters."

"Nawsir," Ferd said. "Hit ain't the width. Hit's the depth give it the strength to span. That one sure ain't deep enough.

"I'll tell you what," Charlie said. "You haul them winos and I'll do carpentry." I saw his neck turning red under the collar.

"Yes sir." Ferd said. Then he turned toward the wagon.

"Goddamn it Sheriff," Charlie said. "Am I gonna have to put up with shit like this from ever field hand comes by?"

"Go on back to work, Charlie," I said. He did and I stood there watching for a spell. It was a long span but hell, Charlie was a white man. I couldn't get into this. Not with election coming up. I had asked him to leave an opening in the section so I could have a place to unload prisoners out of sight and out of the rain. That's why we needed such a long span. I figured Charlie knew what he was doing.

It turns out I might should have listened. We could have corrected it fairly easily then. It was two weeks before I saw Ferd again – the Easter boys were quiet for a weekend – and by that time the walls and roof were framed and guess what? The sagging was noticeable and getting worse all the time.

I called Ferd over and had him look at it. "You obviously know something about carpentry," I said. "Do you have any idea what we can do about it?"

"Will he allow me?" He nodded at Charlie who had just joined us.

I looked at Charlie. He wasn't as cocky as before. "I'm open to idears," he said.

“Get in the wagon and stay there,” Ferd said to two young hands that had found themselves engaged to the same woman Saturday night. They climbed into the wagon with a great deal of politeness to one another, still cut up from their scuffle just two nights before.

Ferd walked over and looked at the sagging structure. He stepped over a floor beam and looked up at the sagging portion from the interior. He squatted and remained there for a long time, just staring up at the structure. Almost absentmindedly, he reached into a pocket and produced a match. He began to work it slowly up and down. Finally, he stood up.

“Would you have a piece of paper, Sheriff? He asked.

“Just a minute,” I said. I yelled at my deputy to bring a tablet out here. He did and I handed it to Ferd. He took a pencil from his pocket. Sitting on a floor joist, he began to make notes and a little drawing. I was amazed. So was Charlie but he pretended not to be. He would look down Main Street like he was waiting for his best friend. Then he would sneak a look at what Ferd was doing. The boys in the wagon had both gone to sleep sitting up. I watched Ferd and wondered a dozen things to myself.

Finally, he stood up and walked over. He showed me and Charlie the drawing. It looked like something out of a book.

“First you have to jack her up,” he said. “Do that quick before you put anymore weight on it. Jack it up a little extry – ‘bout two inches over straight ought to do it. Then - you build this and nail her to the top of the beam. That way you won’t even see it from the outside.”

He tore the sheet from the drawing. It added a built-up contraption that looked like a ladder made of two-by-fours on the top of the beam.

“I don’t know, Charlie began, “It don’t look like much to me.”

“Do you have a better idea without tearing anything down?” I asked and he admitted that he didn’t.

“Give it a try then.” I said taking the tablet from Ferd. I looked at him and said: “If it works, you might be a hero, Ferd.”

“Oh no sir,” he said. “Hit was most pleasurable.” He turned and climbed aboard the wagon.

Next Monday I was waiting for him when he drove up. “Come in my office for a minute,” I said. He climbed down from the wagon and looked at the new section. I noticed a slight smile when he saw the straight line of the clear span but he didn’t linger on it. He just turned and followed me in.

He stood in front of my desk with his hat in his hand. I sat down. I studied for a minute and said: “I don’t like to get involved in things like this, Ferd.”

“Sir?’ he asked.

“I think Mr. Easter puts a lot of trust in you.”

“I hope so, Sir. I truly do.”

“So it really isn’t my place to get involved, but I appreciate the favor you did us last week.”

He didn’t say anything. He just looked at me in that way they have of knowing it’s best to let someone else do the talking.

“Goddamn it, Ferd,” I said. “Charlie wants to hire you.”

“Sir?” he looked at me like I was speaking Chinese.

"Wants to offer you a job helping him build but he's too damn proud to ask you himself."

He didn't say anything. I felt a little uncomfortable and so I broke the silence. "It would be a good opportunity for you—a real job in a real trade. No more cotton chopping. No more cotton picking. Real wages, Ferd. And Charlie has a storage shed back of his place that you could make into a place to stay right here in town—a real opportunity."

"No," he finally said. "I appreciate it. But no. I stays where I is."

"I appreciate your loyalty to Mr. Easter," I told him. "But I think that even he would tell you go. You need to look out for yourself."

"Hit ain't Mr. Easter," he said. "I looks out for myself and I'll stay where I is."

"You hard headed…" I began.

"Kin I go now, Sheriff?" he interrupted.

"Sure," I said. "Go on."

Just as he got to the door, something made me blurt out: "Are you just going to get old and rot out there in that shotgun shack.?"

He turned and looked back at me. "They's wuss places." Then he left.

I continued to see him after that but we never talked much. Maybe he thought I was mad but I didn't care one way or another. I had more to worry about than one crazy colored boy who could have had a nice life in town just for the asking. Activity picked up as the Depression seemed to be about over. There wasn't as much stealing now, but there seemed to be a lot more mischief. It seemed that when people didn't have to worry about the next meal, they started thinking about things to get into, especially the kids.

So when it happened I wasn't surprised at the act as much as I was at the intensity of it. It was a Monday and I was in my office having my morning coffee when I heard Mr. Thomas Easter come in yelling where was the Sheriff. Before I could set my coffee cup down, he burst in and said, "You got to get out to Ferd Starling's house. Something terrible has happened.

I had jumped up so fast that I spilled my coffee all over me and the desk and I asked him what it was.

"You got to see yourself," he yelled. "Come on!"

I brushed the coffee off me as best I could and started for the door. I stopped there and took my pistol belt off the peg where I keep it and followed Mr. Easter outside.

"I'll take my own car," I said. "It has a siren."

"I'll meet you there," he said.

I left Mr. Easter behind so I had some time to view the scene alone before he got there. I almost wished I hadn't.

The details are in the official report but it doesn't do the mess justice. What I found was the place pretty much demolished. When I pushed the door open, I saw Ferd right away. He was lying on the floor in a drawn-up position. It appeared he had been sitting on a chair and he had fallen onto a rifle. One odd fact was that there was so very little blood. Our investigation concluded that he had placed the end of the barrel under his chin and then reached down and pulled the trigger himself. But there was only one little spot of blood. I've seen many crime scenes in my life and the amount of blood is usually the sickening thing for there is always so much of it. But not this time.

I first ascertained that he was truly dead and had some time to look around before Mr. Easter got there. I couldn't do it justice in the official report and I can't do it justice now. There were drawings and books scattered all over. They had been pushed into a pile and repeatedly soiled. Most had been torn and twisted to the point you couldn't even tell what they had been. But they were mostly drawings of buildings – fancy, elaborate drawings. I would like to have looked at them all, but they were too nasty to touch. It was the same with the books. I determined later that they were castoffs from the school library—another one of the many things that most people didn't know about Ferd. But from what I could tell without having to touch them, they were stuffed with bookmarks and covered with notes in every margin. Even lying there in that filth you could tell they had been loved.

I don't normally get sick at the scene of a crime or an accident. But I almost did that time. I was glad, in fact, to hear Mr. Easter drive up. I needed another person in that room with me.

He had lost his sense of urgency by then and walked in rather slowly. "Did you have any idea about this?" I asked him.

"None," he said. "He kept so much to himself and was so dependable that I never had reason to come here. That's why I came over so soon after he didn't show up this morning. I just knew something was wrong." Then I looked over and saw that he was beginning to cry.

"Do you have any idea who it was?" I asked him.

He wiped a sleeve across his eyes. "Pretty much," he said. "There's been a gang of boys hunting around here. I guess they broke in and it got out of control. I guess it broke poor Ferd's heart when he saw it. You know who they are, don't you?

"I have a pretty good idea. Why don't you go on home and let me take care of this."

"Would you?" he asked.

"Go on home," I said.

After he left I walked through the rest of the house. The kitchen was well stocked, and hadn't been disturbed. I wanted to get my mind off the mess in the other room, to give my head time to clear. So I walked slowly around the room, repeating the names of the dry goods: Pet Milk, Rex Jelly, Humco Lard, bags of Martha White Flour, Brere Rabbit Syrup, and Clabber Girl baking powder. He could have lived off this for some time. There were also several jars of Sunny Brook Coffee. As I looked at it, I remarked the slogan for the first time, "Every Swallow Brings You Joy," flanked by two birds enjoying the full freedom of flight. In the far corner of the room was a five-gallon kerosene can. For a moment I wondered why the perpetrators just didn't burn the place. Then it came to me. They wanted people to see what their hands had done.

Finally, I had to go back into the other room. I took one more look around. The destruction had been complete—vicious and complete. I stood wondering how one person, or even a group of people, could do this to one another. There were still pieces of drawings tacked to the wall, amidst patches of faded wallpaper and sheets of newspaper. Then I noticed a plank that had been removed from the flooring. A shallow box had been attached and there were several items there: some sort of drawing instrument, several pencils and a Garrett Snuff bottle containing some rifle shells. Subsequent investigations caused us to conclude that Ferd had stored—hidden—the rifle here as well. It turned out

to be a remarkable weapon – a classic Remington in pure condition. While we were holding it and trying to find any relatives of Ferd's, it disappeared and has never been found.

The stench was beginning to be unbearable as the morning sun rose. There wasn't anything else I could do, so I walked outside to radio for help.

There wasn't any doubt about who did it. There were five of them but one apparently left before it happened. The others really didn't deny doing it. They just never would talk about it much, like they had made a pact. Three of them did say the Hinson boy left before it started. Mr. Easter raised considerable commotion for me to do something. So did that old-maid at the library. Most folks around town were more intrigued than incensed. So in the end, I let the matter drop. You can say I counted votes; I don't blame you. But you have to understand that they were white boys.

After they moved Ferd out, I had one of the deputies take the dry goods to old Mrs. Courtney. Then we talked Mr. Easter into letting us just burn the shack. He resisted at first and said he was going to leave it as a shrine to what kind of county it was we lived in. Finally he said we could burn it but to get someone to bury Ferd in the front yard, under the oak tree.

We did, and Mr. Easter had a tombstone made. All it had was his name and the year he died since nobody knew when he was born. We never found any relatives or anyone who knew anything about him except that he was from somewhere north of Conway, in Faulkner County. Until now, there wasn't anybody who thought Ferd Starling's life was worth going all that way for.

Mr. Easter died that following year and the tombstone disappeared after that; nobody knows where to. His oldest boy cut the oak tree down the next spring on account of it was shading too much cotton, he said. For a time, they plowed around Ferd's grave but then they got closer and closer to it and one day it was gone.

I have, on more than one occasion, driven by there and stopped for a few minutes. I can't tell you why. If you know right where to look, you can make out a rectangle where the house stood, from the burning of it. I look out over those cotton fields and think about Ferd and about the note I found under him but never told anyone about but just put in my pocket and kept. It didn't make any sense anyhow. I still have it at my office if you want to see it. It doesn't make a bit of sense to me. Maybe it would to you.

He had written it out in that beautiful handwriting of his. I can recite it from memory if you like.

He had written this:

"*The least of these lies broken by your fears*."

Oh, and by the way—that roof span? It never did sag again.