George looked over at Slim and saw the calm, Godlike eyes fastened on him.

“Funny,” said George. “I used to have a hell of a lot of fun with ‘im. Used to

play jokes on ‘im ‘cause he was too dumb to take care of ‘imself. But he was

too dumb even to know he had a joke played on him. I had fun. Made me seem

God damn smart alongside of him. Why he’d do any damn thing I tol’ him. If I

tol’ him to walk over a cliff, over he’d go. That wasn’t so damn much fun after

a while. He never got mad about it, neither. I’ve beat the hell outa him, and he

coulda bust every bone in my body jus’ with his han’s, but he never lifted a

finger against me.” George’s voice was taking on the tone of confession. “Tell

you what made me stop that. One day a bunch of guys was standin’ around up

on the Sacramento River. I was feelin’ pretty smart. I turns to Lennie and says,

‘Jump in.’ An’ he jumps. Couldn’t swim a stroke. He damn near drowned

before we could get him. An’ he was so damn nice to me for pullin’ him out.

Clean forgot I told him to jump in. Well, I ain’t done nothing like that no more.”

“He’s a nice fella,” said Slim. “Guy don’t need no sense to be a nice fella.

Seems to me sometimes it jus’ works the other way around. Take a real smart

guy and he ain’t hardly ever a nice fella.”

George stacked the scattered cards and began to lay out his solitaire hand.

The shoes thudded on the ground outside. At the windows the light of the

evening still made the window squares bright.

“I ain’t got no people,” George said. “I seen the guys that go around on the

ranches alone. That ain’t no good. They don’t have no fun. After a long time

they get mean. They get wantin’ to fight all the time.”

“Yeah, they get mean,” Slim agreed. “They get so they don’t want to talk to

nobody.”

“’Course Lennie’s a God damn nuisance most of the time,” said George.

“But you get used to goin’ around with a guy an’ you can’t get rid of him.”

“He ain’t mean,” said Slim. “I can see Lennie ain’t a bit mean.”

Whit laid down his cards impressively. “Well, stick around an’ keep your

eyes open. You’ll see plenty. She ain’t concealin’ nothing. I never seen nobody

like her. She got the eye goin’ all the time on everybody. I bet she even gives

the stable buck the eye. I don’t know what the hell she wants.”

George asked casually, “Been any trouble since she got here?”

It was obvious that Whit was not interested in his cards. He laid his hand

down and George scooped it in. George laid out his deliberate solitaire hand—

seven cards, and six on top, and five on top of those.

Whit said, “I see what you mean. No, they ain’t been nothing yet. Curley’s

got yella-jackets in his drawers, but that’s all so far. Ever’ time the guys is

around she shows up. She’s lookin’ for Curley, or she thought she lef’

somethin’ layin’ around and she’s lookin’ for it. Seems like she can’t keep away

from guys. An’ Curley’s pants is just crawlin’ with ants, but they ain’t nothing

come of it yet.”

George said, “She’s gonna make a mess. They’s gonna be a bad mess about

her. She’s a jail bait all set on the trigger. That Curley got his work cut out for

him. Ranch with a bunch of guys on it ain’t no place for a girl, specially like

her.”

Whit said, “If you got idears, you oughtta come in town with us guys tomorra

night.”

“Why? What’s doin’?”

“Jus’ the usual thing. We go in to old Susy’s place. Hell of a nice place. Old

Susy’s a laugh—always crackin’ jokes. Like she says when we come up on the

front porch las’ Sat’day night. Susy opens the door and then she yells over her

shoulder, ‘Get yor coats on, girls, here comes the sheriff.’ She never talks dirty,

neither. Got five girls there.”

He looked down at her, and carefully he removed his hand from over her

mouth, and she lay still. “I don’t want to hurt you,” he said, “but George’ll be

mad if you yell.” When she didn’t answer nor move he bent closely over her. He

lifted her arm and let it drop. For a moment he seemed bewildered. And then he

whispered in fright, “I done a bad thing. I done another bad thing.”

He pawed up the hay until it partly covered her.

From outside the barn came a cry of men and the double clang of shoes on

metal. For the first time Lennie became conscious of the outside. He crouched

down in the hay and listened. “I done a real bad thing,” he said. “I shouldn’t of

did that. George’ll be mad. An’ . . . . he said . . . . an’ hide in the brush till he

come. He’s gonna be mad. In the brush till he come. Tha’s what he said.”

Lennie went back and looked at the dead girl. The puppy lay close to her.

Lennie picked it up. “I’ll throw him away,” he said. “It’s bad enough like it is.”

He put the pup under his coat, and he crept to the barn wall and peered out

between the cracks, toward the horseshoe game. And then he crept around the

end of the last manger and disappeared

It was quite dark now, but the fire lighted the trunks of the trees and the

curving branches overhead. Lennie crawled slowly and cautiously around the

fire until he was close to George. He sat back on his heels. George turned the

bean cans so that another side faced the fire. He pretended to be unaware of

Lennie so close beside him.

“George,” very softly. No answer. “George!”

“Whatta you want?”

“I was only foolin’, George. I don’t want no ketchup. I wouldn’t eat no

ketchup if it was right here beside me.”

“If it was here, you could have some.”

“But I wouldn’t eat none, George. I’d leave it all for you. You could cover

your beans with it and I wouldn’t touch none of it.”

George still stared morosely at the fire. “When I think of the swell time I

could have without you, I go nuts. I never get no peace.”

Lennie still knelt. He looked off into the darkness across the river. “George,

you want I should go away and leave you alone?”

“Where the hell could you go?”

“Well, I could. I could go off in the hills there. Some place I’d find a cave.”

“Yeah? How’d you eat? You ain’t got sense enough to find nothing to eat.”

“I’d find things, George. I don’t need no nice food with ketchup. I’d lay out

in the sun and nobody’d hurt me. An’ if I foun’ a mouse, I could keep it.

Nobody’d take it away from me.”

George looked quickly and searchingly at him. “I been mean, ain’t I?”

“If you don’ want me I can go off in the hills an’ find a cave. I can go away any time.”

“No—look! I was jus’ foolin’, Lennie. ‘Cause I want you to stay with me.

Trouble with mice is you always kill ‘em.” He paused. “Tell you what I’ll do,

Lennie. First chance I get I’ll give you a pup. Maybe you wouldn’t kill it. That’d

be better than mice. And you could pet it harder.”

Lennie avoided the bait. He had sensed his advantage. “If you don’t want me,

you only jus’ got to say so, and I’ll go off in those hills right there—right up in

those hills and live by myself. An’ I won’t get no mice stole from me.”

George said, “I want you to stay with me, Lennie. Jesus Christ, somebody’d

shoot you for a coyote if you was by yourself. No, you stay with me. Your Aunt

Clara wouldn’t like you running off by yourself, even if she is dead.”

George stared at his solitaire lay, and then he flounced the cards together and

turned around to Lennie. Lennie was lying down on the bunk watching him.

“Look, Lennie! This here ain’t no setup. I’m scared. You gonna have trouble

with that Curley guy. I seen that kind before. He was kinda feelin’ you out. He

figures he’s got you scared and he’s gonna take a sock at you the first chance he

gets.”

Lennie’s eyes were frightened. “I don’t want no trouble,” he said plaintively.

“Don’t let him sock me, George.”

George got up and went over to Lennie’s bunk and sat down on it. “I hate

that kinda bastard,” he said. “I seen plenty of ‘em. Like the old guy says, Curley

don’t take no chances. He always wins.” He thought for a moment. “If he

tangles with you, Lennie, we’re gonna get the can. Don’t make no mistake about

that. He’s the boss’s son. Look, Lennie. You try to keep away from him, will

you? Don’t never speak to him. If he comes in here you move clear to the other

side of the room. Will you do that, Lennie?”

“I don’t want no trouble,” Lennie mourned. “I never done nothing to him.”

“Well, that won’t do you no good if Curley wants to plug himself up for a

fighter. Just don’t have nothing to do with him. Will you remember?”

“Sure, George. I ain’t gonna say a word.” The sound of the approaching grain teams was louder, thud of big hooves onhard ground, drag of brakes and the jingle of trace chains. Men were calling back and forth from the teams. George, sitting on the bunk beside Lennie, frowned as he thought. Lennie asked timidly, “You ain’t mad, George?”

“I ain’t mad at you. I’m mad at this here Curley bastard. I hoped we was

gonna get a little stake together—maybe a hundred dollars.” His tone grew

decisive. “You keep away from Curley, Lennie.”

“Sure I will, George. I won’t say a word.”

“Don’t let him pull you in—but—if the son-of-a-bitch socks you—let ‘imhave it.”

“Let ‘im have what, George?”

“Never mind, never mind. I’ll tell you when. I hate that kind of a guy. Look,

Lennie, if you get in any kind of trouble, you remember what I told you to do?”

Lennie raised up on his elbow. His face contorted with thought. Then his

eyes moved sadly to George’s face. “If I get in any trouble, you ain’t gonna let

me tend the rabbits.”

“Damn right he is,” said Carlson. “He don’t give nobody else a chance to win

—” He stopped and sniffed the air, and still sniffing, looked down at the old

dog. “God awmighty, that dog stinks. Get him outa here, Candy! I don’t know

nothing that stinks as bad as an old dog. You gotta get him out.”

Candy rolled to the edge of his bunk. He reached over and patted the ancient

dog, and he apologized, “I been around him so much I never notice how he stinks.”

“Well, I can’t stand him in here,” said Carlson. “That stink hangs around even after he’s gone.” He walked over with his heavy-legged stride and looked

down at the dog. “Got no teeth,” he said. “He’s all stiff with rheumatism. He

ain’t no good to you, Candy. An’ he ain’t no good to himself. Why’n’t you

shoot him, Candy?”

The old man squirmed uncomfortably. “Well—hell! I had him so long. Had him since he was a pup. I herded sheep with him.” He said proudly, “You wouldn’t think it to look at him now, but he was the best damn sheep dog I ever seen.”

George said, “I seen a guy in Weed that had an Airedale could herd sheep.

Learned it from the other dogs.”

Carlson was not to be put off. “Look, Candy. This ol’ dog jus’ suffers hisself all the time. If you was to take him out and shoot him right in the back of the head—” he leaned over and pointed, “—right there, why he’d never know what hit him.”

Candy looked about unhappily. “No,” he said softly. “No, I couldn’t do that.

I had ‘im too long.”

“He don’t have no fun,” Carlson insisted. “And he stinks to beat hell. Tell you what. I’ll shoot him for you. Then it won’t be you that does it.”

Candy threw his legs off his bunk. He scratched the white stubble whiskers on his cheek nervously. “I’m so used to him,” he said softly. “I had him from a pup.”

“Well, you ain’t bein’ kind to him keepin’ him alive,” said Carlson. “Look,

Slim’s bitch got a litter right now. I bet Slim would give you one of them pups

to raise up, wouldn’t you, Slim?”

The skinner had been studying the old dog with his calm eyes. “Yeah,” he said. “You can have a pup if you want to.” He seemed to shake himself free for speech. “Carl’s right, Candy. That dog ain’t no good to himself. I wisht somebody’d shoot me if I get old an’ a cripple.”

“Tell about the house, George,” Lennie begged.

“Sure, we’d have a little house an’ a room to ourself. Little fat iron stove, an’

in the winter we’d keep a fire goin’ in it. It ain’t enough land so we’d have to

work too hard. Maybe six, seven hours a day. We wouldn’t have to buck no

barley eleven hours a day. An’ when we put in a crop, why, we’d be there to

take the crop up. We’d know what come of our planting.”

“An’ rabbits,” Lennie said eagerly. “An’ I’d take care of ‘em. Tell how I’d do

that, George.”

“Sure, you’d go out in the alfalfa patch an’ you’d have a sack. You’d fill up

the sack and bring it in an’ put it in the rabbit cages.”

“They’d nibble an’ they’d nibble,” said Lennie, “the way they do. I seen

‘em.”

“Ever’ six weeks or so,” George continued, “them does would throw a litter

so we’d have plenty rabbits to eat an’ to sell. An’ we’d keep a few pigeons to go

flyin’ around the win’mill like they done when I was a kid.” He looked raptly at

the wall over Lennie’s head. “An’ it’d be our own, an’ nobody could can us. If

we don’t like a guy we can say, ‘Get the hell out,’ and by God he’s got to do it.

An’ if a fren’ come along, why we’d have an extra bunk, an’ we’d say, ‘Why

don’t you spen’ the night?’ an’ by God he would. We’d have a setter dog and a

couple stripe cats, but you gotta watch out them cats don’t get the little rabbits.”

Lennie breathed hard. “You jus’ let ‘em try to get the rabbits. I’ll break their

God damn necks. I’ll . . . . I’ll smash ‘em with a stick.” He subsided, grumbling

to himself, threatening the future cats which might dare to disturb the future

rabbits.

George sat entranced with his own picture.

When Candy spoke they both jumped as though they had been caught doing

something reprehensible. Candy said, “You know where’s a place like that?”

Candy joined the attack with joy. “Glove fulla vaseline,” he said disgustedly.

Curley glared at him. His eyes slipped on past and lighted on Lennie; and

Lennie was still smiling with delight at the memory of the ranch.

Curley stepped over to Lennie like a terrier. “What the hell you laughin’ at?”

Lennie looked blankly at him. “Huh?”

Then Curley’s rage exploded. “Come on, ya big bastard. Get up on your feet.

No big son-of-a-bitch is gonna laugh at me. I’ll show ya who’s yella.”

Lennie looked helplessly at George, and then he got up and tried to retreat.

Curley was balanced and poised. He slashed at Lennie with his left, and then

smashed down his nose with a right. Lennie gave a cry of terror. Blood welled

from his nose. “George,” he cried. “Make ‘um let me alone, George.” He

backed until he was against the wall, and Curley followed, slugging him in the

face. Lennie’s hands remained at his sides; he was too frightened to defend

himself.

George was on his feet yelling, “Get him, Lennie. Don’t let him do it.”

Lennie covered his face with his huge paws and bleated with terror. He cried,

“Make ‘um stop, George.” Then Curley attacked his stomach and cut off his

wind.

Slim jumped up. “The dirty little rat,” he cried, “I’ll get ‘um myself.”

George put out his hand and grabbed Slim. “Wait a minute,” he shouted. He

cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled, “Get ‘im, Lennie!”

Lennie took his hands away from his face and looked about for George, and

Curley slashed at his eyes. The big face was covered with blood. George yelled

again, “I said get him.”

Curley’s fist was swinging when Lennie reached for it. The next minute

Curley was flopping like a fish on a line, and his closed fist was lost in Lennie’s

big hand. George ran down the room. “Leggo of him, Lennie. Let go.”

But Lennie watched in terror the flopping little man whom he held. Blood

ran down Lennie’s face, one of his eyes was cut and closed. George slapped himin the face again and again, and still Lennie held on to the closed fist. Curley

was white and shrunken by now, and his struggling had become weak. He stood

crying, his fist lost in Lennie’s paw.

Noiselessly Lennie appeared in the open doorway and stood there looking in,

his big shoulders nearly filling the opening. For a moment Crooks did not see

him, but on raising his eyes he stiffened and a scowl came on his face. His hand

came out from under his shirt. Lennie smiled helplessly in an attempt to make friends.

Crooks said sharply, “You got no right to come in my room. This here’s my

room. Nobody got any right in here but me.”

Lennie gulped and his smile grew more fawning. “I ain’t doing nothing,” he

said. “Just come to look at my puppy. And I seen your light,” he explained.

“Well, I got a right to have a light. You go on get outa my room. I ain’t

wanted in the bunk house, and you ain’t wanted in my room.”

“Why ain’t you wanted?” Lennie asked.

“’Cause I’m black. They play cards in there, but I can’t play because I’m

black. They say I stink. Well, I tell you, you all of you stink to me.”

Lennie flapped his big hands helplessly. “Ever’body went into town,” he

said. “Slim an’ George an’ ever’body. George says I gotta stay here an’ not get

in no trouble. I seen your light.”

“Well, what do you want?”

“Nothing—I seen your light. I thought I could jus’ come in an’ set.”

Crooks stared at Lennie, and he reached behind him and took down the

spectacles and adjusted them over his pink ears and stared again. “I don’t know

what you’re doin’ in the barn anyway,” he complained. “You ain’t no skinner.

They’s no call for a bucker to come into the barn at all. You ain’t no skinner.

You ain’t got nothing to do with the horses.”

“The pup,” Lennie repeated. “I come to see my pup.”

“Well, go see your pup, then. Don’t come in a place where you’re notwanted.”

Crooks laughed again. “A guy can talk to you an’ be sure you won’t go

blabbin’. Couple of weeks an’ them pups’ll be all right. George knows what

he’s about. Jus’ talks, an’ you don’t understand nothing.” He leaned forward

excitedly. “This is just a nigger talkin’, an’ a busted-back nigger. So it don’t

mean nothing, see? You couldn’t remember it anyways. I seen it over an’ over

—a guy talkin' to another guy and it don’t make no difference if he don’t hear or

understand. The thing is, they’re talkin’, or they’re settin’ still not talkin’. It

don’t make no difference, no difference.” His excitement had increased until he

pounded his knee with this hand. “George can tell you screwy things, and it

don’t matter. It’s just the talking. It’s just bein’ with another guy. That’s all.” He

paused.

His voice grew soft and persuasive. “S’pose George don’t come back no

more. S’pose he took a powder and just ain’t coming back. What’ll you do

then?”

Lennie’s attention came gradually to what had been said. “What?” he demanded.

“I said s’pose George went into town tonight and you never heard of him no

more.” Crooks pressed forward some kind of private victory. “Just s’pose that,”

he repeated.

“He won’t do it,” Lennie cried. “George wouldn’t do nothing like that. I been

with George a long a time. He’ll come back tonight—” But the doubt was too

much for him. “Don’t you think he will?”

Crooks’ face lighted with pleasure in his torture. “Nobody can’t tell what a

guy’ll do,” he observed calmly. “Le’s say he wants to come back and can’t.

S’pose he gets killed or hurt so he can’t come back.”

Lennie struggled to understand. “George won’t do nothing like that,” he

repeated. “George is careful. He won’t get hurt. He ain’t never been hurt, ‘cause

he’s careful.”

“Well, s’pose, jus’ s’pose he don’t come back. What’ll you do then?”

Lennie’s face wrinkled with apprehension. “I don’ know. Say, what you

doin’ anyways?” he cried. “This ain’t true. George ain’t got hurt.”

Crooks bored in on him. “Want me ta tell ya what’ll happen? They’ll take ya

to the booby hatch. They’ll tie ya up with a collar, like a dog.”

Suddenly Lennie’s eyes centered and grew quiet, and mad. He stood up and

walked dangerously toward Crooks. “Who hurt George?” he demanded.

Crooks saw the danger as it approached him. He edged back on his bunk to

get out of the way. “I was just supposin’,” he said.

“Come on in. If ever’body’s comin’ in, you might just as well.” It was

difficult for Crooks to conceal his pleasure with anger.

Candy came in, but he was still embarrassed, “You got a nice cozy little

place in here,” he said to Crooks. “Must be nice to have a room all to yourself

this way.”

“Sure,” said Crooks. “And a manure pile under the window. Sure, it’s swell.”

Lennie broke in, “You said about them rabbits.”

Candy leaned against the wall beside the broken collar while he scratched the

wrist stump. “I been here a long time,” he said. “An’ Crooks been here a long

time. This’s the first time I ever been in his room.”

Crooks said darkly, “Guys don’t come into a colored man’s room very much.

Nobody been here but Slim. Slim an’ the boss.”

Candy quickly changed the subject. “Slim’s as good a skinner as I ever

seen.”

Lennie leaned toward the old swamper. “About them rabbits,” he insisted.

Candy smiled. “I got it figured out. We can make some money on them

rabbits if we go about it right.”

“But I get to tend ‘em,” Lennie broke in. “George says I get to tend ‘em. He

promised.”

Crooks interrupted brutally. “You guys is just kiddin’ yourself. You’ll talk

about it a hell of a lot, but you won’t get no land. You’ll be a swamper here till

they take you out in a box. Hell, I seen too many guys. Lennie here’ll quit an’ be

on the road in two, three weeks. Seems like ever’ guy got land in his head.”

Candy rubbed his cheek angrily. “You God damn right we’re gonna do it.

George says we are. We got the money right now.”

“Yeah?” said Crooks. “An’ where’s George now? In town in a whorehouse.

That’s where your money’s goin’. Jesus, I seen it happen too many times. I seen

too many guys with land in their head. They never get none under their hand.”

Crooks stood up from his bunk and faced her. “I had enough,” he said coldly.

“You got no rights comin’ in a colored man’s room. You got no rights messing

around in here at all. Now you jus’ get out, an’ get out quick. If you don’t, I’m

gonna ast the boss not to ever let you come in the barn no more.”

She turned on him in scorn. “Listen, Nigger,” she said. “You know what I

can do to you if you open your trap?”

Crooks stared hopelessly at her, and then he sat down on his bunk and drew

into himself.

She closed on him. “You know what I could do?”

Crooks seemed to grow smaller, and he pressed himself against the wall.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Well, you keep your place then, Nigger. I could get you strung upon a tree

so easy it ain’t even funny.”

Crooks had reduced himself to nothing. There was no personality, no ego—

nothing to arouse either like or dislike. He said, “Yes, ma’am,” and his voice

was toneless.

For a moment she stood over him as though waiting for him to move so that

she could whip at him again; but Crooks sat perfectly still, his eyes averted,

everything that might be hurt drawn in. She turned at last to the other two.

Old Candy was watching her, fascinated. “If you was to do that, we’d tell,”he said quietly. “We’d tell about you framin’ Crooks.”

“Tell an’ be damned,” she cried. “Nobody’d listen to you, an’ you know it.

Nobody’d listen to you.”

Candy subsided. “No . . . .” he agreed. “Nobody’d listen to us.”

Lennie whined, “I wisht George was here. I wisht George was here.”

Candy stepped over to him. “Don’t you worry none,” he said. “I jus’ heard

the guys comin’ in. George’ll be in the bunk house right now, I bet.” He turned

to Curley’s wife. “You better go home now,” he said quietly. “If you go right

now, we won’t tell Curley you was here.”

She appraised him coolly. “I ain’t sure you heard nothing.”

“Better not take no chances,” he said. “If you ain’t sure, you better take the

safe way.”

She turned to Lennie. “I’m glad you bust up Curley a little bit. He got it

comin’ to him. Sometimes I’d like to bust him myself.” She slipped out the door

and disappeared into the dark barn. And while she went through the barn, the

halter chains rattled, and some horses snorted and some stamped their feet.

Only Lennie was in the barn, and Lennie sat in the hay beside a packing case

under a manger in the end of the barn that had not been filled with hay. Lennie

sat in the hay and looked at a little dead puppy that lay in front of him. Lennie

looked at it for a long time, and then he put out his huge hand and stroked it,

stroked it clear from one end to the other.

And Lennie said softly to the puppy, “Why do you got to get killed? You

ain’t so little as mice. I didn’t bounce you hard.” He bent the pup’s head up and

looked in its face, and he said to it, “Now maybe George ain’t gonna let me tend

no rabbits, if he fin’s out you got killed.”

He scooped a little hollow and laid the puppy in it and covered it over with

hay, out of sight; but he continued to stare at the mound he had made. He said,

“This ain’t no bad thing like I got to go hide in the brush. Oh! no. This ain’t. I’ll

tell George I foun’ it dead.”

He unburied the puppy and inspected it, and he stroked it from ears to tail.

He went on sorrowfully, “But he’ll know. George always knows. He’ll say,

‘You done it. Don’t try to put nothing over on me.’ An’ he’ll say, ‘Now jus’ for

that you don’t get to tend no rabbits!’”

Suddenly his anger arose. “God damn you,” he cried. “Why do you got to get

killed? You ain’t so little as mice.” He picked up the pup and hurled it from

him. He turned his back on it. He sat bent over his knees and he whispered,

“Now I won’t get to tend the rabbits. Now he won’t let me.” He rocked himself

back and forth in his sorrow.

From outside came the clang of horseshoes on the iron stake, and then a little

chorus of cries. Lennie got up and brought the puppy back and laid it on the hay

and sat down. He stroked the pup again. “You wasn’t big enough,” he said.

“They tol’ me and tol’ me you wasn’t. I di’n’t know you’d get killed so easy.”

He worked his fingers on the pup’s limp ear. “Maybe George won’t care,” hesaid. “This here God damn little son-of-a-bitch wasn’t nothing to George.”

Candy said, “What done it?”

George looked coldly at him. “Ain’t you got any idear?” he asked. And

Candy was silent. “I should of knew,” George said hopelessly. “I guess maybe

way back in my head I did.”

Candy asked, “What we gonna do now, George? What we gonna do now?”

George was a long time in answering. “Guess . . . . we gotta tell the . . . .

guys. I guess we gotta get ‘im an’ lock ‘im up. We can’t let ‘im get away. Why,

the poor bastard’d starve.” And he tried to reassure himself. “Maybe they’ll lock

‘im up an’ be nice to ‘im.”

But Candy said excitedly, “We oughta let ‘im get away. You don’t know that

Curley. Curley gon’ta wanta get ‘im lynched. Curley’ll get ‘im killed.”

George watched Candy’s lips. “Yeah,” he said at last, “that’s right, Curley

will. An’ the other guys will.” And he looked back at Curley’s wife.

Now Candy spoke his greatest fear. “You an’ me can get that little place,

can’t we, George? You an’ me can go there an’ live nice, can’t we, George?

Can’t we?”

Before George answered, Candy dropped his head and looked down at the

hay. He knew.

George said softly, “—I think I knowed from the very first. I think I know’d

we’d never do her. He usta like to hear about it so much I got to thinking maybewe would.”

“Then—it’s all off?” Candy asked sulkily.

George didn’t answer his question. George said, “I’ll work my month an’ I’ll

take my fifty bucks an’ I’ll stay all night in some lousy cat house. Or I’ll set in

some poolroom till ever’body goes home. An’ then I’ll come back an’ work

another month an’ I’ll have fifty bucks more.”

Candy said, “He’s such a nice fella. I didn’ think he’d do nothing like this.”

The deep green pool of the Salinas River was still in the late afternoon.

Already the sun had left the valley to go climbing up the slopes of the Gabilan

Mountains, and the hilltops were rosy in the sun. But by the pool among the

mottled sycamores, a pleasant shade had fallen.

A water snake glided smoothly up the pool, twisting its periscope head from

side to side; and it swam the length of the pool and came to the legs of a

motionless heron that stood in the shallows. A silent head and beak lanced

down and plucked it out by the head, and the beak swallowed the little snake

while its tail waved frantically.

A far rush of wind sounded and a gust drove through the tops of the trees like

a wave. The sycamore leaves turned up their silver sides, the brown, dry leaves

on the ground scudded a few feet. And row on row of tiny wind waves flowed

up the pool’s green surface.

As quickly as it had come, the wind died, and the clearing was quiet again.

The heron stood in the shallows, motionless and waiting. Another little water

snake swam up the pool, turning its periscope head from side to side.

Suddenly Lennie appeared out of the brush, and he came as silently as a

creeping bear moves. The heron pounded the air with its wings, jacked itself

clear of the water and flew off down river. The little snake slid in among the

reeds at the pool’s side.

Lennie came quietly to the pool’s edge. He knelt down and drank, barely

touching his lips to the water. When a little bird skittered over the dry leaves

behind him, his head jerked up and he strained toward the sound with eyes and

ears until he saw the bird, and then he dropped his head and drank again.

And George raised the gun and steadied it, and he brought the muzzle of it

close to the back of Lennie’s head. The hand shook violently, but his face set

and his hand steadied. He pulled the trigger. The crash of the shot rolled up the

hills and rolled down again. Lennie jarred, and then settled slowly forward to

the sand, and he lay without quivering.

George shivered and looked at the gun, and then he threw it from him, back

up on the bank, near the pile of old ashes.

The brush seemed filled with cries and with the sound of running feet. Slim’s

voice shouted. “George. Where you at, George?”

But George sat stiffly on the bank and looked at his right hand that had

thrown the gun away. The group burst into the clearing, and Curley was ahead.

He saw Lennie lying on the sand. “Got him, by God.” He went over and looked

down at Lennie, and then he looked back at George. “Right in the back of the

head,” he said softly.

Slim came directly to George and sat down beside him, sat very close to him.

“Never you mind,” said Slim. “A guy got to sometimes.”

But Carlson was standing over George. “How’d you do it?” he asked.

“I just done it,” George said tiredly.“Did he have my gun?”

“Yeah. He had your gun.”

“An’ you got it away from him and you took it an’ you killed him?”

“Yeah. Tha’s how.” George’s voice was almost a whisper. He looked

steadily at his right hand that had held the gun.

Slim twitched George’s elbow. “Come on, George. Me an’ you’ll go in an’

get a drink.”

George let himself be helped to his feet. “Yeah, a drink.”

Slim said, “You hadda, George. I swear you hadda. Come on with me.” He

led George into the entrance of the trail and up toward the highway.

Curley and Carlson looked after them. And Carlson said, “Now what the hell

ya suppose is eatin’ them two guys?”