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William Stoner entered the University of Missouri as a freshman in the year 1910, at the age of nineteen. Eight years later, during the height of World War I, he received his Doctor of Philosophy degree and accepted an instructorship at the same University, where he taught until his death in 1956. He did not rise above the rank of assistant professor, and few students remembered him with any sharpness after they had taken his courses. When he died his colleagues made a memorial contribution of a medieval manuscript to the University library. This manuscript may still be found in the Rare Books Collection, bearing the inscription: 'Presented to the Library of the University of Missouri, in memory of William Stoner, Department of English. By his colleagues.'

An occasional student who comes upon the name may wonder idly who William Stoner was, but he seldom pursues his curiosity beyond a casual question. Stoner's colleagues, who held him in no particular esteem when he was alive, speak of him rarely now; to the older ones, his name is a reminder of the end that awaits them all, and to the younger ones it is merely a sound which evokes no sense of the past and no identity with which they can associate themselves or their careers.

★

He was born in 1891 on a small farm in central Missouri near the village of Booneville, some forty miles from Columbia, the home of the University. Though his parents were young at the time of his birth—his father twenty-five, his mother barely twenty—Stoner thought of them, even when he was a boy, as old. At thirty his father looked fifty; stooped by labor, he gazed without hope at the arid patch of land that sustained the family from one year to the next. His mother regarded her life patiently, as if it were a long moment that she had to endure. Her eyes were pale and blurred, and the tiny wrinkles around them were enhanced by thin graying hair worn straight over her head and caught in a bun at the back.

From the earliest time he could remember, William Stoner had his duties. At the age of six he milked the bony cows, slopped the pigs in the sty a few yards from the house, and gathered small eggs from a flock of spindly chickens. And even when he started attending the rural school eight miles from the farm, his day, from before dawn until after dark, was filled with work of one sort or another. At seventeen his shoulders were already beginning to stoop beneath the weight of his occupation.

It was a lonely household, of which he was an only child, and it was bound together by the necessity of its toil. In the evenings the three of them sat in the small kitchen lighted by a single kerosene lamp, staring into the yellow flame; often during the hour or so between supper and bed, the only sound that could be heard was the weary movement of a body in a straight chair and the soft creak of a timber giving a little beneath the age of the house.

The house was built in a crude square, and the unpainted timbers sagged around the porch and doors. It had with the years taken on the colors of the dry land—gray and

brown, streaked with white. On one side of the house was a long parlor, sparsely furnished with straight chairs and a few hewn tables, and a kitchen, where the family spent most of its little time together. On the other side were two bedrooms, each furnished with an iron bedstead enameled white, a single straight chair, and a table, with a lamp and a wash basin on it. The floors were of unpainted plank, unevenly spaced and cracking with age, up through which dust steadily seeped and was swept back each day by Stoner's mother.

At school he did his lessons as if they were chores only somewhat less exhausting than those around the farm. When he finished high school in the spring of 1910, he expected to take over more of the work in the fields; it seemed to him that his father grew slower and more weary with the passing months.

But one evening in late spring, after the two men had spent a full day hoeing corn, his father spoke to him in the kitchen, after the supper dishes had been cleared away.

'County agent come by last week.'

William looked up from the red-and-white-checked oilcloth spread smoothly over the round kitchen table. He did not speak.

'Says they have a new school at the University in Columbia. They call it a College of Agriculture. Says he thinks you ought to go. It takes four years.'

'Four years,' William said. 'Does it cost money?'

'You could work your room and board,' his father said. 'Your ma has a first cousin owns a place just outside Columbia. There would be books and things. I could send you two or three dollars a month.'

William spread his hands on the tablecloth, which gleamed dully under the lamplight. He had never been farther from

home than Booneville, fifteen miles away. He swallowed to steady his voice.

'Think you could manage the place all by yourself?' he asked.

'Your ma and me could manage. I'd plant the upper twenty in wheat; that would cut down the hand work.'

William looked at his mother. 'Ma?' he asked.

She said tonelessly, 'You do what your pa says.'

'You really want me to go?' he asked, as if he half hoped for a denial. 'You really want me to?'

His father shifted his weight on the chair. He looked at his thick, callused fingers, into the cracks of which soil had penetrated so deeply that it could not be washed away. He laced his fingers together and held them up from the table, almost in an attitude of prayer.

'I never had no schooling to speak of,' he said, looking at his hands. 'I started working a farm when I finished sixth grade. Never held with schooling when I was a young 'un. But now I don't know. Seems like the land gets drier and harder to work every year; it ain't rich like it was when I was a boy. County agent says they got new ideas, ways of doing things they teach you at the University. Maybe he's right. Sometimes when I'm working the field I get to thinking.' He paused. His fingers tightened upon themselves, and his clasped hands dropped to the table. 'I get to thinking—' He scowled at his hands and shook his head. 'You go on to the University come fall. Your ma and me will manage.'

It was the longest speech he had ever heard his father make. That fall he went to Columbia and enrolled in the University as a freshman in the College of Agriculture.

He came to Columbia with a new black broadcloth suit ordered from the catalogue of Sears & Roebuck and paid

for with his mother's egg money, a worn greatcoat that had belonged to his father, a pair of blue serge trousers that once a month he had worn to the Methodist church in Booneville, two white shirts, two changes of work clothing, and twenty-five dollars in cash, which his father had borrowed from a neighbor against the fall wheat. He started walking from Booneville, where in the early morning his father and mother brought him on the farm's flat-bed, mule-drawn wagon.

It was a hot fall day, and the road from Booneville to Columbia was dusty; he had been walking for nearly an hour before a goods wagon came up beside him and the driver asked him if he wanted a ride. He nodded and got up on the wagon seat. His serge trousers were red with dust to his knees, and his sun- and wind-browned face was caked with dirt, where the road dust had mingled with his sweat. During the long ride he kept brushing at his trousers with awkward hands and running his fingers through his straight sandy hair, which would not lie flat on his head.

They got to Columbia in the late afternoon. The driver let Stoner off at the outskirts of town and pointed to a group of buildings shaded by tall elms. 'That's your University,' he said. 'That's where you'll be going to school.'

For several minutes after the man had driven off, Stoner stood unmoving, staring at the complex of buildings. He had never before seen anything so imposing. The red brick buildings stretched upward from a broad field of green that was broken by stone walks and small patches of garden. Beneath his awe, he had a sudden sense of security and serenity he had never felt before. Though it was late, he walked for many minutes about the edges of the campus, only looking, as if he had no right to enter.

It was nearly dark when he asked a passer-by directions

to Ashland Gravel, the road that would lead him to the farm owned by Jim Foote, the first cousin of his mother for whom he was to work; and it was after dark when he got to the white two-storied frame house where he was to live. He had not seen the Footes before, and he felt strange going to them so late.

They greeted him with a nod, inspecting him closely. After a moment, during which Stoner stood awkwardly in the door-way, Jim Foote motioned him into a small dim parlor crowded with overstuffed furniture and bric-a-brac on dully gleaming tables. He did not sit.

'Et supper?' Foote asked.

'No, sir,' Stoner answered.

Mrs Foote crooked an index finger at him and padded away. Stoner followed her through several rooms into a kitchen, where she motioned him to sit at a table. She put a pitcher of milk and several squares of cold cornbread before him. He sipped the milk, but his mouth, dry from excitement, would not take the bread.

Foote came into the room and stood beside his wife. He was a small man, not more than five feet three inches, with a lean face and a sharp nose. His wife was four inches taller, and heavy; rimless spectacles hid her eyes, and her thin lips were tight. The two of them watched hungrily as he sipped his milk.

'Feed and water the livestock, slop the pigs in the morning,' Foote said rapidly.

Stoner looked at him blankly. 'What?'

'That's what you do in the morning,' Foote said, 'before you leave for your school. Then in the evening you feed and slop again, gather the eggs, milk the cows. Chop firewood when you find time. Weekends, you help me with whatever I'm doing.'

'Yes, sir,' Stoner said.

Foote studied him for a moment. 'College,' he said and shook his head.

So for nine months' room and board he fed and watered the livestock, slopped pigs, gathered eggs, milked cows, and chopped firewood. He also plowed and harrowed fields, dug stumps (in the winter breaking through three inches of frozen soil), and churned butter for Mrs Foote, who watched him with her head bobbing in grim approval as the wooden churner splashed up and down through the milk.

He was quartered on an upper floor that had once been a storeroom; his only furniture was a black iron bedstead with sagging frames that supported a thin feather mattress, a broken table that held a kerosene lamp, a straight chair that sat unevenly on the floor, and a large box that he used as a desk. In the winter the only heat he got seeped up through the floor from the rooms below; he wrapped himself in the tattered quilts and blankets allowed him and blew on his hands so that they could turn the pages of his books without tearing them.

He did his work at the University as he did his work on the farm—thoroughly, conscientiously, with neither pleasure nor distress. At the end of his first year his grade average was slightly below a B; he was pleased that it was no lower and not concerned that it was no higher. He was aware that he had learned things that he had not known before, but this meant to him only that he might do as well in his second year as he had done in his first.

The summer after his first year of college he returned to his father's farm and helped with the crops. Once his father asked him how he liked school, and he replied that he liked it fine. His father nodded and did not mention the matter again.

It was not until he returned for his second year that William Stoner learned why he had come to college.

By his second year he was a familiar figure on the campus. In every season he wore the same black broadcloth suit, white shirt, and string tie; his wrists protruded from the sleeves of the jacket, and the trousers rode awkwardly about his legs, as if it were a uniform that had once belonged to someone else.

His hours of work increased with his employers' growing indolence, and he spent the long evenings in his room methodically doing his class assignments; he had begun the sequence that would lead him to a Bachelor of Science degree in the College of Agriculture, and during this first semester of his second year he had two basic sciences, a course from the school of Agriculture in soil chemistry, and a course that was rather perfunctorily required of all University students—a semester survey of English literature.

After the first few weeks he had little difficulty with the science courses; there was so much work to be done, so many things to be remembered. The course in soil chemistry caught his interest in a general way; it had not occurred to him that the brownish clods with which he had worked for most of his life were anything other than what they appeared to be, and he began vaguely to see that his growing knowledge of them might be useful when he returned to his father's farm. But the required survey of English literature troubled and disquieted him in a way nothing had ever done before.

The instructor was a man of middle age, in his early fifties; his name was Archer Sloane, and he came to his task of teaching with a seeming disdain and contempt, as if he perceived between his knowledge and what he could say a

gulf so profound that he would make no effort to close it. He was feared and disliked by most of his students, and he responded with a detached, ironic amusement. He was a man of middle height, with a long, deeply lined face, cleanly shaven; he had an impatient gesture of running his fingers through the shock of his gray curling hair. His voice was flat and dry, and it came through barely moving lips without expression or intonation; but his long thin fingers moved with grace and persuasion, as if giving to the words a shape that his voice could not.

Away from the classroom, doing his chores about the farm or blinking against the dim lamplight as he studied in his windowless attic room, Stoner was often aware that the image of this man had risen up before the eye of his mind. He had difficulty summoning up the face of any other of his instructors or remembering anything very specific about any other of his classes; but always on the threshold of his awareness waited the figure of Archer Sloane, and his dry voice, and his contemptuously offhand words about some passage from *Beowulf*, or some couplet of Chaucer's.

He found that he could not handle the survey as he did his other courses. Though he remembered the authors and their works and their dates and their influences, he nearly failed his first examination; and he did little better on his second. He read and reread his literature assignments so frequently that his work in other courses began to suffer; and still the words he read were words on pages, and he could not see the use of what he did.

And he pondered the words that Archer Sloane spoke in class, as if beneath their flat, dry meaning he might discover a clue that would lead him where he was intended to go; he hunched forward over the desk-top of a chair too small to hold him comfortably, grasping the edges of the desk-top

so tightly that his knuckles showed white against his brown hard skin; he frowned intently and gnawed at his underlip. But as Stoner's and his classmates' attention grew more desperate, Archer Sloane's contempt grew more compelling. And once that contempt erupted into anger and was directed at William Stoner alone.

The class had read two plays by Shakespeare and was ending the week with a study of the sonnets. The students were edgy and puzzled, half frightened at the tension growing between themselves and the slouching figure that regarded them from behind the lectern. Sloane had read aloud to them the seventy-third sonnet; his eyes roved about the room and his lips tightened in a humorless smile.

'What does the sonnet mean?' he asked abruptly, and paused, his eyes searching the room with a grim and almost pleased hopelessness. 'Mr Wilbur?' There was no answer. 'Mr Schmidt?' Someone coughed. Sloane turned his dark bright eyes upon Stoner. 'Mr Stoner, what does the sonnet mean?'

Stoner swallowed and tried to open his mouth.

'It is a sonnet, Mr Stoner,' Sloane said dryly, 'a poetical composition of fourteen lines, with a certain pattern I am sure you have memorized. It is written in the English language, which I believe you have been speaking for some years. Its author is William Shakespeare, a poet who is dead, but who nevertheless occupies a position of some importance in the minds of a few.' He looked at Stoner for a moment more, and then his eyes went blank as they fixed unseeingly beyond the class. Without looking at his book he spoke the poem again; and his voice deepened and softened, as if the words and sounds and rhythms had for a moment become himself:

'That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruin'd choirs where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west;
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must expire,
Consumed with that which it was nourisht by.
This thou perceivest, which makes thy love
more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.'

In a moment of silence, someone cleared his throat. Sloane repeated the lines, his voice becoming flat, his own again.

'This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more
strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.'

Sloane's eyes came back to William Stoner, and he said dryly, 'Mr Shakespeare speaks to you across three hundred years, Mr Stoner; do you hear him?'

William Stoner realized that for several moments he had been holding his breath. He expelled it gently, minutely aware of his clothing moving upon his body as his breath went out of his lungs. He looked away from Sloane about the room. Light slanted from the windows and settled upon the faces of his fellow students, so that the illumination seemed to come from within them and go out against a

dimness; a student blinked, and a thin shadow fell upon a cheek whose down had caught the sunlight. Stoner became aware that his fingers were unclenching their hard grip on his desk-top. He turned his hands about under his gaze, marveling at their brownness, at the intricate way the nails fit into his blunt finger-ends; he thought he could feel the blood flowing invisibly through the tiny veins and arteries, throbbing delicately and precariously from his fingertips through his body.

Sloane was speaking again. 'What does he say to you, Mr Stoner? What does his sonnet mean?'

Stoner's eyes lifted slowly and reluctantly. 'It means,' he said, and with a small movement raised his hands up toward the air; he felt his eyes glaze over as they sought the figure of Archer Sloane. 'It means,' he said again, and could not finish what he had begun to say.

Sloane looked at him curiously. Then he nodded abruptly and said, 'Class is dismissed.' Without looking at anyone he turned and walked out of the room.

William Stoner was hardly aware of the students about him who rose grumbling and muttering from their seats and shuffled out of the room. For several minutes after they left he sat unmoving, staring out before him at the narrow planked flooring that had been worn bare of varnish by the restless feet of students he would never see or know. He slid his own feet across the floor, hearing the dry rasp of wood on his soles, and feeling the roughness through the leather. Then he too got up and went slowly out of the room.

The thin chill of the late fall day cut through his clothing. He looked around him, at the bare gnarled branches of the trees that curled and twisted against the pale sky. Students, hurrying across the campus to their classes, brushed against

him; he heard the mutter of their voices and the click of their heels upon the stone paths, and saw their faces, flushed by the cold, bent downward against a slight breeze. He looked at them curiously, as if he had not seen them before, and felt very distant from them and very close to them. He held the feeling to him as he hurried to his next class, and held it through the lecture by his professor in soil chemistry, against the droning voice that recited things to be written in notebooks and remembered by a process of drudgery that even now was becoming unfamiliar to him.

In the second semester of that school year William Stoner dropped his basic science courses and interrupted his Ag School sequence; he took introductory courses in philosophy and ancient history and two courses in English literature. In the summer he returned again to his parents' farm and helped his father with the crops and did not mention his work at the University.

When he was much older, he was to look back upon his last two undergraduate years as if they were an unreal time that belonged to someone else, a time that passed, not in the regular flow to which he was used, but in fits and starts. One moment was juxtaposed against another, yet isolated from it, and he had the feeling that he was removed from time, watching as it passed before him like a great unevenly turned diorama.

He became conscious of himself in a way that he had not done before. Sometimes he looked at himself in a mirror, at the long face with its thatch of dry brown hair, and touched his sharp cheekbones; he saw the thin wrists that protruded inches out of his coat sleeves; and he wondered if he appeared as ludicrous to others as he did to himself.

He had no plans for the future, and he spoke to no one

of his uncertainty. He continued to work at the Footes' for his room and board, but he no longer worked the long hours of his first two years at the University. For three hours every afternoon and for half a day on the weekends he allowed himself to be used as Jim and Serena Foote desired; the rest of the time he claimed as his own.

Some of this time he spent in his little attic room atop the Foote house; but as often as he could, after his classes were over and his work at the Footes' done, he returned to the University. Sometimes, in the evenings, he wandered in the long open quadrangle, among couples who strolled together and murmured softly; though he did not know any of them, and though he did not speak to them, he felt a kinship with them. Sometimes he stood in the center of the quad, looking at the five huge columns in front of Jesse Hall that thrust upward into the night out of the cool grass; he had learned that these columns were the remains of the original main building of the University, destroyed many years ago by fire. Grayish silver in the moonlight, bare and pure, they seemed to him to represent the way of life he had embraced, as a temple represents a god.

In the University library he wandered through the stacks, among the thousands of books, inhaling the musty odor of leather, cloth, and drying page as if it were an exotic incense. Sometimes he would pause, remove a volume from the shelves, and hold it for a moment in his large hands, which tingled at the still unfamiliar feel of spine and board and unresisting page. Then he would leaf through the book, reading a paragraph here and there, his stiff fingers careful as they turned the pages, as if in their clumsiness they might tear and destroy what they took such pains to uncover.

He had no friends, and for the first time in his life he became aware of loneliness. Sometimes, in his attic room at

night, he would look up from a book he was reading and gaze in the dark corners of his room, where the lamplight flickered against the shadows. If he stared long and intently, the darkness gathered into a light, which took the insubstantial shape of what he had been reading. And he would feel that he was out of time, as he had felt that day in class when Archer Sloane had spoken to him. The past gathered out of the darkness where it stayed, and the dead raised themselves to live before him; and the past and the dead flowed into the present among the alive, so that he had for an intense instant a vision of denseness into which he was compacted and from which he could not escape, and had no wish to escape. Tristan, Iseult the fair, walked before him; Paolo and Francesca whirled in the glowing dark; Helen and bright Paris, their faces bitter with consequence, rose from the gloom. And he was with them in a way that he could never be with his fellows who went from class to class, who found a local habitation in a large university in Columbia, Missouri, and who walked unheeding in a midwestern air.

In a year he learned Greek and Latin well enough to read simple texts; often his eyes were red and burning from strain and lack of sleep. Sometimes he thought of himself as he had been a few years before and was astonished by the memory of that strange figure, brown and passive as the earth from which it had emerged. He thought of his parents, and they were nearly as strange as the child they had borne; he felt a mixed pity for them and a distant love.

Near the middle of his fourth year at the University, Archer Sloane stopped him one day after class and asked him to drop by his office for a chat.

It was winter, and a low damp midwestern mist floated over the campus. Even at midmorning the thin branches

of the dogwood trees glistened with hoarfrost, and the black vines that trailed up the great columns before Jesse Hall were rimmed with iridescent crystals that winked against the grayness. Stoner's greatcoat was so shabby and worn that he had decided not to wear it to see Sloane even though the weather was freezing. He was shivering as he hurried up the walk and up the wide stone steps that led into Jesse Hall.

After the cold, the heat inside the building was intense. The grayness outside trickled through the windows and glassed doors on either side of the hall, so that the yellow tiled floors glowed brighter than the gray light upon them, and the great oaken columns and the rubbed walls gleamed from their dark. Shuffling footsteps hissed upon the floors, and a murmur of voices was muted by the great expanse of the hall; dim figures moved slowly, mingling and parting; and the oppressive air gathered the smell of the oiled walls and the wet odor of woolen clothing. Stoner went up the smooth marble stairs to Archer Sloane's second-floor office. He knocked on the closed door, heard a voice, and went in.

The office was long and narrow, lighted by a single window at the far end. Shelves crowded with books rose to the high ceiling. Near the window a desk was wedged, and before this desk, half turned and outlined darkly against the light, sat Archer Sloane.

'Mr Stoner,' Sloane said dryly, half rising and indicating a leather-covered chair facing him. Stoner sat down.

'I have been looking through your records.' Sloane paused and lifted a folder from his desk, regarding it with detached irony. 'I hope you do not mind my inquisitiveness.'

Stoner wet his lips and shifted on the chair. He tried to fold his large hands together so that they would be invisible. 'No, sir,' he said in a husky voice.

Sloane nodded. 'Good. I note that you began your course of studies here as an agriculture student and that sometime during your sophomore year you switched your program to literature. Is that correct?'

'Yes, sir,' Stoner said.

Sloane leaned back in his chair and gazed up at the square of light that came in from the high small window. He tapped his fingertips together and turned back to the young man who sat stiffly in front of him.

'The official purpose of this conference is to inform you that you will have to make a formal change of study program, declaring your intention to abandon your initial course of study and declare your final one. It's a matter of five minutes or so at the registrar's office. You will take care of that, won't you?'

'Yes, sir,' Stoner said.

'But as you may have guessed, that is not the reason I asked you to drop by. Do you mind if I inquire a little about your future plans?'

'No, sir,' Stoner said. He looked at his hands, which were twisted tightly together.

Sloane touched the folder of papers that he had dropped on his desk. 'I gather that you were a bit older than the ordinary student when you first entered the University. Nearly twenty, I believe?'

'Yes, sir,' Stoner said.

'And at that time your plans were to undertake the sequence offered by the school of Agriculture?'

'Yes, sir.'

Sloane leaned back in his chair and regarded the high dim ceiling. He asked abruptly, 'And what are your plans now?'

Stoner was silent. This was something he had not thought

about, had not wanted to think about. He said at last, with a touch of resentment, 'I don't know. I haven't given it much thought.'

Sloane said, 'Are you looking forward to the day when you emerge from these cloistered walls into what some call the world?'

Stoner grinned through his embarrassment. 'No, sir.'

Sloane tapped the folder of papers on his desk. 'I am informed by these records that you come from a farming community. I take it that your parents are farm people?'

Stoner nodded.

'And do you intend to return to the farm after you receive your degree here?'

'No, sir,' Stoner said, and the decisiveness of his voice surprised him. He thought with some wonder of the decision he had suddenly made.

Sloane nodded. 'I should imagine a serious student of literature *might* find his skills not precisely suited to the persuasion of the soil.'

'I won't go back,' Stoner said as if Sloane had not spoken. 'I don't know what I'll do exactly.' He looked at his hands and said to them, 'I can't quite realize that I'll be through so soon, that I'll be leaving the University at the end of the year.'

Sloane said casually, 'There is, of course, no absolute need for you to leave. I take it that you have no independent means?'

Stoner shook his head.

'You have an excellent undergraduate record. Except for your'—he lifted his eyebrows and smiled—'except for your sophomore survey of English literature, you have all A's in your English courses; nothing below a B elsewhere. If you could maintain yourself for a year or so beyond graduation,

you could, I'm sure, successfully complete the work for your Master of Arts; after which you would probably be able to teach while you worked toward your doctorate. If that sort of thing would interest you at all.'

Stoner drew back. 'What do you mean?' he asked and heard something like fear in his voice.

Sloane leaned forward until his face was close; Stoner saw the lines on the long thin face soften, and he heard the dry mocking voice become gentle and unprotected.

'But don't you know, Mr Stoner?' Sloane asked. 'Don't you understand about yourself yet? You're going to be a teacher.'

Suddenly Sloane seemed very distant, and the walls of the office receded. Stoner felt himself suspended in the wide air, and he heard his voice ask, 'Are you sure?'

'I'm sure,' Sloane said softly.

'How can you tell? How can you be sure?'

'It's love, Mr Stoner,' Sloane said cheerfully. 'You are in love. It's as simple as that.'

It was as simple as that. He was aware that he nodded to Sloane and said something inconsequential. Then he was walking out of the office. His lips were tingling and his fingertips were numb; he walked as if he were asleep, yet he was intensely aware of his surroundings. He brushed against the polished wooden walls in the corridor, and he thought he could feel the warmth and age of the wood; he went slowly down the stairs and wondered at the veined cold marble that seemed to slip a little beneath his feet. In the halls the voices of the students became distinct and individual out of the hushed murmur, and their faces were close and strange and familiar. He went out of Jesse Hall into the morning, and the grayness no longer seemed to oppress the campus; it led his eyes outward and upward into

the sky, where he looked as if toward a possibility for which he had no name.

In the first week of June, in the year 1914, William Stoner, with sixty other young men and a few young ladies, received his Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Missouri.

To attend the ceremony, his parents—in a borrowed buggy drawn by their old dun mare—had started the day before, driving overnight the forty-odd miles from the farm, so that they arrived at the Footes' shortly after dawn, stiff from their sleepless journey. Stoner went down into the yard to meet them. They stood side by side in the crisp morning light and awaited his approach.

Stoner and his father shook hands with a single quick pumping action, not looking at each other.

'How do,' his father said.

His mother nodded. 'Your pa and me come down to see you graduate.'

For a moment he did not speak. Then he said, 'You'd better come in and get some breakfast.'

They were alone in the kitchen; since Stoner had come to the farm the Footes had got in the habit of sleeping late. But neither then nor after his parents had finished breakfast could he bring himself to tell them of his change of plans, of his decision not to return to the farm. Once or twice he started to speak; then he looked at the brown faces that rose nakedly out of their new clothing, and thought of the long journey they had made and of the years they had awaited his return. He sat stiffly with them until they finished the last of their coffee, and until the Footes roused themselves and came into the kitchen. Then he told them that he had to go early to the University and that he would see them there later in the day, at the exercises.

He wandered about the campus, carrying the black robe

and cap that he had hired; they were heavy and troublesome, but he could find no place to leave them. He thought of what he would have to tell his parents, and for the first time realized the finality of his decision, and almost wished that he could recall it. He felt his inadequacy to the goal he had so recklessly chosen and felt the attraction of the world he had abandoned. He grieved for his own loss and for that of his parents, and even in his grief felt himself drawing away from them.

He carried this feeling of loss with him throughout the graduation exercises; when his name was spoken and he walked across the platform to receive a scroll from a man faceless behind a soft gray beard, he could not believe his own presence, and the roll of parchment in his hand had no meaning. He could only think of his mother and father sitting stiffly and uneasily in the great crowd.

When the ceremonies were over he drove with them back to the Footes', where they were to stay overnight and start the journey home the following dawn.

They sat late in the Footes' parlor. Jim and Serena Foote stayed up with them for a while. Every now and then Jim and Stoner's mother would exchange the name of a relative and lapse into silence. His father sat on a straight chair, his legs spread apart, leaning a little forward, his broad hands clasping his kneecaps. Finally the Footes looked at each other and yawned and announced that it was late. They went to their bedroom, and the three were left alone.

There was another silence. His parents, who looked straight ahead in the shadows cast by their own bodies, every now and then glanced sideways at their son, as if they did not wish to disturb him in his new estate.

After several minutes William Stoner leaned forward and spoke, his voice louder and more forceful than he had

intended. 'I ought to have told you sooner. I ought to have told you last summer, or this morning.'

His parents' faces were dull and expressionless in the lamplight.

'What I'm trying to say is, I'm not coming back with you to the farm.'

No one moved. His father said, 'You got some things to finish up here, we can go back in the morning and you can come on home in a few days.'

Stoner rubbed his face with his open palm. 'That's—not what I meant. I'm trying to tell you I won't be coming back to the farm at all.'

His father's hands tightened on his kneecaps and he drew back in the chair. He said, 'You get yourself in some kind of trouble?'

Stoner smiled. 'It's nothing like that. I'm going on to school for another year, maybe two or three.'

His father shook his head. 'I seen you get through this evening. And the county agent said the farm school took four years.'

Stoner tried to explain to his father what he intended to do, tried to evoke in him his own sense of significance and purpose. He listened to his words fall as if from the mouth of another, and watched his father's face, which received those words as a stone receives the repeated blows of a fist. When he had finished he sat with his hands clasped between his knees and his head bowed. He listened to the silence of the room.

Finally his father moved in his chair. Stoner looked up. His parents' faces confronted him; he almost cried out to them.

'I don't know,' his father said. His voice was husky and tired. 'I didn't figure it would turn out like this. I thought

I was doing the best for you I could, sending you here. Your ma and me has always done the best we could for you.'

'I know,' Stoner said. He could not look at them longer. 'Will you be all right? I could come back for a while this summer and help. I could—'

'If you think you ought to stay here and study your books, then that's what you ought to do. Your ma and me can manage.'

His mother was facing him, but she did not see him. Her eyes were squeezed shut; she was breathing heavily, her face twisted as if in pain, and her closed fists were pressed against her cheeks. With wonder Stoner realized that she was crying, deeply and silently, with the shame and awkwardness of one who seldom weeps. He watched her for a moment more; then he got heavily to his feet and walked out of the parlor. He found his way up the narrow stairs that led to his attic room; for a long time he lay on his bed and stared with open eyes into the darkness above him.

2

Two weeks after Stoner received his Bachelor of Arts degree, Archduke Francis Ferdinand was assassinated at Sarajevo by a Serbian nationalist; and before autumn war was general all over Europe. It was a topic of continuing interest among the older students; they wondered about the part America would eventually play, and they were pleasantly unsure of their own futures.

But before William Stoner the future lay bright and certain and unchanging. He saw it, not as a flux of event and change and potentiality, but as a territory ahead that awaited his exploration. He saw it as the great University library, to which new wings might be built, to which new books might be added and from which old ones might be withdrawn, while its true nature remained essentially unchanged. He saw the future in the institution to which he had committed himself and which he so imperfectly understood; he conceived himself changing in that future, but he saw the future itself as the instrument of change rather than its object.

Near the end of that summer, just before the beginning of the autumn semester, he visited his parents. He had intended to help with the summer crop; but he found that his father had hired a Negro field hand who worked with a quiet, fierce intensity, accomplishing by himself in a day

nearly as much as William and his father together had once done in the same time. His parents were happy to see him, and they seemed not to resent his decision. But he found that he had nothing to say to them; already, he realized, he and his parents were becoming strangers; and he felt his love increased by its loss. He returned to Columbia a week earlier than he had intended.

He began to resent the time he had to spend at work on the Foote farm. Having come to his studies late, he felt the urgency of study. Sometimes, immersed in his books, there would come to him the awareness of all that he did not know, of all that he had not read; and the serenity for which he labored was shattered as he realized the little time he had in life to read so much, to learn what he had to know.

He finished his course work for the Master of Arts degree in the spring of 1915 and spent the summer completing his thesis, a prosodic study of one of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Before the summer was out the Footes told him that they would not need him any longer on the farm.

He had expected his dismissal and in some ways he welcomed it; but for a moment after it happened he had a twinge of panic. It was as if the last tie between himself and the old life had been cut. He spent the last weeks of the summer at his father's farm, putting the finishing touches on his thesis. By that time Archer Sloane had arranged for him to teach two classes of beginning English to incoming freshmen, while he started to work toward his Ph.D. For this he received four hundred dollars a year. He removed his belongings from the Footes' tiny attic room, which he had occupied for five years, and took an even smaller room near the University.

Though he was to teach only the fundamentals of grammar and composition to a group of unselected freshmen,

he looked forward to his task with enthusiasm and with a strong sense of its significance. He planned the course during the week before the opening of the autumn semester, and saw the kinds of possibility that one sees as one struggles with the materials and subjects of an endeavor; he felt the logic of grammar, and he thought he perceived how it spread out from itself, permeating the language and supporting human thought. In the simple compositional exercises he made for his students he saw the potentialities of prose and its beauties, and he looked forward to animating his students with the sense of what he perceived.

But in the first classes he met, after the opening routines of rolls and study plans, when he began to address himself to his subject and his students, he found that his sense of wonder remained hidden within him. Sometimes, as he spoke to his students, it was as if he stood outside himself and observed a stranger speaking to a group assembled unwillingly; he heard his own flat voice reciting the materials he had prepared, and nothing of his own excitement came through that recitation.

He found his release and fulfillment in the classes in which he himself was a student. There he was able to recapture the sense of discovery he had felt on that first day, when Archer Sloane had spoken to him in class and he had, in an instant, become someone other than who he had been. As his mind engaged itself with its subject, as it grappled with the power of the literature he studied and tried to understand its nature, he was aware of a constant change within himself; and as he was aware of that, he moved outward from himself into the world which contained him, so that he knew that the poem of Milton's that he read or the essay of Bacon's or the drama of Ben Jonson's changed the world which was its subject, and changed it because of

its dependence upon it. He seldom spoke in class, and his papers rarely satisfied him. Like his lectures to his young students, they did not betray what he most profoundly knew.

He began to be on familiar terms with a few of his fellow students who were also acting instructors in the department. Among those were two with whom he became friendly, David Masters and Gordon Finch.

Masters was a slight dark youth with a sharp tongue and gentle eyes. Like Stoner, he was just beginning his doctoral program, though he was a year or so younger than Stoner. Among the faculty and the graduate students he had a reputation for arrogance and impertinence, and it was generally conceded that he would have some difficulty in finally obtaining his degree. Stoner thought him the most brilliant man he had ever known and deferred to him without envy or resentment.

Gordon Finch was large and blond, and already, at the age of twenty-three, beginning to run to fat. He had taken an undergraduate degree from a commercial college in St Louis, and at the University had made various stabs at advanced degrees in the departments of economics, history, and engineering. He had begun work on his degree in literature largely because he had been able, at the last minute, to get a small instructing job in the English Department. He quickly showed himself to be the most nearly indifferent student in the department. But he was popular with the freshmen, and he got along well with the older faculty members and with the officers of the administration.

The three of them—Stoner, Masters, and Finch—got in the habit of meeting on Friday afternoons at a small saloon in downtown Columbia, drinking large schooners of beer and talking late into the night. Though he found the only social pleasure he knew in these evenings, Stoner often

wondered at their relationship. Though they got along well enough together, they had not become close friends; they had no confidences and seldom saw each other outside their weekly gatherings.

None of them ever raised the question of that relationship. Stoner knew that it had not occurred to Gordon Finch, but he suspected that it had to David Masters. Once, late in the evening, as they sat at a rear table in the dimness of the saloon, Stoner and Masters talked of their teaching and study with the awkward facetiousness of the very serious. Masters, holding aloft a hard-boiled egg from the free lunch as if it were a crystal ball, said, 'Have you gentlemen ever considered the question of the true nature of the University? Mr Stoner? Mr Finch?'

Smiling, they shook their heads.

'I'll bet you haven't. Stoner, here, I imagine, sees it as a great repository, like a library or a whorehouse, where men come of their free will and select that which will complete them, where all work together like little bees in a common hive. The True, the Good, the Beautiful. They're just around the corner, in the next corridor; they're in the next book, the one you haven't read, or in the next stack, the one you haven't got to. But you'll get to it someday. And when you do—when you do—' He looked at the egg for a moment more, then took a large bite of it and turned to Stoner, his jaws working and his dark eyes bright.

Stoner smiled uncomfortably, and Finch laughed aloud and slapped the table. 'He's got you, Bill. He's got you good.'

Masters chewed for a moment more, swallowed, and turned his gaze to Finch. 'And you, Finch. What's your idea?' He held up his hand. 'You'll protest you haven't thought of it. But you have. Beneath that bluff and hearty exterior there works a simple mind. To you, the institution is an

instrument of good—to the world at large, of course, and just incidentally to yourself. You see it as a kind of spiritual sulphur-and-molasses that you administer every fall to get the little bastards through another winter; and you're the kindly old doctor who benignly pats their heads and pockets their fees.'

Finch laughed again and shook his head. 'I swear, Dave, when you get going—'

Masters put the rest of the egg in his mouth, chewed contentedly for a moment, and took a long swallow of beer. 'But you're both wrong,' he said. 'It is an asylum or—what do they call them now?—a rest home, for the infirm, the aged, the discontent, and the otherwise incompetent. Look at the three of us—*we* are the University. The stranger would not know that we have so much in common, but *we* know, don't we? We know well.'

Finch was laughing. 'What's that, Dave?'

Interested now in what he was saying, Masters leaned intently across the table. 'Let's take you first, Finch. Being as kind as I can, I would say that you are the incompetent. As you yourself know, you're not really very bright—though that doesn't have everything to do with it.'

'Here, now,' Finch said, still laughing.

'But you're bright enough—and *just* bright enough—to realize what would happen to you in the world. You're cut out for failure, and you know it. Though you're capable of being a son-of-a-bitch, you're not quite ruthless enough to be so consistently. Though you're not precisely the most honest man I've ever known, neither are you heroically dishonest. On the one hand, you're capable of work, but you're just lazy enough so that you can't work as hard as the world would want you to. On the other hand, you're not quite so lazy that you can impress upon the world a

sense of your importance. And you're not lucky—not really. No aura rises from you, and you wear a puzzled expression. In the world you would always be on the fringe of success, and you would be destroyed by your failure. So you are chosen, elected; providence, whose sense of humor has always amused me, has snatched you from the jaws of the world and placed you safely here, among your brothers.'

Still smiling and ironically malevolent, he turned to Stoner. 'Nor do you escape, my friend. No indeed. Who are you? A simple son of the soil, as you pretend to yourself? Oh, no. You, too, are among the infirm—you are the dreamer, the madman in a madder world, our own midwestern Don Quixote without his Sancho, gamboling under the blue sky. You're bright enough—brighter anyhow than our mutual friend. But you have the taint, the old infirmity. You think there's something *here*, something to find. Well, in the world you'd learn soon enough. You, too, are cut out for failure; not that you'd fight the world. You'd let it chew you up and spit you out, and you'd lie there wondering what was wrong. Because you'd always expect the world to be something it wasn't, something it had no wish to be. The weevil in the cotton, the worm in the beanstalk, the borer in the corn. You couldn't face them, and you couldn't fight them; because you're too weak, and you're too strong. And you have no place to go in the world.'

'What about you?' Finch asked. 'What about yourself?'

'Oh,' Masters said, leaning back, 'I'm one of you. Worse, in fact. I'm too bright for the world, and I won't keep my mouth shut about it; it's a disease for which there is no cure. So I must be locked up, where I can be safely irresponsible, where I can do no harm.' He leaned forward again and smiled at them. 'We're all poor Toms, and we're a-cold.'

'King Lear,' Stoner said seriously.

'Act Three, Scene Four,' said Masters. 'And so providence, or society, or fate, or whatever name you want to give it, has created this hovel for us, so that we can go in out of the storm. It's for us that the University exists, for the dispossessed of the world; not for the students, not for the selfless pursuit of knowledge, not for any of the reasons that you hear. We give out the reasons, and we let a few of the ordinary ones in, those that would do in the world; but that's just protective coloration. Like the church in the Middle Ages, which didn't give a damn about the laity or even about God, we have our pretenses in order to survive. And we shall survive—because we have to.'

Finch shook his head admiringly. 'You sure make us sound bad, Dave.'

'Maybe I do,' Masters said. 'But bad as we are, we're better than those on the outside, in the muck, the poor bastards of the world. We do no harm, we say what we want, and we get paid for it; and that's a triumph of natural virtue, or pretty damn close to it.'

Masters leaned back from the table, indifferent, no longer concerned with what he had said.

Gordon Finch cleared his throat. 'Well, now,' he said earnestly. 'You may have something in what you say, Dave. But I think you go too far. I really do.'

Stoner and Masters smiled at each other, and they spoke no more of the question that evening. But for years afterward, at odd moments, Stoner remembered what Masters had said; and though it brought him no vision of the University to which he had committed himself, it did reveal to him something about his relationship to the two men, and it gave him a glimpse of the corrosive and unspoiled bitterness of youth.

★

On May 7, 1915, a German submarine sank the British liner *Lusitania*, with a hundred and fourteen American passengers on board; by the end of 1916 submarine warfare by the Germans was unrestricted, and relations between the United States and Germany steadily worsened. In February 1917 President Wilson broke off diplomatic relations. On April 6 a state of war was declared by Congress to exist between Germany and the United States.

With that declaration, thousands of young men across the nation, as if relieved that the tension of uncertainty had finally been broken, besieged the recruiting stations that had been hastily set up some weeks before. Indeed, hundreds of young men had not been able to wait for America's intervention and had as early as 1915 signed up for duty with the Royal Canadian forces or as ambulance drivers for one of the European allied armies. A few of the older students at the University had done so; and although William Stoner had not known any of these, he heard their legendary names with increasing frequency as the months and weeks drew on to the moment that they all knew must eventually come.

War was declared on a Friday, and although classes remained scheduled the following week, few students or professors made a pretense of meeting them. They milled about in the halls and gathered in small groups, murmuring in hushed voices. Occasionally the tense quietness erupted into near violence; twice there were general anti-German demonstrations, in which students shouted incoherently and waved American flags. Once there was a brief-lived demonstration against one of the professors, an old and bearded teacher of Germanic languages, who had been born in Munich and who as a youth had attended the University of Berlin. But when the professor met the angry and flushed little group of students, blinked in bewilderment, and held