



A Fable (Vintage International)

By William Faulkner

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This novel won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award in 1955. An allegorical story of World War I, set in the trenches in France and dealing ostensibly with a mutiny in a French regiment, it was originally considered a sharp departure for Faulkner. Recently it has come to be recognized as one of his major works and an essential part of the Faulkner *oeuvre*. Faulkner himself fought in the war, and his descriptions of it "rise to magnificence," according to *The New York Times*, and include, in Malcolm Cowley's words, "some of the most powerful scenes he ever conceived."

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Editorial Review

From the Inside Flap

An allegorical story of World War I set in the trenches in France and dealing ostensibly with a mutiny in a French regiment.

About the Author

William Faulkner was born in New Albany, Mississippi, on September 25, 1897. His family was rooted in local history: his great-grandfather, a Confederate colonel and state politician, was assassinated by a former partner in 1889, and his grandfather was a wealthy lawyer who owned a railroad. When Faulkner was five his parents moved to Oxford, Mississippi, where he received a desultory education in local schools, dropping out of high school in 1915. Rejected for pilot training in the U.S. Army, he passed himself off as British and joined the Canadian Royal Air Force in 1918, but the war ended before he saw any service. After the war, he took some classes at the University of Mississippi and worked for a time at the university post office. Mostly, however, he educated himself by reading promiscuously.

Faulkner had begun writing poems when he was a schoolboy, and in 1924 he published a poetry collection, **The Marble Faun**, at his own expense. His literary aspirations were fueled by his close friendship with Sherwood Anderson, whom he met during a stay in New Orleans. Faulkner's first novel, **Soldier's Pay**, was published in 1926, followed a year later by **Mosquitoes**, a literary satire. His next book, **Flags in the Dust**, was heavily cut and rearranged at the publisher's insistence and appeared finally as **Sartoris** in 1929. In the meantime he had completed **The Sound and the Fury**, and when it appeared at the end of 1929 he had finished **Sanctuary** and was ready to begin writing **As I Lay Dying**. That same year he married Estelle Oldham, whom he had courted a decade earlier.

Although Faulkner gained literary acclaim from these and subsequent novels—**Light in August** (1932), **Pylon** (1935), **Absalom, Absalom!** (1936), **The Unvanquished** (1938), **The Wild Palms** (1939), **The Hamlet** (1940), and **Go Down, Moses** (1942)—and continued to publish stories regularly in magazines, he was unable to support himself solely by writing fiction. He worked as a screenwriter for MGM, Twentieth Century-Fox, and Warner Brothers, forming a close relationship with director Howard Hawks, with whom he worked on **To Have and Have Not**, **The Big Sleep**, and **Land of the Pharaohs**, among other films. In 1944 all but one of Faulkner's novels were out of print, and his personal life was at low ebb due in part to his chronic heavy drinking. During the war he had been discovered by Sartre and Camus and others in the French literary world. In the postwar period his reputation rebounded, as Malcolm Cowley's anthology **The Portable Faulkner** brought him fresh attention in America, and the immense esteem in which he was held in Europe consolidated his worldwide stature.

Faulkner wrote seventeen books set in the mythical Yoknapatawpha County, home of the Compson family in **The Sound and the Fury**. "No land in all fiction lives more vividly in its physical presence than this county of Faulkner's imagination," Robert Penn Warren wrote in an essay on Cowley's anthology. "The descendants of the old families, the descendants of bushwhackers and carpetbaggers, the swamp rats, the Negro cooks and farm hands, the bootleggers and gangsters, tenant farmers, college boys, county-seat lawyers, country storekeepers, peddlers—all are here in their fullness of life and their complicated interrelations." In 1950, Faulkner traveled to Sweden to accept the 1949 Nobel Prize for Literature. In later books—**Intruder in the Dust** (1948), **Requiem for a Nun** (1951), **A Fable** (1954), **The Town** (1957), **The Mansion** (1959), and **The Reivers** (1962)—he continued to explore what he had called "the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself," but did so in the context of Yoknapatawpha's increasing connection with

the modern world. He died of a heart attack on July 6, 1962.

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Chapter 1

Wednesday

Long before the first bugles sounded from the barracks within the city and the cantonments surrounding it, most of the city was already awake. These did not need to rise from the straw mattresses and thin pallet beds of their hive-dense tenements, because few of them save the children had ever lain down. Instead, they had huddled all night in one vast tongueless brotherhood of dread and anxiety, about the thin fires of braziers and meagre hearths, until the night wore at last away and a new day of anxiety and dread had begun.

Because the original regiment had been raised in this district, raised in person, in fact, by one of the glorious blackguards who later became Napoleon's marshals, who delivered the regiment into the Emperor's own hand, and along with it became one of the fiercest stars in that constellation which filled half the sky with its portent and blasted half the earth with its lightning. And most of its subsequent replacements had been drawn from this same district, so that most of these old men were not only veterans of it in their time, and these male children already dedicated to it when their time should come, but all these people were parents and kin, not only the actual old parents and kin of the doomed men, but fathers and mothers and sisters and wives and sweethearts whose sons and brothers and husbands and fathers and lovers might have been among the doomed men except for sheer blind chance and luck.

Even before the bugles' echoes died away, the warren'd purlieus were already disgorging them. A French or British or American aviator (or a German either for that matter, if he had had the temerity and the luck) could have watched it best: hovel and tenement voiding into lane and alley and nameless cul-de-sac, and lane and alley and cul-de-sac compounding into streets as the trickles became streams and the streams became rivers, until the whole city seemed to be pouring down the broad boulevards converging like wheelspokes into the Place de Ville, filling the Place and then, pressed on by the weight of its own converging mass, flowing like an unrecoiling wave up to the blank gates of the Hôtel where the three sentries of the three co-embattled nations flanked the three empty flagstaffs awaiting the three concordant flags.

They met the first troops here. It was a body of garrison cavalry, drawn up across the mouth of the wide main boulevard leading from the Place to the old gate in what had once been the city's ancient eastern wall, already in position and waiting as though the murmur of the flood's beginning had preceded it, right into the bedroom of the town- major himself. But the crowd paid no attention to the cavalry. It just continued to press on into the Place, slowing and stopping now because of its own massy congested weight, merely stirring and shifting constantly and faintly within its own mass while it stared, mazed and patient in the rising light, at the Hôtel door.

Then the sunrise gun crashed from the old citadel above the city; the three flags broke simultaneously from nowhere and climbed the three staffs. What they broke and climbed and peaked in was still dawn, hanging motionless for a moment. But when they streamed on the first morning breeze, they streamed into sunlight, flinging into sunlight the three mutual colors-the red for courage and pride, the white for purity and constancy, the blue for honor and truth. Then the empty boulevard behind the cavalry filled suddenly with sunlight which flung suddenly the tall shadows of the men and the horses outward upon the crowd as though the cavalry were charging it.

Only it was the people advancing on the cavalry. The mass made no sound. It was almost orderly, merely

irresistible in the concord of its frail components like a wave in its drops. For an instant the cavalry-there was an officer present, though a sergeant-major seemed to be in charge-did nothing. Then the sergeant-major shouted. It was not a command, because the troop did not stir. It sounded like nothing whatever, in fact: unintelligible: a thin forlorn cry hanging for a fading instant in the air like one of the faint, sourceless, musical cries of the high invisible larks now filling the sky above the city. His next shout though was a command. But it was already too late; the crowd had already underswept the military, irresistible in that passive and invincible humility, carrying its fragile bones and flesh into the iron orbit of the hooves and sabres with an almost inattentive, a humbly and passively contemptuous disregard, like martyrs entering an arena of lions.

For another instant, the cavalry held. And even then, it did not break. It just began to move in retrograde while still facing forward, as though it had been picked up bodily-the white-rolled eyes of the short-held horses, the high, small faces of the riders gaped with puny shouting beneath the raised sabres, all moving backward like the martial effigies out of a gutted palace or mansion or museum being swept along on the flood which had obliterated to instantaneous rubble the stone crypts of their glorious privacy. Then the mounted officer freed himself. For a moment, he alone seemed to be moving, because he alone was stationary above the crowd which was now parting and flowing on either side of him. Then he actually was moving, forward, breasting the still short-bitted horse, iron-held, into and through the moving crowd; a voice cried once somewhere beneath the horse-a child, a woman, possibly a man's voice eunuch-keened by fear or pain-as he forced the horse on, feinting and dodging the animal through the human river which made no effort to avoid him, which accepted the horse as water accepts a thrusting prow. Then he was gone. Accelerating now, the crowd poured into the boulevard. It flung the cavalry aside and poured on, blotting the intersecting streets as it passed them as a river in flood blots up its tributary creeks, until at last that boulevard too was one dense seething voiceless lake.

But before that, the infantry had already arrived, debouching from the Place de Ville on the crowd's rear long before the cavalry officer could have reported to the officer of the day, who would have dispatched the orderly, who would have summonsed the batman, who would have interrupted at his ablutions and shaving the adjutant, who would have waked the town-major in his nightcap, who would have telephoned or sent a runner to the infantry commander in the citadel. It was a whole battalion, armed except for packs, emerging from the Place de Ville in close route column, led by a light tank with its visor closed for action, which as it advanced, parted the crowd like a snow-plow, thrusting the divided parting back from either curb like the snow-plow's jumbled masses, the infantry deploying into two parallel files behind the advancing tank, until at last the whole boulevard from the Place to the old gate was clear and empty again between the two thin lines of interlocked bayoneted rifles. A slight commotion rose at one point behind the dyke of bayonets, but its area was not ten feet and it did not spread, and only those near it knew that anything was happening or had happened. And when a platoon sergeant stooped under the interlocked rifles and shouldered his way in, there was not much to see either: only a young woman, a girl, thin and poorly dressed, who had fainted. She lay as she had fallen: a thin huddle of shabby, travel-stained garments, as if she had come a long distance and mostly on foot or in farm carts, lying in the narrow grave-shaped space they had made for her to fall in, and, if such had been her intention, die in, while those who apparently had made no room for her to stand erect and breathe in, stood looking quietly down at her as people will, until someone makes the first move. The sergeant made it.

'At least pick her up,' he said savagely. 'Get her up out of the street where she wont be trampled.' A man moved then, but as he and the sergeant stooped, the woman opened her eyes; she even tried to help as the sergeant hauled her to her feet, not roughly, just impatient at the stupidly complicating ineptitude of civilians at all times, particularly at this one now which kept him from his abandoned post. 'Who does she belong to?' he said. There was no answer: only the quiet attentive faces. Apparently he had expected none. He was

already glancing about, though he had probably already seen that it would be impossible to get her out of the crowd, even if anyone had offered to take charge of her. He looked at her again; he started to speak again, to her this time, but stopped himself, furious and contained-a thick man of forty, moustached like a Sicilian brigand and wearing the service and campaign ribbons of three continents and two hemispheres on his tunic, whose racial stature Napoleon had shortened two or three inches a hundred years ago as Caesar had shortened that of the Italians and Hannibal that of the nameless pediment-pieces of his glory,-a husband and father who should (perhaps even could and would) have been a custodian of wine-casks in the Paris Halles if he and the Paris Halles had been cast on some other stage than this. He glanced again at the patient faces. 'Doesn't anybody--'

'She's hungry,' a voice said.

'All right,' the sergeant said. 'Has anybody--' But the hand had already extended the bread. It was the heel of a loaf, soiled and even a little warm from the pocket it had been carried in. The sergeant took it. But when he offered it to her, she refused it, quickly, glancing quickly about with something like fright in her face, her eyes, as if she were looking for an avenue of escape. The sergeant thrust the bread into her hands. 'Here,' he said harshly, with that roughness which was not unkindness but just impatience, 'eat it. You'll have to stay and look at him too, whether you want to or not.'

But she refused again, repudiating the bread, not the gift of it but the bread itself, and not to whoever had offered it, but to herself. It was as if she were trying to keep her eyes from looking at the bread, and knew that she could not. Even while they watched her, she surrendered. Her eyes, her whole body, denied her mouth's refusal, her eyes already devouring the bread before her hand reached to take it, snatching it from the sergeant and holding it to her face between both hands as though to hide either the bread from a ravisher, or her voracity from those who watched her, gnawing at the bread like a species of rodent, her eyes darting constantly above the concealing hands, not quite furtive, not quite secret: just anxious, watchful, and terrified,-a quality which glowed and faded and then glowed again like a coal she breathed on. But she was all right now, and the sergeant had begun to turn away, when the same voice spoke again. Without doubt, it belonged to the hand which had tendered the bread, though if the sergeant remarked it now, he gave no sign. But without doubt he did remark now that the face did not belong here at all, not now, at this time, this place-not just in France, but in forty kilometres of the Western Front, on this or any Wednesday in late May in 1918-; a man not so young actually, but rather simply youthful- looking, and this not merely in contrast to the other men among (or above rather; he was that tall, that unblemished) whom he stood, sound and erect and standing easily in a faded smock and rough trousers and stained shoes like a road-mender or perhaps a plasterer, who, to be here on this day on this place on the earth, must have been a soldier invalidated safely and securely and forever out since the fifth day of August almost four years ago now, yet who, if this was so, didn't show it, and if the sergeant remarked it or thought it, there was only the flicker of his glance to reveal that he had. The first time the man spoke, he had addressed the sergeant; this time, the sergeant had no doubt of it.

'But now she has eaten bread,' the man said. 'With that morsel, she should have bought immunity from her anguish, not?'

In fact, the sergeant had turned away, already in motion, when the voice, the murmur, stopped him-the murmur not so much gentle as just quiet, not so much tentative as bland, and possessing, for last of all the qualities, innocence: so that in the second, the instant of pause before he even began to turn back, he could see, feel all the quiet attentive faces watching, not him nor the speaker either, but as though looking at something intangible which the man's voice had created in the very air between them. Then the sergeant saw it too. It was the cloth he wore. Turning and looking back, not only at the man who had spoken but at all the

faces surrounding him, it seemed to him that he was looking, out of a sort of weary, prolonged, omniscient grief and sorrow so long borne and accustomed that, now when he happened to remember it, it was no longer even regret, at the whole human race across the insuperable barrier of the vocation and livelihood to which twenty years ago he had not merely dedicated but relinquished too, not just his life but his bones and flesh; it seemed to him that the whole ring of quiet attentive faces was stained with a faint, ineradicable, reflected horizon-blue. It had always been so; only the tint had changed-the drab and white of the desert and the tropics, the sharp full red-and-blue of the old uniform, and now the chameleon-azure of this present one since three years ago. He had expected that, not only expected, but accepted, relinquishing volition and the fear of hunger and decision to the extent of even being paid a few sure sous a day for the privilege and right, at no other cost than obedience and the exposure and risk of his tender and brittle bones and flesh, of immunity forever for his natural appetites. So for twenty years now he had looked at the anonymous denizens of the civilian world from the isolation, insulation, of that unchallengeable immunity, with a sort of contempt as alien intruders, rightless, on simple sufferance, himself and his interknit and interlocked kind in the impregnable fraternity of valor and endurance breasting through it behind the sharp and cleaving prow of their stripe and bars and stars and ribbons, like an armored ship (or, since a year ago now, a tank) through a shoal of fish. But now something had happened. Looking about at the waiting faces (all except the young woman's; she alone was not watching him, the end of the heel of bread still cupped against her chewing face between her slender dirt-stained hands, so that it was not he alone, but the two of them, himself and the kinless and nameless girl, who seemed to stand in a narrow well of unbreathing), it seemed to him with a kind of terror that it was himself who was the alien, and not just alien but obsolete; that on that day twenty years ago, in return for the right and the chance to wear on the battle-soiled breast of his coat the battle-grimed symbolical candy-stripes of valor and endurance and fidelity and physical anguish and sacrifice, he had sold his birthright in the race of man. But he did not show it. The candy-stripes themselves were the reason that he could not, and his wearing of them the proof that he would not.

'And so?' he said.

'It was the whole regiment,' the tall man said dreamily, in his murmurous, masculine, gentle, almost musing baritone. 'All of it. At zero, nobody left the trench except the officers and a few N.C.O.'s. That's right, not?'

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