AS I LAY DYING

[Illustrated]

BY

WILLIAM FAULKNER

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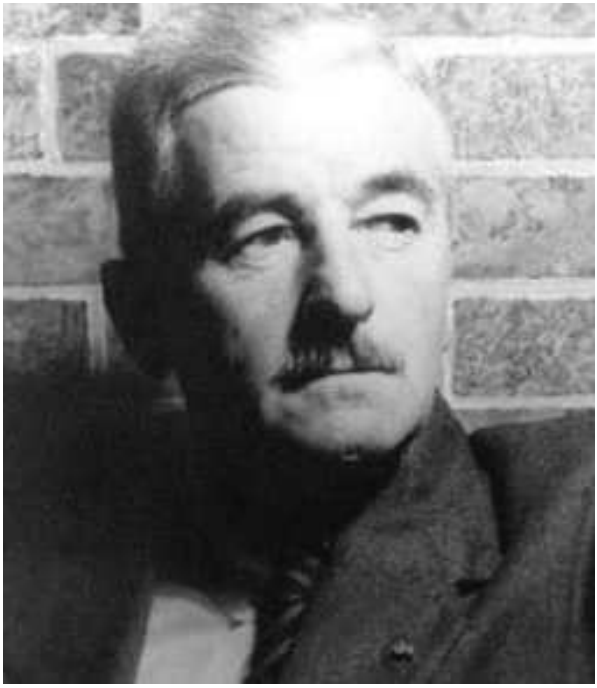
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ABOUT AUTHOR



One of the 20th century's greatest novelists, William Cuthbert Falkner, as his name was originally spelled, never graduated from high school. He was born in New Albany, Mississippi, the first of four sons, and moved with his family to Oxford, Mississippi, at the age of five. As a young man, influenced by the work of English poets A.E. Housman and Algernon Charles Swinburne, he began writing poems that explored Romantic themes of lost love and natural beauty.

After a brief stint in the Canadian Royal Air Force (where it is believed he claimed the "Faulkner" spelling), he enrolled at the University of Mississippi for three semesters, during which time he published his first poem, "L'Apres-Midi d'un Faune," in the New Republic. In 1924 his first book, a poetry collection entitled The Marble Faun, was published.

Soon thereafter, Faulkner moved to New Orleans, where he began to write the novels and stories for which he would become famous. In his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize, Faulkner spoke on the fate of the human race in the face of the coming Cold War, stating his faith in the survival of man because "he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's duty is to write about these things [...] The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail."

Faulkner died of a heart attack at the age of 64. He is buried in St. Peter's Cemetery in Oxford.

Dedication

To Hal Smith

Darl



JEWEL and I come up from the field, following the path in single file. Although I am fifteen feet ahead of him, anyone watching us from the cotton–house can see Jewel's frayed and broken straw hat a full head above my own.

The path runs straight as a plumb–line, worn smooth by feet and baked brick–hard by July, between the green rows of laid–by cotton, to the cotton–house in the centre of the field, where it turns and circles the cotton–house at four soft right

angles and goes on across the field again, worn so by feet in fading precision.

The cotton–house is of rough logs, from between which the chinking has long fallen. Square, with a broken roof set at a single pitch, it leans in empty and shimmering dilapidation in the sunlight, a single broad window in two opposite walls giving on to the approaches of the path. When we reach it I turn and follow the path which circles the house. Jewel, fifteen feet behind me, looking straight ahead, steps in a single stride through the window. Still staring straight ahead, his pale eyes like wood set into his wooden face, he crosses the floor in four strides with the rigid gravity of a cigar–store Indian dressed in patched overalls and endued with life from the hips down, and steps in a single stride through the opposite window and into the path again just as I come around the corner. In single file and five feet apart and Jewel now in front, we go on up the path toward the foot of the bluff.

Tull's wagon stands beside the spring, hitched to the rail, the reins wrapped about the seat stanchion. In the wagon–bed are two chairs. Jewel stops at the spring and takes the gourd from the willow branch and drinks. I pass him and mount the path, beginning to hear Cash's saw.

When I reach the top he has quit sawing. Standing in a litter of chips, he is fitting two of the boards together. Between the shadow spaces they are yellow as gold, like soft gold, bearing on their flanks in smooth undulations the marks of the adze blade: a good carpenter, Cash is. He holds the two planks on the trestle, fitted along the edges in a quarter of the finished box. He kneels and squints along the edge of them, then he lowers them and takes up the adze. A good carpenter. Addie Bundren could not want a better one, a better box to lie in. It will give her confidence and comfort. I go on to the house, followed by the

Chuck Chuck Chuck of the adze.

Cora



SO I saved out the eggs and baked yesterday. The cakes turned out right well. We depend a lot on our chickens. They are good layers, what few we have left after the possums and such. Snakes, too, in the summer. A snake will break up a hen–house quicker than anything. So after they were going to cost so much more than Mr. Tull thought, and after I promised that the difference in the number of eggs would make it up, I had to be more careful than ever because it was on my final say–so we took them. We could have stocked cheaper chickens, but I gave my promise as Miss Lawington said when she advised me to get a good breed, because

Mr. Tull himself admits that a good breed of cows or hogs pays in the long run. So when we lost so many of them we couldn't afford to use the eggs ourselves, because I could not have had Mr. Tull chide me when it was on my say–so we took them. So when Miss Lawington told me about the cakes I thought that I could bake them and earn enough at one time to increase the net value of the flock the equivalent of two head. And that by saving the eggs out one at a time, even the eggs wouldn't be costing anything. And that week they laid so well that I not only saved out enough eggs above what we had engaged to sell, to bake the cakes with, I had saved enough so that the flour and the sugar and the stove wood would not be costing anything. So I baked yesterday, more careful than ever I baked in my life, and the cakes turned out right well. But when we got to town this morning Miss Lawington told me the lady had changed her mind and was not going to have the party after all.

"She ought to taken those cakes anyway," Kate says.

"Well," I say, "I reckon she never had no use for them now."

"She ought to taken them," Kate says. "But those rich town ladies can change their minds. Poor folks can't."

Riches is nothing in the face of the Lord, for He can see into the heart. “Maybe I can sell them at the bazaar Saturday,” I say. They turned out real well.

“You can’t get two dollars a piece for them,” Kate says.

“Well, it isn’t like they cost me anything,” I say. I saved them out and swapped a dozen of them for the sugar and flour. It isn’t like the cakes cost me anything, as Mr. Tull himself realizes that the eggs I saved were over and beyond what we had engaged to sell, so it was like we had found the eggs or they had been given to us.

“She ought to taken those cakes when she same as gave you her word,” Kate says. The Lord can see into the heart. If it is His will that some folks has different ideas of honesty from other folks, it is not my place to question His decree.

“I reckon she never had any use for them,” I say. They turned out real well, too.

The quilt is drawn up to her chin, hot as it is, with only her two hands and her face outside. She is propped on the pillow, with her head raised so she can see out the window, and we can hear him every time he takes up the adze or the saw. If we were deaf we could almost watch her face and hear him, see him. Her face is wasted away so that the

bones draw just under the skin in white lines. Her eyes are like two candles when you watch them gutter down into the sockets of iron candle–sticks. But the eternal and the everlasting salvation and grace is not upon her.

"They turned out real nice," I say. "But not like the cakes Addie used to bake." You can see that girl's washing and ironing in the pillow–slip, if ironed it ever was. Maybe it will reveal her blindness to her, laying there at the mercy and the ministration of four men and a tom–boy girl. "There's not a woman in this section could ever bake with Addie Bundren," I say. "First thing we know she'll be up and baking again, and then we won't have any sale for ours at all." Under the quilt she makes no more of a hump than a rail would, and the only way you can tell she is breathing is by the sound of the mattress shucks. Even the hair at her cheek does not move, even with that girl standing right over her, fanning her with the fan. While we watch she swaps the fan to the other hand without stopping it.

"Is she sleeping?" Kate whispers.

"She's just watching Cash yonder," the girl says. We can hear the saw in the board. It sounds like snoring. Eula turns on the trunk and looks out the window. Her necklace looks real nice with her red

hat. You wouldn't think it only cost twenty–five cents.

"She ought to taken those cakes," Kate says.

I could have used the money real well. But it's not like they cost me anything except the baking. I can tell him that anybody is likely to make a miscue, but it's not all of them that can get out of it without loss, I can tell him. It's not everybody can eat their mistakes, I can tell him.

Someone comes through the hall. It is Darl. He does not look in as he passes the door. Eula watches him as he goes on and passes from sight again toward the back. Her hand rises and touches her beads lightly, and then her hair. When she finds me watching her, her eyes go blank.

Darl



PA and Vernon are sitting on the back porch. Pa is tilting snuff from the lid of his snuff–box into his lower lip, holding the lip outdrawn between thumb and finger. They look around as I cross the porch and dip the gourd into the water bucket and drink.

"Where's Jewel?" Pa says. When I was a boy I first learned how much better water tastes when it has set a while in a cedar bucket. Warmish–cool, with a faint taste like the hot July wind in cedar trees smells. It has to set at least six hours, and be drunk from a gourd. Water should never be drunk from metal.

And at night it is better still. I used to lie on the pallet in the hall, waiting until I could hear them all asleep, so I could get up and go back to the bucket. It would be black, the shelf black, the still surface of the water a round orifice in nothingness, where before I stirred it awake with the dipper I could see maybe a star or two in the bucket, and maybe in the dipper a star or two before I drank. After that I was bigger, older. Then I would wait until they all went to sleep so I could lie with my shirt–tail up, hearing them asleep, feeling myself without touching myself, feeling the cool silence blowing upon my parts and wondering if Cash was yonder in the darkness doing it too, had been doing it perhaps for the last two years before I could have wanted to or could have.

Pa's feet are badly splayed, his toes cramped and bent and warped, with no toenail at all on his little toes, from working so hard in the wet in home–made shoes when he was a boy. Beside his chair his brogans sit. They look as though they had been hacked with a blunt axe out of pig–iron. Vernon has been to town. I have never seen him go to town in overalls. His wife, they say. She taught school too, once.

I fling the dipper dregs to the ground and wipe my mouth on my sleeve. It is going to rain before

morning. Maybe before dark. “Down to the barn,” I say. “Harnessing the team.”

Down there fooling with that horse. He will go on through the barn, into the pasture. The horse will not be in sight: he is up there among the pine seedlings, in the cool. Jewel whistles, once and shrill. The horse snorts, then Jewel sees him, glinting for a gaudy instant among the blue shadows. Jewel whistles again; the horse comes dropping down the slope, stiff–legged, his ears cocking and flicking, his mis–matched eyes rolling, and fetches up twenty feet away, broadside on, watching Jewel over his shoulder in an attitude kittenish and alert.

“Come here, sir,” Jewel says. He moves. Moving that quick his coat, bunching, tongues swirling like so many flames. With tossing mane and tail and rolling eye the horse makes another short curveting rush and stops again, feet bunched, watching Jewel. Jewel walks steadily toward him, his hands at his sides. Save for Jewel’s legs they are like two figures carved for a tableau savage in the sun.

When Jewel can almost touch him, the horse stands on his hind legs and slashes down at Jewel. Then Jewel is enclosed by a glittering maze of hooves as by an illusion of wings; among them, beneath the upreared chest, he moves with the

flashing limberness of a snake. For an instant before the jerk comes on to his arms he sees his whole body earth–free, horizontal, whipping snake–limber, until he finds the horse's nostrils and touches earth again. Then they are rigid, motionless, terrific, the horse back–thrust on stiffened, quivering legs, with lowered head; Jewel with dug heels, shutting off the horse's wind with one hand, with the other patting the horse's neck in short strokes myriad and caressing, cursing the horse with obscene ferocity.

They stand in rigid terrific hiatus, the horse trembling and groaning. Then Jewel is on the horse's back. He flows upward in a stooping swirl like the lash of a whip, his body in mid–air shaped to the horse. For another moment the horse stands spraddled, with lowered head, before it bursts into motion. They descend the hill in a series of spine–jolting jumps, Jewel high, leech–like on the withers, to the fence where the horse bunches to a scuttering halt again.

"Well," Jewel says, "you can quit now, if you got a–plenty."

Inside the barn Jewel slides running to the ground before the horse stops. The horse enters the stall, Jewel following. Without looking back the horse kicks at him, slamming a single hoof into the

wall with a pistol–like report. Jewel kicks him in the stomach; the horse arches his neck back, crop–toothed; Jewel strikes him across the face with his fist and slides on to the trough and mounts upon it. Clinging to the hay–rack he lowers his head and peers out across the stall–tops and through the doorway. The path is empty; from here he cannot even hear Cash sawing. He reaches up and drags down hay in hurried armfuls and crams it into the rack.

"Eat," he says. "Get the goddamn stuff out of sight while you got a chance, you pussel–gutted bastard. You sweet son of a bitch," he says.

Jewel



IT'S because he stays out there, right under the window, hammering and sawing on that goddamn box. Where she's got to see him. Where every breath she draws is full of his knocking and sawing where she can see him saying See. See what a good one I am making for you. I told him to go somewhere else. I said Good God do you want to see her in it. It's like when he was a little boy and she says if she had some fertilizer she would try to raise some flowers and he taken the bread–pan and brought it back from the barn full of dung.

And now them others sitting there, like buzzards. Waiting, fanning themselves. Because I

said if you wouldn't keep on sawing and nailing at it until a man can't sleep even and her hands laying on the quilt like two of them roots dug up and tried to wash and you couldn't get them clean. I can see the fan and Dewey Dell's arm. I said if you'd just let her alone. Sawing and knocking, and keeping the air always moving so fast on her face that when you're tired you can't breathe it, and that goddamn adze going. One lick less. One lick less. One lick less until everybody that passes in the road will have to stop and see it and say what a fine carpenter he is. If it had just been me when Cash fell off of that church and if it had just been me when pa laid sick with that load of wood fell on him, it would not be happening with every bastard in the county coming in to stare at her because if there is a God what the hell is He for. It would just be me and her on a high hill and me rolling the rocks down the hill at their faces, picking them up and throwing them down the hill, faces and teeth and all by God until she was quiet and not that goddamn adze going. One lick less. One lick less and we could be quiet.

Darl



WE watch him come around the corner and mount the steps. He does not look at us. “You ready?” he says.

“If you’re hitched up,” I say. I say “Wait.” He stops, looking at pa. Vernon spits, without moving. He spits with decorous and deliberate precision into the pocked dust below the porch. Pa rubs his hands slowly on his knees. He is gazing out beyond the crest of the bluff, out across the land. Jewel watches him a moment, then he goes on to the pail and drinks again.

“I mislike undecision as much as ere a man,” pa says.

“It means three dollars,” I say. The shirt across pa’s hump is faded lighter than the rest of it. There is no sweat stain on his shirt. I have never seen a sweat stain on his shirt. He was sick once from working in the sun when he was twenty–two years old, and he tells people that if he ever sweats, he will die. I suppose he believes it.

“But if she don’t last until you get back,” he says. “She will be disappointed.”

Vernon spits into the dust. But it will rain before morning.

“She’s counted on it,” pa says. “She’ll want to start right away. I know her. I promised her I’d keep the team here and ready, and she’s counting on it.”

“We’ll need that three dollars then, sure,” I say. He gazes out over the land, rubbing his hands on his knees. Since he lost his teeth his mouth collapses in slow repetition when he dips. The stubble gives his lower face that appearance that old dogs have. “You’d better make up your mind soon, so we can get there and get a load on before dark,” I say.

“Ma ain’t that sick,” Jewel says. “Shut up, Darl.”

“That’s right,” Vernon says. “She seems more like herself to–day than she has in a week. Time you and Jewel get back, she’ll be setting up.”

“You ought to know,” Jewel says. “You been here often enough looking at her. You or your folks.” Vernon looks at him. Jewel’s eyes look like pale wood in his high–blooded face. He is a head taller than any of the rest of us, always was. I told them that’s why ma always whipped him and petted him more. Because he was peakling around the house more. That’s why she named him Jewel I told them.

“Shut up, Jewel,” pa says, but as though he is not listening much. He gazes out across the land, rubbing his knees.

“You could borrow the loan of Vernon’s team and we could catch up with you,” I say. “If she didn’t wait for us.”

“Ah, shut your goddamn mouth,” Jewel says.

“She’ll want to go in ourn,” pa says. He rubs his knees. “Don’t ere a man mislike it more.”

“It’s laying there, watching Cash whittle on that damn … ” Jewel says. He says it harshly, savagely, but he does not say the word. Like a little boy in the dark to flail his courage and suddenly aghast into silence by his own noise.

“She wanted that like she wants to go in our own wagon,” pa says. “She’ll rest easier for knowing it’s a good one, and private. She was ever a private woman. You know it well.”

“Then let it be private,” Jewel says. “But how the hell can you expect it to be——” He looks at the back of pa’s head, his eyes like pale wooden eyes.

“Sho,” Vernon says, “she’ll hold on till it’s finished. She’ll hold on till everything’s ready, till her own good time. And with the roads like they are now, it won’t take you no time to get her to town.”

“It’s fixing up to rain,” pa says. “I am a luckless man. I have ever been.” He rubs his hands on his knees. “It’s that durn doctor, liable to come at any time. I couldn’t get word to him till so late. If he was to come to–morrow and tell her the time was nigh, she wouldn’t wait. I know her. Wagon or no wagon, she wouldn’t wait. Then she’d be upset, and I wouldn’t upset her for the living world. With that family burying–ground in Jefferson and them of her blood waiting for her there, she’ll be impatient. I promised my word me and the boys would get her there quick as mules could walk it, so she could rest quiet.” He rubs his hands on his knees. “No man ever misliked it more.”

“If everybody wasn’t burning hell to get her there,” Jewel says in that harsh, savage voice. “With Cash all day long right under the window, hammering and sawing at that——”

“It was her wish,” pa says. “You got no affection nor gentleness for her. You never had. We would be beholden to no man,” he says, “me and her. We have never yet been, and she will rest quieter for knowing it and that it was her own blood sawed out the boards and drove the nails. She was ever one to clean up after herself.”

“It means three dollars,” I say. “Do you want us to go, or not?” Pa rubs his knees. “We’ll be back by to–morrow sundown.”

“Well ... ” pa says. He looks out over the land, awry–haired, mouthing the snuff slowly against his gums.

“Come on,” Jewel says. He goes down the steps. Vernon spits neatly into the dust.

“By sundown, now,” pa says. “I would not keep her waiting.”

Jewel glances back, then he goes on around the house. I enter the hall, hearing the voices before I reach the door. Tilting a little down the hill, as our house does, a breeze draws through the hall all the time, upslanting. A feather dropped near the front

door will rise and brush along the ceiling, slanting backward, until it reaches the down–turning current at the back door: so with voices. As you enter the hall, they sound as though they were speaking out of the air about your head.

Cora



IT was the sweetest thing I ever saw. It was like he knew he would never see her again, that Anse Bundren was driving him from his mother's death–bed, never to see her in this world again. I always said Darl was different from those others. I always

said he was the only one of them that had his mother's nature, had any natural affection. Not that Jewel, the one she laboured so to bear and coddled and petted so and him flinging into tantrums or sulking spells, inventing devilment to devil her till I would have frailed him time and time. Not him to come and tell her good–bye. Not him to miss a chance to make that extra three dollars at the price of his mother's good–bye kiss. A Bundren through and through, loving nobody, caring for nothing except how to get something with the least amount of work. Mr. Tull says Darl asked them to wait. He said Darl almost begged them on his knees not to force him to leave her in her condition. But nothing would do but Anse and Jewel must make that three dollars. Nobody that knows Anse could have expected different, but to think of that boy, that Jewel, selling all those years of self–denial and downright partiality—they couldn't fool me: Mr. Tull says Mrs. Bundren liked Jewel the least of all, but I knew better. I knew she was partial to him, to the same quality in him that let her put up with Anse Bundren when Mr. Tull said she ought to poisoned him—for three dollars, denying his dying mother the good–bye kiss.

Why, for the last three weeks I have been coming over every time I could, coming sometimes when I shouldn't have, neglecting my own family

and duties so that somebody would be with her in her last moments and she would not have to face the Great Unknown without one familiar face to give her courage. Not that I deserve credit for it: I will expect the same for myself. But thank God it will be the faces of my loved kin, my blood and flesh, for in my husband and children I have been more blessed than most, trials though they have been at times.

She lived, a lonely woman, lonely with her pride, trying to make folks believe different, hiding the fact that they just suffered her, because she was not cold in the coffin before they were carting her forty miles away to bury her, flouting the will of God to do it. Refusing to let her lie in the same earth with those Bundrens.

"But she wanted to go," Mr. Tull said. "It was her own wish to lie among her own people."

"Then why didn't she go alive?" I said. "Not one of them would have stopped her, with even that little one almost old enough now to be selfish and stone–hearted like the rest of them."

"It was her own wish," Mr. Tull said. "I heard Anse say it was."

"And you would believe Anse, of course," I said. "A man like you would. Don't tell me."