



Faulkner

Novels 1957–1962

The Town

The Mansion

The Reivers

WILLIAM FAULKNER

NOVELS 1957-1962

The Town

The Mansion

The Reivers



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THE TOWN

VOLUME TWO

Snopes

TO PHIL STONE

He did half the laughing for thirty years

ONE

CHARLES MALLISON

CI wasn't born yet so it was Cousin Gowan who was there and big enough to see and remember and tell me afterward when I was big enough for it to make sense. That is, it was Cousin Gowan plus Uncle Gavin or maybe Uncle Gavin rather plus Cousin Gowan. He—Cousin Gowan—was thirteen. His grandfather was Grandfather's brother so by the time it got down to us, he and I didn't know what cousin to each other we were. So he just called all of us except Grandfather 'cousin' and all of us except Grandfather called him 'cousin' and let it go at that.

They lived in Washington, where his father worked for the State Department, and all of a sudden the State Department sent his father to China or India or some far place, to be gone two years; and his mother was going too so they sent Gowan down to stay with us and go to school in Jefferson until they got back. 'Us' was Grandfather and Mother and Father and Uncle Gavin then. So this is what Gowan knew about it until I got born and big enough to know about it too. So when I say 'we' and 'we thought' what I mean is Jefferson and what Jefferson thought.

At first we thought that the water tank was only Flem Snopes's monument. We didn't know any better then. It wasn't until afterward that we realised that that object low on the sky above Jefferson, Mississippi, wasn't a monument at all. It was a footprint.

One day one summer he drove up the southeast road into town in a two-mule wagon containing his wife and baby and a small assortment of house-furnishings. The next day he was behind the counter of a small back-alley restaurant which belonged to V. K. Ratliff. That is, Ratliff owned it with a partner, since he—Ratliff—had to spend most of his time in his buckboard (this was before he owned the Model T Ford) about the county with his demonstrator sewing machine for which he was the agent. That is, we thought Ratliff was still

the other partner until we saw the stranger in the other greasy apron behind the counter—a squat uncommunicative man with a neat minute bow tie and opaque eyes and a sudden little hooked nose like the beak of a small hawk; a week after that, Snopes had set up a canvas tent behind the restaurant and he and his wife and baby were living in it. And that was when Ratliff told Uncle Gavin:

“Just give him time. Give him six months and he’ll have Grover Cleveland” (Grover Cleveland Winbush was the partner) “out of that café too.”

That was the first summer, the first Summer of the Snopes, Uncle Gavin called it. He was in Harvard now, working for his M.A. After that he was going to the University of Mississippi law school to get ready to be Grandfather’s partner. But already he was spending the vacations helping Grandfather be City Attorney; he had barely seen Mrs Snopes yet so he not only didn’t know he would ever go to Germany to enter Heidelberg University, he didn’t even know yet that he would ever want to: only to talk about going there someday as a nice idea to keep in mind or to talk about.

He and Ratliff talked together a lot. Because although Ratliff had never been to school anywhere much and spent his time travelling about our county selling sewing machines (or selling or swapping or trading anything else for that matter), he and Uncle Gavin were both interested in people—or so Uncle Gavin said. Because what I always thought they were mainly interested in was curiosity. Until this time, that is. Because this time it had already gone a good deal further than just curiosity. This time it was alarm.

Ratliff was how we first began to learn about Snopes. Or rather, Snopeses. No, that’s wrong: there had been a Snopes in Colonel Sartoris’s cavalry command in 1864—in that part of it whose occupation had been raiding Yankee picket-lines for horses. Only this time it was a Confederate picket which caught him—that Snopes—raiding a Confederate horse-line and, it was believed, hung him. Which was evidently wrong too, since (Ratliff told Uncle Gavin) about ten years ago Flem and an old man who seemed to be his father appeared suddenly from nowhere one day and rented a little farm from Mr Will Varner who just about owned the whole settlement and

district called Frenchman's Bend about twenty miles from Jefferson. It was a farm so poor and small and already worn-out that only the most trifling farmer would undertake it, and even they stayed only one year. Yet Ab and Flem rented it and evidently (this is Ratliff) he or Flem or both of them together found it——

"Found what?" Uncle Gavin said.

"I dont know," Ratliff said. "Whatever it was Uncle Billy and Jody had buried out there and thought was safe."—because that winter Flem was the clerk in Uncle Billy's store. And what they found on that farm must have been a good one, or maybe they didn't even need it anymore; maybe Flem found something else the Varners thought was hidden and safe under the counter of the store itself. Because in another year old Ab had moved into Frenchman's Bend to live with his son and another Snopes had appeared from somewhere to take over the rented farm; and in two years more still another Snopes was the official smith in Mr Varner's blacksmith shop. So there were as many Snopeses in Frenchman's Bend as there were Varners; and five years after that, which was the year Flem moved to Jefferson, there were even more Snopeses than Varners because one Varner was married to a Snopes and was nursing another small Snopes at her breast.

Because what Flem found that last time was inside Uncle Billy's house. She was his only daughter and youngest child, not just a local belle but a belle throughout that whole section. Nor was it just because of old Will's land and money. Because I saw her too and I knew what it was too, even if she was grown and married and with a child older than I was and I only eleven and twelve and thirteen. ("Oh ay," Uncle Gavin said. "Even at twelve dont think you are the first man ever chewed his bitter thumbs for that like reason such as her.") She wasn't too big, heroic, what they call Junoesque. It was that there was just too much of what she was for any just one human female package to contain and hold: too much of white, too much of female, too much of maybe just glory, I dont know: so that at first sight of her you felt a kind of shock of gratitude just for being alive and being male at the same instant with her in space and time, and then in the next second and forever after a kind of despair because you knew that

there never would be enough of any one male to match and hold and deserve her; grief forever after because forever after nothing less would ever do.

That was what he found this time. One day, according to Ratliff, Frenchman's Bend learned that Flem Snopes and Eula Varner had driven across the line into the next county the night before and bought a license and got married; the same day, still according to Ratliff, Frenchman's Bend learned that three young men, three of Eula's old suitors, had left the country suddenly by night too, for Texas it was said, or anyway west, for enough west to be longer than Uncle Billy or Jody Varner could have reached if they had needed to try. Then a month later Flem and Eula also departed for Texas (that bourne, Uncle Gavin said, in our time for the implicated the insolvent or the merely hopeful), to return the next summer with a girl baby a little larger than you would have expected at only three months——

"And the horses," Uncle Gavin said. Because we did know about that, mainly because Flem Snopes had not been the first to import them. Every year or so someone brought into the county a string of wild unbroken plains ponies from somewhere in the west and auctioned them off. This time the ponies arrived, in the charge of a man who was obviously from Texas, at the same time that Mr and Mrs Snopes returned home from that state. This string however seemed to be uncommonly wild, since the resultant scattering of the untamed and untameable calico-splotched animals covered not just Frenchman's Bend but the whole east half of the county too. Though even to the last, no one ever definitely connected Snopes with their ownership. "No no," Uncle Gavin said. "You were not one of the three that ran from the smell of Will Varner's shotgun. And dont tell me Flem Snopes traded you one of those horses for your half of that restaurant because I wont believe it. What was it?"

Ratliff sat there with his bland brown smoothly-shaven face and his neat tieless blue shirt and his shrewd intelligent gentle eyes not quite looking at Uncle Gavin. "It was that old house," he said. Uncle Gavin waited. "The Old Frenchman place." Uncle Gavin waited. "That buried money." Then Uncle Gavin understood: not an old pre-Civil War plantation

house in all Mississippi or the South either but had its legend of the money and plate buried in the flower garden from Yankee raiders;—in this particular case, the ruined mansion which in the old time had dominated and bequeathed its name to the whole section known as Frenchman's Bend, which the Varners now owned. "It was Henry Armstid's fault, trying to get even with Flem for that horse that Texas man sold him that broke his leg. No," Ratliff said, "it was me too as much as anybody else, as any of us. To figger out what Flem was doing owning that old place that anybody could see wasn't worth nothing. I dont mean why Flem bought it. I mean, why he even taken it when Uncle Billy give it to him and Eula for a wedding gift. So when Henry taken to following and watching Flem and finally caught him that night digging in that old flower garden, I dont reckon Henry had to persuade me very hard to go back the next night and watch Flem digging myself."

"So when Flem finally quit digging and went away, you and Henry crawled out of the bushes and dug too," Uncle Gavin said. "And found it. Some of it. Enough of it. Just exactly barely enough of it for you to hardly wait for daylight to swap Flem Snopes your half of that restaurant for your half of the Old Frenchman place. How much longer did you and Henry dig before you quit?"

"I quit after the second night," Ratliff said. "That was when I finally thought to look at the money."

"All right," Uncle Gavin said. "The money."

"They was silver dollars me and Henry dug up. Some of them was pretty old. One of Henry's was minted almost twenty years ago."

"A salted goldmine," Uncle Gavin said. "One of the oldest tricks in the world, yet you fell for it. Not Henry Armstid: you."

"Yes," Ratliff said. "Almost as old as that handkerchief Eula Varner dropped. Almost as old as Uncle Billy Varner's shotgun." That was what he said then. Because another year had passed when he stopped Uncle Gavin on the street and said, "With the court's permission, Lawyer, I would like to take a exception. I want to change that-ere to 'still'."

"Change what-ere to 'still'?" Uncle Gavin said.

"Last year I said 'That handkerchief Miz Flem Snopes dropped'. I want to change that 'dropped' to 'still dropping'. They's one feller I know still following it."

Because in six months Snopes had not only eliminated the partner from the restaurant, Snopes himself was out of it, replaced behind the greasy counter and in the canvas tent too by another Snopes accreted in from Frenchman's Bend into the vacuum behind the first one's next advancement by that same sort of osmosis by which, according to Ratliff, they had covered Frenchman's Bend, the chain unbroken, every Snopes in Frenchman's Bend moving up one step, leaving that last slot at the bottom open for the next Snopes to appear from nowhere and fill, which without doubt he had already done though Ratliff had not yet had time to go out there and see.

And now Flem and his wife lived in a small rented house in a back street near the edge of town, and Flem was now superintendent of the town power-plant which pumped the water and produced the electricity. Our outrage was primarily shock; shock not that Flem had the job, we had not got that far yet, but shock that we had not known until now that the job existed; that there was such a position in Jefferson as superintendent of the power-plant. Because the plant—the boilers and the engines which ran the pump and dynamo—was operated by an old saw mill engineer named Harker, and the dynamos and the electric wiring which covered the town were cared for by a private electrician who worked on a retainer from the town;—a condition which had been completely satisfactory ever since running water and electricity first came to Jefferson. Yet suddenly and without warning, we needed a superintendent for it. And as suddenly and simultaneously and with that same absence of warning, a country man who had not been in town two years now and (we assumed) had probably never seen an electric light until that first night two years ago when he drove in, was that superintendent.

That was the only shock. It wasn't that the country man was Flem Snopes. Because we had all seen Mrs Snopes by now, what few times we did see her which was usually behind the counter in the restaurant in another greasy apron, frying the hamburgers and eggs and ham and the tough pieces of

steak on the grease-crust ed kerosene griddle, or maybe once a week on the Square, always alone; not, as far as we knew, going anywhere: just moving, walking in that aura of decorum and modesty and solitariness ten times more immodest and a hundred times more disturbing than one of the bathing suits young women would begin to wear about 1920 or so, as if in the second just before you looked, her garments had managed in one last frantic pell mell scurry to overtake and cover her. Though only for a moment because in the next one, if only you followed long enough, they would wilt and fail from that mere plain and simple striding which would shred them away like the wheel of a constellation through a wisp and cling of trivial scud.

And we had known the mayor, Major de Spain, longer than that. Jefferson, Mississippi, the whole South for that matter, was still full at that time of men called General or Colonel or Major because their fathers or grandfathers had been generals or colonels or majors or maybe just privates, in Confederate armies, or who had contributed to the campaign funds of successful state governors. But Major de Spain's father had been a real major of Confederate cavalry, and De Spain himself was a West Pointer who had gone to Cuba as a second lieutenant with troops and came home with a wound—a long scar running from his hair through his left ear and down his jaw, which could have been left by the sabre or gun-rammer we naturally assumed some embattled Spaniard had hit him with, or by the axe which political tactics during the race for mayor claimed a sergeant in a dice game had hit him with.

Because he had not been long at home and out of his blue Yankee coat before we realised that he and Jefferson were incorrigibly and invincibly awry to one another, and that one of them was going to have to give. And that it would not be him: that he would neither flee Jefferson nor try to alter himself to fit Jefferson, but instead would try to wrench Jefferson until the town fitted him, and—the young people hoped—would succeed.

Until then, Jefferson was like all the other little Southern towns: nothing had happened in it since the last carpet-bagger had given up and gone home or been assimilated into another unregenerate Mississippian. We had the usual mayor

and board of aldermen who seemed to the young people to have been in perpetuity since the Ark or certainly since the last Chickasaw departed for Oklahoma in 1820, as old then as now and even now no older: old Mr Adams the mayor with a long patriarchial white beard, who probably seemed to young people like Cousin Gowan older than God Himself, until he might actually have been the first man; Uncle Gavin said there were more than just boys of twelve and thirteen like Cousin Gowan that referred to him by name, leaving off the last s, and to his old fat wife as 'Miss Eve Adam', fat old Eve long since free of the danger of inciting a snake or anything else to tempt her.

So we were wondering just what axe Lieutenant de Spain would use to chop the corners off Jefferson and make it fit him. One day he found it. The city electrician (the one who kept the town's generators and dynamos and transformers working) was a genius. One afternoon in 1904 he drove out of his back yard into the street in the first automobile we had ever seen, made by hand completely, engine and all, from magneto coil to radius rod, and drove into the Square at the moment when Colonel Sartoris the banker's surrey and blooded matched team were crossing it on the way home. Although Colonel Sartoris and his driver were not hurt and the horses when caught had no scratch on them and the electrician offered to repair the surrey (it was said he even offered to put a gasoline engine in it this time), Colonel Sartoris appeared in person before the next meeting of the board of aldermen, who passed an edict that no gasoline-propelled vehicle should ever operate on the streets of Jefferson.

That was De Spain's chance. It was more than just his. It was the opportunity which that whole contemporary generation of young people had been waiting for, not just in Jefferson but everywhere, who had seen in that stinking noisy little home-made self-propelled buggy which Mr Buffaloe (the electrician) had made out of odds and ends in his back yard in his spare time, not just a phenomenon but an augury, a promise of the destiny which would belong to the United States. He—De Spain—didn't even need to campaign for mayor: all he needed was to announce. And the old dug-in city fathers saw that too, which was why they spooked to the

desperate expedient of creating or exhuming or repeating (whichever it was) the story of the Cuban dice game and the sergeant's axe. And De Spain settled that once and for all not even as a politician; Caesar himself couldn't have done it any neater.

It was one morning at mail-time. Mayor Adams and his youngest son Theron who was not as old as De Spain and not even very much bigger either, mainly just taller, were coming out of the post office when De Spain met them. That is, he was already standing there with a good crowd watching, his finger already touching the scar when Mr Adams saw him. "Good morning, Mister Mayor," he said. "What's this I hear about a dice game with an axe in it?"

"That's what the voters of the city of Jefferson would like to ask you, sir," Mr Adams said. "If you know of any proof to the contrary nearer than Cuba, I would advise you to produce it."

"I know a quicker way than that," De Spain said. "Your Honor's a little too old for it, but Theron there's a good-sized boy now. Let him and me step over to McCaslin's hardware store and get a couple of axes and find out right now if you are right."

"Aw now, Lieutenant," Theron said.

"That's all right," De Spain said. "I'll pay for both of them."

"Gentlemen," Theron said. And that was all of that. In June De Spain was elected mayor. It was a landslide because more than just he had won, been elected. The new age had entered Jefferson; he was merely its champion, the Godfrey de Bouillon, the Tancred, the Jefferson Richard Lion-heart of the twentieth century.

He wore that mantle well. No: it wasn't a mantle: it was a banner, a flag and he was carrying it, already out in front before Jefferson knew we were even ready for it. He made Mr Buffaloe City Electrician with a monthly salary, though his first official act was about Colonel Sartoris's edict against automobiles. We thought of course that he and his new aldermen would have repealed it for no other reason than that one old mossback like Colonel Sartoris had told another old mossback like Mayor Adams to pass it, and the second old mossback did.

But they didn't do that. Like I said, it was a landslide that elected him; it was like that axe business with old Mayor Adams and Theron in front of the post office that morning had turned on a light for all the other young people in Jefferson. I mean, the ones who were not yet store- and gin-owners and already settled lawyers and doctors, but were only the clerks and book-keepers in the stores and gins and offices, trying to save enough to get married on, who all went to work to get De Spain elected mayor. And not only did that, but more: before they knew it or even intended it, they had displaced the old dug-in aldermen and themselves rode into office as the city fathers on Manfred de Spain's coat-tails or anyway axe. So you would have thought the first thing they would have done would be to throw out forever that automobile law. Instead, they had it copied out on a piece of parchment like a diploma or a citation and framed and hung on the wall in a lighted glass case in the hall of the Courthouse, where pretty soon people were coming in automobiles from as far away as Chicago to laugh at it. Because Uncle Gavin said this was still that fabulous and legendary time when there was still no paradox between an automobile and mirth, before the time when every American had to have one and they were killing more people than wars did.

He—De Spain—did even more than that. He himself had brought into town the first real automobile—a red E.M.F. roadster, and sold the horses out of the livery stable his father had left him and tore out the stalls and cribs and tack-rooms and established the first garage and automobile agency in Jefferson, so that now all his aldermen and all the other young people to whom neither of the banks would lend one cent to buy a motor vehicle with, no matter how solvent they were, could own them too. Oh yes, the motor age had reached Jefferson and De Spain led it in that red roadster: that vehicle alien and debonair, as invincibly and irrevocably polygamous and bachelor as De Spain himself. And would ever be, living alone in his late father's big wooden house with a cook and a houseman in a white coat; he led the yearly cotillion and was first on the list of the ladies' german; if café society—not the Social Register nor the Four Hundred: Café Society—had been invented yet and any of it had