WILLIAM FAULKNER

Light in August

PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS

LIGHT IN AUGUST

William Faulkner was born near Oxford, Mississippi, in 1897. His great-grandfather, Colonel William Falkner (sic) had been one of the wild characters of the American South. The author, who had made little impression at school, was rejected by the U.S. army when America entered the First World War but became a pilot in the Canadian Flying Corps. After the war he attended the University of Mississippi for a time and then supported himself for several years through a variety of odd jobs, at the same time starting to write. While working in New Orleans he met the novelist Sherwood Anderson and through his encouragement wrote his first novel, *Soldier's Pay* (1926, Penguin 1938). This was followed by *Mosquitoes* (1927), a mildly satirical novel on New Orleans literary bohemia. Then, on Sherwood Anderson's advice, Faulkner turned to writing about his home area. *Sartoris* (1929), published in the year of his marriage, begins his famous series of novels and stories set in 'Yoknapatawpha County', north Mississippi. Although regional in setting, the Yoknapatawpha series continually draws the reader into the realm of myth, expressing a powerful imaginative vision of the human condition. A recurrent theme is man's failure to sustain his ideals, in particular the failure of the American South to recognize the humanity of the negro. Other titles in this series include *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Sanctuary* (1931), *Light in August* (1932), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), *Go Down, Moses* (1942), *Intruder in the Dust* (1948) and his last novel, *The Reivers* (1962). All of these are published by Penguin, as are his novels *The Unvanquished* (1938) and *The Wild Palms* (1939), and *The Portable Faulkner*, a chronological selection of Yoknapatawpha material edited by Malcolm Cowley.

Faulkner wrote poetry and many short stories as well as novels, and also worked on scripts for Hollywood as a way of making some money. Not long before his death in 1962 he moved his home to Charlottesville, Virginia. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1949 and in his speech reaffirmed the values that are voiced in his work: 'courage and honour and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice'.

WILLIAM FAULKNER

Light in August

PENGUIN BOOKS
IN ASSOCIATION WITH
CHATTO & WINDUS

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England
Viking Penguin Inc., 40 West 23rd Street, New York, New York 10010, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Limited, 2801 John Street, Markham, Ontario, Canada L3R 1B4
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182–190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand

—

First published 1932
First published in Great Britain by Chatto & Windus 1952
Published in Penguin Books 1960
Reprinted 1964, 1965, 1967, 1970, 1971, 1973, 1974, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1980, 1981, 1983, 1985, 1986

—

—

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Cox & Wyman Ltd, Reading
Set in Monotype Garamond

I

SITTING beside the road, watching the wagon mount the hill toward her, Lena thinks, 'I have come from Alabama: a fur piece. All the way from Alabama a-walking. A fur piece.' Thinking *although I have not been quite a month on the road I am already in Mississippi, further from home than I have ever been before. I am now further from Doane's Mill than I have been since I was twelve years old.*

She had never even been to Doane's Mill until after her father and mother died, though six or eight times a year she went to town on Saturday, in the wag on, in a mail-order dress and her bare feet flat in the wagon be and her shoes wrapped in a piece of paper beside her on the seat. She would put on the shoes just before the wagon reached town. After she got to be a big girl she would ask her father to stop the wagon at the edge of town and she would get down and walk. She would not tell her father why she wanted to walk in instead of riding. He thought that it was because of the smooth streets, the sidewalks. But it was because she believed that the people who saw her and whom she passed on foot would believe that she lived in the town too.

When she was twelve years old her father and mother died in the same summer, in a log house of three rooms and a hall, without screens, in a room lighted by a bug-swirled kerosene lamp, the naked floor worn smooth as old silver by naked feet. She was the youngest living child. Her mother died first. She said, 'Take care of paw.' Lena did so. Then one day her father said, 'You go to Doane's Mill with McKinley. You get ready to go, be ready when he comes.' Then he died. McKinley, the brother, arrived in a wagon. They buried the father in a grove behind a country church one afternoon, with a pine headstone. The next morning she departed forever, though it is possible that she did not know this at the time, in the wagon with McKinley, for Doane's Mill. The wagon was borrowed and the brother had promised to return it by nightfall.

The brother worked in the mill. All the men in the village worked in the mill or for it. It was cutting pine. It had been there seven years and in seven years more it would destroy all the timber within its reach. Then some of the machinery and most of the men who ran it and existed because of and for it would be loaded onto freight cars and moved away. But some of the machinery would be left, since new pieces could always be bought on the instalment plan – gaunt, staring, motionless wheels rising from mounds of brick rubble and ragged weeds with a quality profoundly astonishing, and gutted boilers lifting their rusting and unsmoking stacks with an air stubborn, baffled and bemused upon a stumppocked scene of profound and peaceful desolation, unplowed, untilled, gutting slowly into red and choked ravines beneath the long quiet rains of autumn and the galloping fury of vernal equinoxes. Then the hamlet which at its best day had borne no name listed on Post-office Department annals would not now even be remembered by the hookwormridden heirs-at-large who pulled the buildings down and burned them in cookstoves and winter grates.

There were perhaps five families there when Lena arrived. There was a track and a station, and once a day a mixed train fled shrieking through it. The train could be stopped with a red flag, but by ordinary it appeared out of the devastated hills with apparitionlike suddenness and wailing like a banshee, athwart and past that little less-than-village like a forgotten bead from a broken string. The brother was twenty years her senior. She hardly remembered him at all when she came to live with him. He lived in a four room and unpainted house with his labour- and childridden wife. For almost half of every year the sister-in-law was either lying in or recovering. During this time Lena did all the housework and took care of the other children. Later she told herself, 'I reckon that's why I got one so quick myself.'

She slept in a leanto room at the back of the house. It had a window which she learned to open and close again in the dark without making a sound, even though there also slept in the leanto room at first her oldest nephew and then the two oldest and then the three. She had lived there eight years

before she opened the window for the first time. She had not opened it a dozen times hardly before she discovered that she should not have opened it at all. She said to herself, 'That's just my luck.'

The sister-in-law told the brother. Then he remarked her changing shape, which he should have noticed some time before. He was a hard man. Softness and gentleness and youth (he was just forty) and almost everything else except a kind of stubborn and despairing fortitude and the bleak heritage of his bloodpride had been sweated out of him. He called her whore. He accused the right man (young bachelors, or sawdust Casanovas anyway, were even fewer in number than families) but she would not admit it, though the man had departed six months ago. She just repeated stubbornly, 'He's going to send for me. He said he would send for me'; unshakable, sheeplike, having drawn upon that reserve of patient and steadfast fidelity upon which the Lucas Burches depend and trust, even though they do not intend to be present when the need for it arises. Two weeks later she climbed again through the window. It was a little difficult, this time. 'If it had been this hard to do before, I reckon I would not be doing it now,' she thought. She could have departed by the door, by daylight. Nobody would have stopped her. Perhaps she knew that. But she chose to go by night, and through the window. She carried a palm leaf fan and a small bundle tied neatly in a bandanna handkerchief. It contained among other things thirty-five cents in nickels and dimes. Her shoes were a pair of his own which her brother had given to her. They were but slightly worn, since in the summer neither of them wore shoes at all. When she felt the dust of the road beneath her feet she removed the shoes and carried them in her hand.

She had been doing that now for almost four weeks. Behind her the four weeks, the evocation of *far*, is a peaceful corridor paved with unflagging and tranquil faith and peopled with kind and nameless faces and voices: *Lucas Burch? I dont know. I dont know of anybody by that name around here. This road? It goes to Pocahontas. He might be there. It's possible. Here's a wagon that's going a piece of the way. It will take you that far;* backrolling now

behind her a long monotonous succession of peaceful and undeviating changes from day to dark and dark to day again, through which she advanced in identical and anonymous and deliberate wagons as though through a succession of creak-wheeled and limpeared avatars, like something moving forever and without progress across an urn.

The wagon mounts the hill toward her. She passed it about a mile back down the road. It was standing beside the road, the mules asleep in the traces and their heads pointed in the direction in which she walked. She saw it and she the two men squatting beside a barn beyond the fence. She looked at the wagon and the men once: a single glance all-embracing, swift, innocent and profound. She did not stop; very likely the men beyond the fence had not seen her even look at the wagon or at them. Neither did she look back. She went on out of sight, walking slowly, the shoes unlaced about her ankles, until she reached the top of the hill a mile beyond. Then she sat down on the ditchbank, with her feet in the shallow ditch, and removed the shoes. After a while she began to hear the wagon. She heard it for some time. Then it came into sight, mounting the hill.

The sharp and brittle crack and clatter of its weathered and ungreased wood and metal is slow and terrific: a series of dry sluggish reports carrying for a half mile across the hot still pinewiney silence of the August afternoon. Though the mules plod in a steady and unflagging hypnosis, the vehicle does not seem to progress. It seems to hang suspended in the middle distance forever and forever, so infinitesimal is its progress, like a shabby bead upon the mild red string of road. So much is this so that in the watching of it the eye loses it as sight and sense drowsily merge and blend, like the road itself, with all the peaceful and monotonous changes between darkness and day, like already measured thread being rewound onto a spool. So that at last, as though out of some trivial and unimportant region beyond even distance, the sound of it seems to come slow and terrific and without meaning, as though it were a ghost travelling a half mile ahead of its own shape. 'That far within my hearing before my seeing,' Lena thinks. She thinks

of herself as already moving, riding again, thinking *then it will be as if I were riding for a half mile before I even got into the wagon, before the wagon even got to where I was waiting, and that when the wagon is empty of me again it will go on for a half mile with me still in it* She waits, not even watching the wagon now, while thinking goes idle and swift and smooth, filled with nameless kind faces and voices: *Lucas Burch? You say you tried in Pocahontas? This road? It goes to Springvale. You wait here. There will be a wagon passing soon that will take you as far as it goes* Thinking, 'And if he is going all the way to Jefferson, I will be riding within the hearing of Lucas Burch before his seeing. He will hear the wagon, but he wont know. So there will be one within his hearing before his seeing. And then he will see me and he will be excited. And so there will be two within his seeing before his remembering.'

While Armstid and Winterbottom were squatting against the shady wall of Winterbottom's stable, they saw her pass in the road. They saw at once that she was young, pregnant, and a stranger. 'I wonder where she got that belly,' Winterbottom said.

'I wonder how far she has brought it afoot,' Armstid said.

'Visiting somebody back down the road, I reckon,' Winterbottom said.

'I reckon not. Or I would have heard. And it aint nobody up my way, neither. I would have heard that, too.'

'I reckon she knows where she is going,' Winterbottom said. 'She walks like it.'

'She'll have company, before she goes much further,' Armstid said. The woman had now gone on, slowly, with her swelling and unmistakable burden. Neither of them had seen her so much as glance at them when she passed in a shapeless garment of faded blue, carrying a palm leaf fan and a small cloth bundle. 'She aint come from nowhere close,' Armstid said. 'She's hitting that lick like she's been at it for a right smart while and had a right smart piece to go yet.'

'She must be visiting around here somewhere,' Winterbottom said.

'I reckon I would have heard about it,' Armstid said. The woman went on. She had not looked back. She went out of sight up the road: swollen, slow, deliberate, unhurried and tireless as augmenting afternoon itself. She walked out of their talking too; perhaps out of their minds too. Because after a while Armstid said what he had come to say. He had already made two previous trips, coming in his wagon five miles and squatting and spitting for three hours beneath the shady wall of Winterbottom's barn with the timeless unhaste and indirection of his kind, in order to say it. It was to make Winterbottom an offer for a cultivator which Winterbottom wanted to sell. At last Armstid looked at the sun and offered the price which he had decided to offer while lying in bed three nights ago. 'I know of one in Jefferson I can buy at that figure,' he said.

'I reckon you better buy it.' Winterbottom said. 'It sounds like a bargain.'

'Sho,' Armstid said. He spat. He looked again at the sun, and rose. 'Well, I reckon I better get on toward home.'

He got into his wagon and waked the mules. That is, he put them into motion, since only a negro can tell when a mule is asleep or awake. Winterbottom followed him to the fence, leaning his arms on the top rail. 'Yes, sir,' he said. 'I'd sho buy that cultivator at that figure. If you dont take it, I be dog if I aint a good mind to buy it, myself, at that price. I reckon the fellow that owns it aint got a span of mules to sell for about five dollars, has he?'

'Sho,' Armstid said. He drove on, the wagon beginning to fall into its slow and mileconsuming clatter. Neither does he look back. Apparently he is not looking ahead either, because he does not see the woman sitting in the ditch beside the road until the wagon has almost reached the top of the hill. In the instant in which he recognizes the blue dress he cannot tell if she has ever seen the wagon at all. And no one could have known that he had ever looked at her either as, without any semblance of progress in either of them, they draw slowly together as the wagon crawls terrifically toward her in its slow palpable aura of somnolence and red dust in which the steady

feet of the mules move dreamlike and punctuate by the sparse jingle of harness and the limber bobbing of jackrabbit ears, the mules still neither asleep nor awake as he halts them.

From beneath a sunbonnet of faded blue, weathered now by other than formal soap and water, she looks up at him quietly and pleasantly: young, pleasantfaced, candid, friendly, and alert. She does not move yet. Beneath the faded garment of that same weathered blue her body is shapeless and immobile. The fan and the bundle lie on her lap. She wears no stockings. Her bare feet rest side by side in the shallow ditch. The pair of dusty, heavy, manlooking shoes beside them are not more inert. In the halted wagon Armstid sits, humped, bleacheyed. He sees that the rim of the fan is bound neatly in the same faded blue as the sunbonnet and the dress.

'How far you going?' he says.

'I was trying to get up the road a pieceways before dark,' she says. She rises and takes up the shoes. She climbs slowly and deliberately into the road, approaching the wagon. Armstid does not descend to help her. He merely holds the team still while she climbs heavily over the wheel and sets the shoes beneath the seat. Then the wagon moves on. 'I thank you,' she says. 'It was right tiring afoot.'

Apparently Armstid has never once looked full at her. Yet he has already seen that she wears no wedding ring. He does not look at her now. Again the wagon settles into its slow clatter. 'How far you come from?' he says.

She expels her breath. It is not a sigh so much as a peaceful expiration, as though of peaceful astonishment. 'A right good piece, it seems now. I come from Alabama.'

'Alabama? In your shape? Where's your folks?'

She does not look at him, either. 'I'm looking to meet him up this way. You might know him. His name is Lucas Burch. They told me back yonder a ways that he is in Jefferson, working for the planing mill.'

'Lucas Burch.' Armstid's tone is almost identical with hers. They sit side by side on the sagging and brokenspringed seat. He can see her hands upon her lap and her profile beneath the sunbonnet; from the corner of his eye he sees it. She seems to

be watching the road as it unrolls between the limber ears of the mules. 'And you come all the way here, afoot, by yourself, hunting for him?'

She does not answer for a moment. Then she says: 'Folks have been kind. They have been right kind.'

'Womenfolks too?' From the corner of his eye he watches her profile, thinking *I dont know what Martha's going to say* thinking, 'I reckon I do know what Martha's going to say. I reckon womenfolks are likely to be good without being very kind. Men, now, might. But it's only a bad woman herself that is likely to be very kind to another woman that needs the kindness' thinking *Yes I do. I know exactly what Martha is going to say.*'

She sits a little forward, quite still, her profile quite still, her cheek. 'It's a strange thing,' she says.

'How folks can look at a strange young gal walking the road in your shape and know that her husband has left her?' She does not move. The wagon now has a kind of rhythm, its ungreased and outraged wood one with the slow afternoon, the road, the heat. 'And you aim to find him up here.'

She does not move, apparently watching the slow road between the ears of the mules, the distance perhaps roadcarved and definite. 'I reckon I'll find him. It wont be hard. He'll be where the most folks are gathered together, and the laughing and joking is. He always was a hand for that.'

Armstid grunts, a sound savage, brusque. 'Get up, mules,' he says; he says to himself, between thinking and saying aloud: 'I reckon she will. I reckon that fellow is fixing to find that he made a bad mistake when he stopped this side of Arkansas, or even Texas.'

The sun is slanting, an hour above the horizon now, above the swift coming of the summer night. The lane turns from the road, quieter even than the road. 'Here we are,' Armstid says.

The woman moves at once. She reaches down and finds the shoes; apparently she is not even going to delay the wagon long enough to put them on. 'I thank you kindly,' she says. 'It was a help.'

The wagon is halted again. The woman is preparing to

descend. 'Even if you get to Varner's store before sundown, you'll still be twelve miles from Jefferson,' Armstid says.

She holds the shoes, the bundle, the fan awkwardly in one hand, the other free to help her down. 'I reckon I better get on,' she says.

Armstid does not touch her. 'You come on and stay the night at my house,' he says; 'where womenfolks – where a woman can . . . if you – You come on, now. I'll take you on to Varner's first thing in the morning, and you can get a ride into town. There will be somebody going, on a Saturday. He aint going to get away on you overnight. If he is in Jefferson at all, he will still be there tomorrow.'

She sits quite still, her possessions gathered into her hand for dismounting. She is looking ahead, to where the road curves on and away, crossslanted with shadows. 'I reckon I got a few days left.'

'Sho. You got plenty of time yet. Only you are liable to have some company at any time now that can't walk. You come on home with me.' He puts the mules into motion without waiting for a reply. The wagon enters the lane, the dim road. The woman sits back, though she still holds the fan, the bundle, the shoes.

'I wouldn't be beholden,' she says. 'I wouldn't trouble.'

'Sho,' Armstid says. 'You come on with me.' For the first time the mules move swiftly of their own accord. 'Smelling corn,' Armstid says, thinking, 'But that's the woman of it. Her own self one of the first ones to cut the ground from under a sister woman, she'll walk the public country herself without shame because she knows that folks, menfolks, will take care of her. She don't care nothing about womenfolks. It wasn't any woman that got her into what she don't even call trouble. Yes, sir. You just let one of them get married or get into trouble without being married, and right then and there is where she secedes from the woman race and species and spends the balance of her life trying to get joined up with the man race. That's why they dip snuff and smoke and want to vote.'

When the wagon passes the house and goes on toward the

barnlot, his wife is watching it from the front door. He does not look in that direction; he does not need to look to know that she will be there, is there. 'Yes,' he thinks with sardonic ruefulness, turning the mules into the open gate, 'I know exactly what she is going to say. I reckon I know exactly.' He halts the wagon, he does not need to look to know that his wife is now in the kitchen, not watching now; just waiting. He halts the wagon. 'You go on to the house,' he says; he has already descended and the woman is now climbing slowly down, with that inward listening deliberation. 'When you meet somebody, it will be Martha. I'll be in when I feed the stock.' He does not watch her cross the lot and go on toward the kitchen. He does not need to. Step by step with her he enters the kitchen door also and comes upon the woman who now watches the kitchen door exactly as she had watched the wagon pass from the front one. 'I reckon I know exactly what she will say,' he thinks.

He takes the team out and waters and stalls and feeds them, and lets the cows in from the pasture. Then he goes to the kitchen. She is still there, the grey woman with a cold, harsh, irascible face, who bore five children in six years and raised them to man- and woman-hood. She is not idle. He does not look at her. He goes to the sink and fills a pan from the pail and turns his sleeves back. 'Her name is Burch,' he says. 'At least that's what she says the fellow's name is that she is hunting for. Lucas Burch. Somebody told her back down the road a ways that he is in Jefferson now.' He begins to wash, his back to her. 'She come all the way from Alabama, alone and afoot, she says.'

Mrs Armstid does not look around. She is busy at the table. 'She's going to quit being alone a good while before she sees Alabama again,' she says.

'Or that fellow Burch either, I reckon.' He is quite busy at the sink, with the soap and water. And he can feel her looking at him, at the back of his head, his shoulders in the shirt of sweatfaded blue. 'She says that somebody down at Samson's told her there is a fellow named Burch or something working at the planing mill in Jefferson.'

'And she expects to find him there. Waiting. With the house all furnished and all.'

He cannot tell from her voice if she is watching him or not now. He towels himself with a split floursack. 'Maybe she will. If it's running away from her he's after, I reckon he's going to find out he made a bad mistake when he stopped before he put the Mississippi River between them.' And now he knows that she is watching him: the grey woman not plump and not thin, manhard, workhard, in a serviceable grey garment worn savage and brusque, her hands on her hips, her face like those of generals who have been defeated in battle.

'You men,' she says.

'What do you want to do about it? Turn her out? Let her sleep in the barn maybe?'

'You men,' she says. 'You durn men.'

They enter the kitchen together, though Mrs Armstid is in front. She goes straight to the stove. Lena stands just within the door. Her head is uncovered now, her hair combed smooth. Even the blue garment looks freshened and rested. She looks on while Mrs Armstid at the stove clashes the metal lids and handles the sticks of wood with the abrupt savageness of a man. 'I would like to help,' Lena says.

Mrs Armstid does not look around. She clashes the stove savagely. 'You stay where you are. You keep off your feet now, and you'll keep off your back a while longer maybe.'

'It would be a beholden kindness to let me help.'

'You stay where you are. I been doing this three times a day for thirty years now. The time when I needed help with it is done passed.' She is busy at the stove, not backlooking. 'Armstid says your name is Burch.'

'Yes,' the other says. Her voice is quite grave now, quite quiet. She sits quite still, her hands motionless upon her lap. And Mrs Armstid does not look around either. She is still busy at the stove. It appears to require an amount of attention out of all proportion to the savage finality with which she built the fire. It appears to engage as much of her attention as if it were an expensive watch.

'Is your name Burch yet?' Mrs Armstid says.

The young woman does not answer at once. Mrs Armstid does not rattle the stove now, though her back is still toward the younger woman. Then she turns. They look at one another, suddenly naked, watching one another: the young woman in the chair, with her neat hair and her inert hands upon her lap, and the older one beside the stove, turning, motionless too, with a savage screw of grey hair at the base of her skull and a face that might have been carved in sandstone. Then the younger one speaks.

'I told you false. My name is not Burch yet. It's Lena Grove.'

They look at one another. Mrs Armstid's voice is neither cold nor warm. It is not anything at all. 'And so you want to catch up with him so your name will be Burch in time. Is that it?'

Lena is looking down now, as though watching her hands upon her lap. Her voice is quiet, dogged. Yet it is serene. 'I dont reckon I need any promise from Lucas. It just happened unfortunate so, that he had to go away. His plans just never worked out right for him to come back for me like he aimed to. I reckon me and him didn't need to make word promises. When he found that night that he would have to go, he–'

'Found out what night? The night you told him about that chap?'

The other does not answer for a moment. Her face is calm as stone, but not hard. Its doggedness has a soft quality, an inwardlighted quality of tranquil and calm unreason and detachment. Mrs Armstid watches her. Lena is not looking at the other woman while she speaks. 'He had done got the word about how he might have to leave a long time before that. He just never told me sooner because he didn't want to worry me with it. When he first heard about how he might have to leave, he knowed then it would be best to go, that he could get along faster somewhere where the foreman wouldn't be down on him. But he kept on putting it off. But when this here happened, we couldn't put it off no longer then. The foreman was down on Lucas because he didn't like him because Lucas was