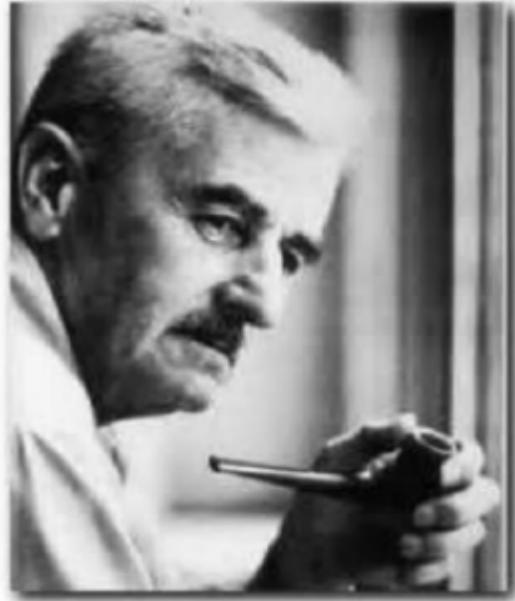


HUMOR



William Faulkner

(1897-1962)

from *The Hamlet* (1940)

...“We went straight to Pat’s camp and druv in with that horse of Beasley’s laying into the collar now sho enough, with its eyes looking nigh as wild as Ab’s and foaming a little at the mouth where Ab had rubbed the saltpeter into its gums and a couple of as pretty tarred bob-wire cuts on its chest as you could want, and another one where Ab has worked that fish hook under its hide where he could touch it by dropping one rein a little...

‘That’s a pretty lively horse you got there,’ [Pat] says.

‘You damn right,’ Ab says. ‘That’s why I got to get shut of it...’

Ab wasn’t trying to beat Pat bad. He just wanted to recover that eight dollars’ worth of the honor and pride of Yoknapatawpha County horse-trading, doing it not for profit but for honor. And I believe it worked. I still believe that Ab fooled Pat, and that it was because of what Pat aimed to trade Ab and not because Pat recognized Beasley’s horse, that Pat refused to trade any way except team for team. Or I don’t know: maybe Ab was so busy fooling Pat that Pat never had to fool Ab at all....

‘I already got a good mule,’ Ab says. ‘It’s just the horse I don’t want. Trade me a mule for the horse.’

‘I don’t want no wild horse neither,’ Pat says. ‘Not that I wont trade for anything that walks, provided I can trade my way. But I aint going to trade for that horse alone because I don’t want it no more than you do. What I am trading for is that mule. And this here team of mine is matched. I aim to get about three times as much for them as a span as I would selling them single.’

‘But you would still have a team to trade with,’ Ab says.

‘No,’ Pat says. ‘I aim to get more for them from you than I would if the pair was broken. If it’s a single mule you want, you better try somewhere else.’

So Ab looked at the mules again. They looked just exactly right. They didn’t look extra good and they didn’t look extra bad. Neither one of them looked quite as good as Ab’s mule, but the two of them together looked just a little mite better than just one mule of anybody’s.... I reckon he knowed right then he wouldn’t even have to try to trade Ab: all he would have to do would be just to say No long enough. Because that’s what he done, leaning there against our wagon bed with his thumbs hooked into his pants,

chewing his tobacco and watching Ab go through the motions of examining them mules again. And even I knowed that Ab had done traded, that he had done walked out into what he thought was a spring branch and then found out it was quicksand, and that now he knowed he couldn't even stop long enough to turn back. 'All right,' he says. 'I'll take them'....

They looked exactly like two ordinary, not extra good mules you might see in a hundred wagons on the road. I had done realized how they had a kind of jerky way of starting off, first one jerking into the collar and then jerking back and then the other jerking into the collar and then jerking back, and even after we was on the road and the wagon rolling good one of them taken a spell of some sort and snatched his self crossways in the traces like he aimed to turn around and go back, maybe crawling right across the wagon to do it, but then Stamper had just told us they was a matched team; he never said they had ever worked together as a matched team in the sense that neither one of them seemed to have any idea as to just when the other one aimed to start moving....all of a sudden I realized that the wagon had done stopped going up the hill and was starting down it backwards and I looked around just in time to see both of them mules this time crossways in the traces and kind of glaring at one another across the tongue and Ab trying to straighten them out and glaring too...and here we come swurging up that hill and into the Square like a roach up a drainpipe, with the wagon on two wheels and Ab sawing at the reins and saying 'Hell fire, hell fire' and folks, ladies and children mostly, scattering and screeching and Ab just managed to swing them into the alley... So it was a good crowd by then, helping us to get untangled...

The mules was all right too. They was laying down. Ab had snubbed them up pretty close to the same post, with the same line through both bits, and now they looked exactly like two fellows that had done hung themselves in one of these here suicide packs, with their heads snubbed up together and pointing straight up and their tongues hanging out and their eyes popping and their necks stretched about four foot and their legs doubled back under them like shot rabbits until Ab jumped down and cut them down with his pocket knife.... [Pat] had give them just exactly to the inch of whatever it was to get them to town and off the square before it played out.... Ab's face was red... He drunk that pint of whiskey in two drinks and set the empty bottle down in the corner careful as a egg and we went back to the wagon. The mules was still standing up this time and...he eased them away careful, with folks still telling each other it was that team of Stamper's.... And I be dog if it didn't seem like Pat Stamper hadn't moved...standing there at the gate to his rope stock pen, with that Stetson cocked and his thumbs still hooked in the top of his pants and Ab sitting in the wagon trying to keep his hands from shaking and the team Stamper had swapped him stopped now with their heads down and their legs spraddled and breathing like a sawmill.

'I come for my team,' Ab says.

'What's the matter?' Stamper says. 'Don't tell me these are too lively for you too. They don't look it.'

'All right,' Ab says. 'All right. I got to have my team. I got four dollars. Make your four-dollar profit and give me my team.'

'I aint got your team,' Stamper says. 'I didn't want that horse neither. I told you that. So I got shut of it.'

Ab set there for a while. It was cooler now. A breeze had got up and you could smell the rain in it. 'But you still got my mule,' Ab says. 'All right. I'll take it.'

'For what?' Stamper says. 'You want to swap that team for your mule?' Because Ab wasn't trading now. He was desperate, sitting there like he couldn't even see, with Stamper leaning easy against the gate post and looking at him for a minute. 'No,' Stamper says. 'I don't want them mules. Yours is the best one. I wouldn't trade that way, even swap.' He spit, easy and careful. 'Besides, I done included your mule into another team. With another horse. You want to look at it?'

'All right,' Ab says. 'How much?'

'Don't you even want to see it first?' Stamper says.

'All right,' Ab says...

I remember how even with it clouded up and no sun, how that horse shined—a horse a little bigger than the one we had traded Stamper, and hog fat. That's just exactly how it was fat: not like a horse is fat but like a hog: fat right up to its ears and looking tight as a drum; it was so fat it couldn't hardly walk, putting its fee down like they didn't have no weight nor feeling in them at all. 'It's too fat to last,' Ab says. 'It won't even get me home.'

'That's what I think myself,' Stamper says. 'That's why I want to get rid of it.'

'All right,' Ab says. 'I'll have to try it.' He begun to get outen the wagon....

Soon as Ab's weight come onto the horse it was like Ab had a live wire in his britches. The horse made one swirl, it looked round as a ball, without no more front or back end than a Irish potato. It throwed Ab

hard and Ab got up and went back to the horse and...the horse slammed him off again and Ab got up with his face just the same and went back and taken the rope again when Stamper stopped him. It was just exactly like Ab wanted that horse to throw him, hard, like the ability of his bones and meat to stand that ere hard ground was all he had left to pay for something with life enough left to get us home. 'Are you trying to kill yourself?' Stamper says.

'All right,' Ab says. 'How much?'

"Come into the tent," Stamper says...

I waited in the wagon. It was most sholly going to rain, and that soon. I mind how I thought that anyway we would have the croker sacks now to try to keep dry under. Then Ab and Stamper came back and Ab never looked at me that time either. He went back into the tent and I could see him drinking outen the bottle again and this time he put it into his shirt....

'Don't you reckon you better let that boy drive?' Stamper says.

'I'll drive,' Ab says. 'Maybe I cant swap a horse with you, but by God I can still drive it.'

'Sho now,' Stamper says. 'That horse will surprise you'....

The rain, the storm, come up before we had gone a mile and we rode in it for two hours, hunched under the croker sacks and watching that new shiny horse that was so fat it even put its feet down like it couldn't even feel them, that every now and then, even during the rain, would give a kind of flinching jerk like when Ab's weight had come down onto its back at Stamper's camp, until we found a old barn to shelter under. I did, that is, because Ab was laying out in the wagon bed by then, flat on his back with the rain popping him in the face and me on the seat driving now and watching that shiny black horse turning into a bay horse. Because I was just eight then, and me and Ab had done all our horse-trading up and down that lane that run past his lot. So I just drove under the first roof I come to and shaken Ab awake. The rain had cooled him off by then and he waked up sober. And he got a heap soberer fast.

'What?' he says. 'What it it?'

'The horse!' I hollered. 'He's changing color!'

He was sober then. We was both outen the wagon then and Ab's eyes popping and a bay horse standing in the traces where he had went to sleep looking at a black one. He put his hand out like he couldn't believe it was even a horse and touched it at a spot where the reins must every now and then just barely touched it and just about where his weight had come down on it when he was trying to ride it at Stamper's, and next I knowed that horse was plunging and swurging. I dodged just as it slammed into the wall behind me; I could even feel the wind in my hair. Then there was a sound like a nail jabbed into a big bicycle tire. It went *whishhhhhhhh* and then the rest of that shiny fat black horse we had got from Pat Stamper vanished. I don't mean me and Ab was sanding there with just the mule left. We had a horse too. Only it was the same horse we had left home with that morning and that we had swapped Beasley Kemp the sorghum mill and the straight stock for two weeks ago. We even got our fish hook back, with the barb still bent where Ab had bent it... But it wasn't till next morning that Ab found the bicycle pump valve under its hide just inside the nigh fore-shoulder—the one place in the world where a man might own a horse for twenty years and never think to look at it."