

## **Faulkner, Flynn and Me**

**by H. W. Moss**

I enlisted in the Navy on Monday, December 8, 1941, the day after Pearl Harbor. I think I chose the sea because it was exotic and having been on a farm all my life, I didn't particularly like the idea of humping around the hills of North Carolina where the Army recruiter told me I'd be sent for basic training.

I lived in Ohio and had to get to a Navy induction center in New York, so I hitchhiked across the Ohio River in Cincinnati, cut across Kentucky even though I had five hundred dollars, my entire life savings up to that point of my existence, in my pocket. I withdrew the entire amount, closed the account on Tuesday before saying goodbye to my parents and sticking out my thumb on the highway early Wednesday.

Thursday dawned beautifully and I had to admit I admired the fields of blue grass even if it still had a reputation, at least among school children, of being a notoriously blue law no liquor on Sunday state. Nowhere as exotic as the Navy.

I found a used car lot in downtown Louisville which the locals didn't pronounce like it reads at all. They had a nice selection of 30's Fords and Packards, but the one that caught my eye was a Chevrolet someone had kept in immaculate condition with white side walls and skirts. It was only two hundred dollars, but when I told the dealer where I was headed and why, I didn't even have to ask and he knocked fifty bucks off.

It got maybe ten miles to the gallon on the highway which was basically a two lane gravel road between farms in Tennessee. There were hundreds of miles between filling stations, gas was fifteen cents a gallon and the tank held 20. I could fill it for three dollars

and drive most of the day. I had two weeks to get to New York, so I detoured south to a small town I knew was somewhere in Mississippi.

I took it slow, several more days, and entering Oxford was a little like walking into the pages of Tom Sawyer come to life.

The mansion was not hard to find. Everyone I asked knew exactly where it was and offered advice or insight such as, “Just knock once then wait.” Or, “He’s come back from Hollywood now.”

The front entrance was as imposing as Roan Oak itself which is just south of the town square. Two tall Doric columns two stories tall framed the screen and front doors.

A black man in livery opened the door but left the screen in place. “Yessir? May I help you?”

“Mr. Faulkner, please.”

“I’m afraid Mister Faulkner is working at the moment. He has a standing rule never to be disturbed between the noon hour and five o’clock tea. May I suggest you have a little over an hour to wait.”

I asked where I might spend that hour and was directed to the rear of the building by way of a path that led to an outdoor gazebo. I admired the garden which was well kept and profuse and felt cool despite the sticky Mississippi humidity and late afternoon heat.

At length, a short man in casual apparel which included a smoking jacket with leather elbow pads opened the rear door and stepped out onto the lawn. He paused to light a pipe, then continued his pace toward me. There was a look of concerned surprise on his face. Obviously he expected someone else to be waiting for him.

“Avery said a young man, so I thought it was the neighbors’ boy come about the tree trimming.”

I stood and introduced myself, stuck out my hand and he shook it. I told him I was a fan of “The Sound and the Fury” and was on my way to Navy boot camp when I thought I’d stop by and say hi.

This seemed to satisfy him and he took a seat beside me.

“Yes, well, we are at war,” he said succinctly. “Again.”

He had a very soft breezy Southern accent that would not betray him as from the south so much as a gentleman. I told him I liked his patio furniture.

“The gazebo is nice, but I like the bougainvillea covered walkway. It’s called a pergola, from the Latin for protrusion or projecting eave I believe. That’s one thing I miss when I’m in Los Angle-ease.” His pronunciation of the city was purposefully and pointedly incorrect.

The manservant appeared carrying in his white gloved hands a tray upon which were two tall drinking glasses with mint sprigs on their lips and a pitcher of cool brown liquid.

“And this is another,” Faulkner said lifting both glasses from the tray and pouring first into mine, then to the top of his. “Branch water. Bourbon, branch water and mint leaf. Simple recipe.” He took a sip. “Introduced the julep to the late Douglas Fairbanks who liked it a lot. Here’s a question: How long dead ya gotta be before they stop referring to you as the late?”

I had no idea and said as much.

“Then there’s that Errol Flynn. ‘In like Flynn.’ Now there’s a good line.”

I said, “Flynn: the man on whom the belles told.”

Faulkner laughed into his glass when he got the joke.

“Can you beat that? Man fucks two girls at once and this increases his reputation. ’Bout as bad as what started the fight between Cabot and Fairbanks.”

I had to ask: “What was that?”

“Fairbanks had a two-way mirror installed above the bed in the room he let Cabot use at Pickfair. All the guys at the party went upstairs and smoked cigars while they watched Cabot fuck this nineteen-year-old. When he found out, Bruce was so pissed off he punched Fairbanks and then they had a brawl lasted half hour. You know how long most fist fights last? Two punches maybe a minute. These guys knocked each silly. We all had to get out of the way.”

I almost spilled my drink as I brought it to my lips. “You were there?”

“Yah, oh yah.”

We sipped silently for a while.

“I liked how you kind of gave it away in the title, the quote from ‘Macbeth’ it’s a tale ‘Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury.’ Pretty clever I thought. Benjy was the idiot. Right? Mentally retarded, right?”

His glass empty, mine only a quarter down, Faulkner refilled them both.

“How many books and short stories? ‘Soldier's Pay’ my first book. Nothing. The one you liked in ’29. None of ’em sold well and I earned little money. Then ‘Sanctuary’ comes out in ’31. Big success. Can you believe? Saturday Evening Post rejected everything I sent them for ten years, now they’ll buy any piece of shit I send ’em.”

“You don’t like publishers I gather. How’d Hollywood treat you?”

He said, “As a matter of fact, pretty darn good moneywise. And speaking of Flynn.”

Then he launched into another tale of the misbegotten actor.

“The Warner lot was huge. There was half a mile of buildings in Burbank and for the filming of ‘Captain Blood’ an entire upper galley of the warship was built directly over the dressing rooms. This was to accommodate the stars, specifically Flynn, who abhorred walking between wardrobe and set. He also wanted to make it easy for a quickie. Well, this was when they were filming ‘The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex’ which was released in Technicolor. So Jack Warner is watching the rushes for the day. You know they rushed the film to be developed so that’s why it’s called that. Anyway, Jack came storming out of the screening room screaming for Flynn about to have a stroke he was so angry. You could see he wanted Flynn’s hide. Turns out they spent a lot on wardrobe and Flynn’s trousers were white with a button fly. And of course they show up in color and right there in the middle of his crotch is this red streak of lipstick completely wrong for the period even if maybe correct for the act.”

Again we sipped in silence and then he said, “My first big purchase was this dilapidated mansion. Neighbors think I’m a reclusive curmudgeon.”

After a while I took my leave and drove to New York and enlisted and went on to many battles in the Pacific and every time I had an idle thought at sea, I remembered the lipstick smear on Errol Flynn’s fly and laughed. I think that’s what got me through the war.

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