BILL'S DEATH OCCURRED ON A SUMMER NIGHT that could have been taken straight from the pages of his *Light in August*, except that it was July, in the early part of the month. It was soon after midnight in the beginning hours of July 6th.

He had been in the hospital for several days. Earlier he had had a bad fall from a horse and he was in there for a general checkup as usual, periodically, the last few years of his life. He had been given his final tests, they had found nothing radically wrong and he was ready to come home. Then death struck.

It was unexpected, the kind of thrombosis that is undetectable until it strikes. If the first attack is light enough, the victim survives and treatment can be instituted that will correct the condition in the future. In such cases the patient can look forward to a future of almost normal years. About half the time in such attacks the patient does survive. In the other half he dies. Such was Bill's case. He died that morning in spite of all the doctors could do.

As the doctors explained it to us, a thrombosis is a stoppage of the veins. Fat has formed on the inner walls of them and in time pieces of it flake off. If the piece is small enough the heart can pump it on through the blood stream. There is a light heart attack, the first warning of the fat condition in the veins, yet the heart is able to maintain its function. Medical treatment is then begun that melts the fat still adhering to the veins' inner walls, and the victim lives. But if that first flaked-off piece is large enough completely to stop up the vein, the heart action can produce no blood flow through it. Without blood the well goes dry, the pump stops. So it happened to Bill. They worked
over him for forty-five minutes but it was to no avail. The block
could not be budged, and Bill was gone.

My phone rang that soft July night. It is in the room next
to where we sleep. It waked us both, my wife and me. She went
to the phone and I sat up on the edge of the bed and lit a ciga-
rette. I heard her answer the phone, and then silence as she lis-
tened. Finally I heard her say, “I don’t know how I can tell
him.”

Some of us have premonitions at such times. I did not. I
knew Bill was in the hospital but I knew, too, that he was about
ready to come home. I did not think of him at all. Actually I did
not know at the moment what time it was. We get calls at odd
times. I did not think one way or the other about this call even
after I heard her say she did not know how she could tell him.
I did not even know she was referring to me. Then, after replac-
ing the receiver, she came to stand beside the bed.

That was Jimmy. Bill just died.”

We had not put on a light. In the familiarity of our
bedroom we did not need it. Now I rose from the bedside,
flicked on the wall switch and began pulling on my clothes.

“Do you want me to fix you some coffee while you dress?”
she asked, still standing beside the bed.

“No,” I said. “I’ll go on down there now.”

I went over to Bill’s house. It was about two-thirty. Jimmy,
my oldest son, was already there. He met me at the door.
Estelle, Bill’s wife, had called him as soon as the hospital had
called her. They had not had time to summon her to the hospi-
tal. They were all too busy working with Bill. Jimmy, as soon as
she called, had called me and Chooky, my younger son, and my
other brother, Jack, in Mobile. Chooky was not there yet.
Jimmy had called me first and he had not quite had time to
arrive.

“Where is he?” I asked Jimmy.

“They’re bringing him to the funeral home from the hospi-
tal,” he said.

“I’ll go up and speak to Estelle.”

“Chester is up there with her,” Jimmy said. “I called him as
soon as Aunt Estelle called me.”

Chester was Dr. Chester McLarty, our family doctor.

I went upstairs to Estelle’s room. Chester was there with
her, watching her. He had given her a sedative but, as yet, it had
had no effect. She was walking the floor, her hands clenched. She came toward where I was as soon as I entered the room. I put my arms around her, held her a moment. There was nothing I could say. I could only give her the sympathy of my arms.

"I can’t believe it," she said. "I can’t believe it. He’s not gone. He’s not gone."

I looked over her shoulder at Chester. He was standing to one side, his whole attention fixed on her. Abruptly she pushed away from me and began walking the floor again. Leaving her with Chester, I went back downstairs to where Jimmy, whom we called Bub, was. I knew Estelle would want him to stay there to take charge for her in all the endless details that accompany death. In her overwhelming grief and shock she would be unable to. Bub was the logical one until Jill, Bill’s daughter, could arrive from Virginia, for through the last few years Bill and Bub had been awfully close and during that time I expect he knew more about Bill and his affairs than any man.

We stood a moment without any words. Bub was waiting for me to speak. After several seconds, standing there in Bill’s home, knowing he was gone, or at least trying to know it, I said, "I’ll go to the funeral home to be there when they bring him in."

Bub nodded.

I left then, driving out Bill’s cedar-lined driveway past the entrance post with the PRIVATE-KEEP OUT sign he had painted himself and put up there, and on to town.

They had not yet brought Bill in when I arrived. After going inside and finding this out, I returned to the front and sat on the steps.

The funeral home is just off the edge of the Square. Almost the whole Square can be seen from the steps. I sat there and smoked and thought of Bill. Every spot on the Square I could see contained a memory of him. The area just ahead of me was where the balloonist used to make his ascension at our county fair. I could see the exact spot where Bill and Jack and I used to stand to watch him. Beyond was the section of the Square, unpaved then, that we used to cut across on our way back and forth to school. A concrete watering trough was there then, for the convenience of the farmers, in which to water their mules when they came to town to trade. We used to pass it several times a day.
It was said of us then: “Don’t fool with those Falkner boys. If you get one of them down you will have the rest of them coming at you from every corner of the Square.”

To my left was the post office. On the steps there I had met Bill many a time as we were entering or leaving after securing our mail. We always stopped and passed the time of day. At all the other places I could see, the same thing had happened. We had come across each other and stopped and talked awhile.

I realized suddenly that I was living, for the moment, in memories. I realized too that that was where Bill would be from now on. And my memories were bringing in my other two brothers: Dean, who was killed in an airplane crash in 1935, and Jack, my remaining brother, who lived now in Mobile. I think it was then, as I sat there in the soft summer night, that I first accepted the fact that Bill was gone.

They brought Bill in. I heard the ambulance as it moved up to the back door down the long hallway from where I sat. I went inside and watched them place Bill’s stretcher on a dolly and roll it into the embalming room. They closed the door behind them, of course, and I went back to the front steps.

I remained there with him until they were ready to take him home. One time I left, for a few minutes, to call Phil Stone, Bill’s oldest and closest friend. I wanted him to hear of Bill’s death from one of us and not from some outside source. It was about six when I called. Phil was not awake. His wife answered the phone and I told her who I was and asked to speak to Phil. When I told him Bill was dead he said, “What!” It was as incredible to him as it had been to me.

He asked where Bill was and I told him, saying that I would stay there with him till they were ready to take him home. Phil said he would come down to Bill’s home. I went back to the funeral home then and about eight they said they were ready. I went ahead of them. Bub and Chooky were there and I told them I had brought Bill home.

Mother, who died about two years before Bill, had been very explicit about her funeral. She had told each of us how she wanted it: her family only, no flowers, as simple a funeral as possible and the least expensive. She said the quickest and the cheapest. Bill had asked for the same thing. As he expressed it: “Just like Mother’s.” He had told all this to Estelle and Bub. Estelle, in the state of shock she was in, left it up to Bub until Jill could get there from Virginia. She got into Oxford
with her husband, Paul, that morning and Paul stood beside Bub in everything. Cho-Cho, Estelle’s daughter by her first marriage, and her husband, Bill Fielding, flew in from Caracas and arrived that day. Malcolm, Bill’s stepson, also came, from Charleston, South Carolina.

Our mayor, who is also owner of the funeral home, came to the home early that morning while they were still fixing Bill up and I was there on the steps. I asked that a guard be placed at Bill’s gate. He asked for how long and I told him as long as Bill lay in his own home. He agreed to send a policeman and he was there on duty soon after we brought Bill from the funeral home.

A great many people tried to get in, but according to Bill’s wishes only his family was admitted, though this included his closest friends.

When he had been brought home in a casket like Mother’s, it was placed on a wheeled funeral bier and rolled into his parlor and placed across his hearth. It was the same spot in which Mammy, who had raised us, had lain and in the same room where Bill had read her funeral service. He had requested that his coffin not be opened after he was placed in it and only one exception was made. Some of his black friends, dressed in their Sunday best, came to the kitchen and asked permission for one last look at him. Bub went to Estelle and she said, “Yes, of course.” They were led in through the dining room and the funeral director opened the casket for them. They looked at him in silence, a few lips moved without sound, and a few dusky tears fell. Then the coffin was closed, not to be opened again.

Wires and cables came from all over the United States and the world. A message from the President arrived, cables from foreign governments and from native and foreign literary societies and other cultural groups. Bennett Cerf, representing Bill’s publisher, Random House, arrived from New York. Shelby Foote came down from Memphis to pay his last respects. The University of Virginia sent a representative and a message from its president. He said that since Bill had been a part of its faculty in a lecture course he held there each spring, he would forever be a part of that institution.

My brother Jack got in from Mobile and among the two of us and my two sons, we set up a watch over Bill that lasted as long as he lay before his own hearth. Taking time about, we were his death watch, his closest remaining male relatives, his blood kin.
Reporters and photographers from all the news services had come to town but according to Bill’s wishes they were restrained at his gate and not allowed in the house. They, of course, wanted entree but Bill had said no. They appointed Paul Flowers of the Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, a friend of Bub’s, as spokesman and he called Bub to meet with them and try to work out some arrangement whereby they could photograph Bill in his coffin and Estelle in her grief. They said that was what they had been sent there for. Bub and Jack met with them and explained that they were simply carrying out Bill’s wishes, that according to those wishes he belonged to his family until the hearse passed out his gate on its way to the cemetery. After that moment he belonged to the public, the world.

Bill had not belonged to any church. None of us has ever been a regular churchgoer, with the exception of my wife, my two sons and Jill. They are Episcopalians. Whatever churchly services we have found the need for, we have gone to their church. So the Episcopal rector was asked to read the service over Bill.

The family stood in the parlor beside Bill, his friends stood in the dining room adjoining. The simple service was read and Jack and Bub and Chooky and I moved Bill’s casket away from his hearth and out to the waiting hearse. We placed our brother inside, the doors were closed for the final ride to the cemetery. As we passed out Bill’s gate, photographers began snapping pictures. Some of them were from the news services, many were those who had come simply to get a shot of Bill’s last ride.

All along the way to the Square people with cameras lined the walks. On the Square the flag had been lowered to half mast and the stores were all closed in Bill’s memory. Photographers were in all vantage points about the Square. Some, on the ground, ran along beside the hearse; others were on upstairs balconies and the tops of buildings.

Grandfather had bought a cemetery lot for us sixty or seventy years ago. He deemed it large enough at that time but there were too many of us; we had lived here and died here too long. He and Granny were there, Mother and Dad, Dean, my youngest brother, Uncle John’s children, who had died soon after birth, and Bill and Estelle’s first-born, a girl named Alabama. She had lived only five days. So our cemetery lot had been filled and now there was need for more room.
Uncle John and Aunt Sue had bought a lot of their own for themselves and their son, John, Jr., who died only a few years ago. Now space had to be found for Bill.

Oxford has outgrown its burial space several times. Just recently a new area was opened up. It is raw now. Only a few people have been buried in it so far. It was the only space available, so Bub and Paul went there and selected a plot. It is on the lower slope of a bank that slants down between the old cemetery and the new. A huge old tree is there. They chose this spot for Bill.

The appointed pallbearers were there when we drove up, Phil Stone and Mack Reed, of course, and some of our kinsmen by marriage. They carried Bill to the open grave, where a tent had been pitched and chairs beside it for his family. A place had been set aside for the newsmen. There were almost more of them than there were of us. The rest of the Episcopal service was read. It did not take long. The coffin was lowered. Bill was committed to his native hills and we filed quietly away.

In the quietness of my own home memories began flooding in of Bill and our boyhood. One memory brought to life another till my life was filled anew with forgotten scenes from my years, in all sixty-one of which Bill has played his part. It was then I decided it was time for me to write about my brother Bill.