Page Hodgen

Displacement

From her rocker on the porch, she saw three horses crest the hill. Her husband, a short little man with a hook nose above a snuff-stained moustache, attached the straps of his overalls, grabbed the half-filled coffee can, and forced himself to his feet. He appeared completely unconcerned, apparently uninterested, like a man who has heard the same joke so many times that he no longer bothers to laugh at it.

The women knew, however, that these were no ordinary riders. They wore wide-brimmed hats and long blue coats too heavy for the climate, and their horses were not local — two greys and a paint. She watched them come down the hill to the bridge, and she heard her husband say as he held aloft the can, "Five cents to cross."

The paint was ridden by a man almost as old as her husband with a mottled face and a patch over one eye. His body was thin and flimsy, as though the passage of time had been stretching him like a sock. "Are you Crawford?" he said in an accent the woman had not heard before.

Her husband nodded.

"My name is Williston. These are my sons."

Identical in face and dress, the boys were short, with wide noses, but their eyes were clouded. The woman assumed that they favored their mother.

"I'm new to this country," Williston said.

"Yessir," her husband said, "I can tell that."

"I've purchased this land from the government, and now I discover that the only bridge across this river is staffed by a toll keeper. Did you say a nickel to cross?"

"Yessir."

"My attorney tells me you've been here a long time."

"That's correct. The wife and I come from Arkansas."

"But you don't own the land."

"Nossir. Just collect the toll."

"Whose toll?"

"At first, the gov'ment's."

"But not now."

"Nossir. Now it's ourn."

Williston smiled. "This is," he said, "the damn strangest country I have ever seen."

"Could be," the old man said. "I don't rightly know."

"I will have cattle moving through this valley daily," Williston said, "and this bridge must remain open. I don't care if you do stay in the cabin, but this toll collecting must cease. I do not intend to pay someone to cross my own property."

The woman on the porch stiffened. Under her breath, she said, "We been here too long."

Her husband peered up at the stranger on the horse and said in a tone of indulgence, "We do things a little different here than where you're from."

Williston smiled. When he spoke, the tone was not hostile. "The war is over, Mr. Crawford. Has been a long time. You're part of the Union now. We all live by the same laws."

Without reply the old man held his can a little higher and shook it, rattling the coins inside.

"I am not going to pay," Williston said.

The woman stood up from her chair on the porch. Her husband, Williston, the twin boys, and the horses all looked at her.

"We been here a long time," she said.

"I appreciate that, Ma'am," Williston said, "but it's my property now."

She took a breath and gazed across the valley at the red, almost motionless river. Beyond the water lay the line of Winding Stair Mountain, and in front of the mountain rose the hill where the chief of the Choctaw Nation had once lived. His house had burned to the ground over forty years before, and nothing was left now. Even the foundation had disappeared.

"We been here a long time," she repeated. Then she came off the porch and down the hill to the bridge, her large body swaying in the breeze as though keeping time to music. "I got Choctaw blood in me," she told Williston as she approached."

"Yes," he replied, "I can see that."

"Come from Arkansas," she said.

"Yes, I know that."

"These your boys?"

"Yes."

She looked at the twins, who gazed back in curiosity. "Good looking fellows,"she said.

"Thank you," Williston said.

"The Choctaw used to own this here valley," she said. "But they lost it."

"I know about that," Williston said.

"They was on the wrong side," she said. "In the War. They owned slaves. If you look on that hill over yonder, you can see where the Big House used to stand. In the War, they was Yankee troops living there. When the chief come back and found the Yankees in his house, he burnt it to the ground."

Williams sat astride the paint, composing himself. Then he said, "I'm a reasonable man. I don't think I'm making an unreasonable request. Surely, you appreciate my position."

"How we know you own anything?" the woman said suddenly.

"I have the deed."

"Show it then."

"My attorney has it, for God's sake."

Now the old man lowered his coffee can. His expression changed slowly from disinterest to something approaching intransigence. He peered up Williston and said, "We'll stay right here 'til somebody moves us."

"I'm not asking you to move," Williston replied. "No one is. I'm just telling you that you must stop charging the toll."

Without a word, the woman walked up to her husband's rocker, reached behind and produced a bolt action rifle. She did not point it at anyone, but her gaze was fixed directly upon Williston.

"Father?" one of the boys said, but Williston waved him off. "Violence is not necessary," he said. "I don't intend to fight."

"We don't, neither," the woman said.

Williston started to reply, then paused. Above him the colorless sky loitered beneath a midday sun. At length, he lightly touched the reins of the paint, and the horse, with the greys following, turned and headed back up the hill.

"What do you plan to do?" the woman said to her husband, watching the horses withdraw.

"Don't know," he replied.

The next day the sheriff rode to the bridge and told them that Williston had filed a complaint. "He don't want you all to move," the

sheriff said. "He just wants you all to stop charging the toll."

"He is a strange fellow," her husband said.

"Yessir," the sheriff said. "He's not from around here. Still, that fellow does own this here land now. I seen the deed."

"We been here too long," the woman muttered.

"I know it," the sheriff said. "You all been here long enough to have rights of your own. Being law abiding citizens, you all could file suit."

"Suit?" the woman said.

"Sue the bastard."

The sheriff explained the procedure, how they merely need go to the office of the justice of the peace in Page and fill out a form. The justice would then set the matter for hearing at which they would appear and tell their story.

"Course," the sheriff said, "that Williston fellow will get the chance to tell his story, too."

"Don't matter," the woman said, punching the air for emphasis, "we been here too long."

Her husband might have been asleep for all the comment he made. He thanked the sheriff for the advice, then after the sheriff was gone, went to the garden and hoed the weeds.

"What is the matter with you?" the woman said.

"Nothing."

"We can fight the sonofabitch — beat him. Beat him fair and square, according to law."

He continued to hoe and would not look at her. Every now and then, after a particularly long stroke of the implement, his lower back would spasm, sending a grimace across his face like the shadow of a cloud across a pond.

"George!" she shouted.

He still would not look at her.

"Then I will go myself."

Now he looked at her. He even stopped the motion of his hoe.

"I'm serious."

"If you think the law will help you," he said with all the conviction he could muster, "then you ain't half as smart as I thought."

"Either you will come with me or stay at home, but I will be there."

"The law is what some man says it is. That's all. It don't make it

right, and it don't make it wrong. It's just what some man says."

"Stay home then," she muttered.

"What will you do if we lose?"

"Why should you care?"

"I want to know."

"I will live with it," she said.

He started his hoe again, searching for weeds. "Then I will go with you," he said.

They found themselves in a courtroom of sorts — a tack store in which the merchandise had been shoved against the walls and a dozen or so nail kegs had been set upon the hardwood floors as chairs. The justice of the peace sat in front of the kegs behind a flat-top desk. His face was shiny with sweat, and his shirt was stained by perspiration. He fanned himself with a folded newspaper.

The woman sat on a nail keg, as did Williston, his sons, the sheriff and three idle spectators. Her husband testified from a keg beside the desk. He told how he and his wife had moved from Arkansas to collect the toll, how the government had inexplicably stopped taking its share, how he and his wife had then kept the money for themselves.

"You know how the gov'ment is," he said, voice as bland as an overcast day.

The woman wanted to stand up and remind him that he was talking about their livelihood, but she held her tongue.

Her husband droned on, losing track of his story from time to time, talking once about the drought when it didn't rain a drop for forty-seven days straight in the dead of summer. He talked about how the Choctaw chief had once had a house on the hill above the river, and how he had burned it down with Yankee troops inside, and then her husband just quit talking altogether, as though a tape running in his head had broken.

The woman glanced at Williston, whom she had been glancing at since he had entered the room, but he would not return her gaze.

"As I understand it," the justice of the peace said, "you all are claiming rights in that bridge because you all be collecting the toll for so long."

Her husband nodded.

"Anything else?"

"Nossir."

"Yessir!" the woman said suddenly, rising from the nail keg.

The justice of the peace looked at her, as did Williston.

"You are a judge," the woman said.

The justice of the peace waited for her to continue.

"A judge," she said. "You know. You got understanding of things like this. You are the one supposed to do what's right."

"Well, ma'am," the justice of the peace said, "I try."

"We come from Arkansas," the woman said. "Mr. Crawford, he done tol' you that, but he don't always get the feeling across. You're supposed to do the right thing."

"I try, Mrs. Crawford, but the right thing has different meaning to different people. You and Mr. Williston, for example, may not agree on what the right thing is in this case."

"They ain't two right things," she said. "They's just one. You need to understand that."

"And I will determine what the one right thing is," the justice of the peace said. "That is the function of this process. Now sit down, please, Mrs. Crawford."

She sat down.

Williston testified then, holding his hat in his hand. His head was completely bald except for a thin fringe of light brown above the ears, like a stone resting in winter grass. He spoke slowly and carefully, looking straight ahead, eyes focusing on no one, nothing, as though he were conversing with himself in a room without windows or doors.

"I'm new to this country," he said. "Don't yet understand all its ways. As far as I'm concerned, the Crawfords have the right to stay in the cabin. I've told them so. I bear them no ill will. They understand that. But I don't see how they can charge me a toll to cross my own property."

"I don't, neither," the justice of the peace said.

The remark hit the woman squarely in the stomach, as though a horse had kicked her, and she stood. "That's not right," she said.

Her husband, who had taken a seat on the nail keg beside her, grabbed her arm and tried to pull her down, but she shook him loose.

The justice of the peace wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. "Miz Crawford," he told her, "the fact that you all come from Arkansas and been here a long time don't, in my eyes at least, give you all the right to charge this man to cross his own bridge."

"I think it does," the woman said.

The justice of the peace looked at her. "Miz Crawford," he said, "in my courtroom it don't matter what you think. The only thing that

matters is what I think."

"You don't understand," she said.

"I'm not..." the justice of the peace started to say, but before he could finish, the woman's husband rose and said, "Miz Crawford gets a little angry sometimes. She cain't control herself sometimes. But she already tol' me she would abide by your decision."

"Sit down, you old fool!" she shouted at him.

The justice of the peace picked up his gavel as though it were an unfamiliar object and pounded it against his desk. "You all be seated," he said, though not rudely. It was more of a request.

As they sat down he said, "I ain't saying you all have to leave the cabin. And I ain't saying forty-something years don't give you all a right to charge a toll. But I am saying that you all cain't charge Mr. Williston to cross his own bridge. Cain't charge his people, neither. I'm also gonna find that you all can charge everyone else in this valley a toll, including me, but you all got to give Mr. Williston the same share you all was giving the gov'ment before they forgot about you. That's what seems fair to me, and I'm the only one that counts."

He might have driven a nail through her hand. How could he, in good conscience, sit there without any concern whatever and wipe away forty years of her life? By what right could anyone do that?

After the hearing Williston was apologetic. He said they needn't give him any share of the tolls collected. All he wanted, he said, was passage for his men and cattle. "I'm not vindictive," he said.

"We don't hold no grudge, neither," her husband said, but something in his tone was different.

The two men shook hands. Then she and her husband mounted their wagon, her husband called the mules to motion and the wagon moved slowly along the red dirt road, raising dust which hung in the air like mosquitoes. After they had been on the road awhile, he looked at her and said, "You tol' me you would live with it."

"That's what I said."

"Will you?"

"Will you?"

"Don't know," her husband said.

She did not respond. The wagon rolled steadily southward toward the dark wall of the mountain.

“You remember that Choctaw chief?” she said to her husband.

He nodded without taking his eyes off the mules.

“He wouldn’t sit still for what they done to him.”

“When I die,” her husband said, “it won’t be like that.”

The chief (whose name was Ayahkombee) had owned slaves and fought for the Confederacy. After the surrender, he returned to find Federals occupying his house. He burned it to the ground one night with Yankee troops inside, and the Federals hung him in front of the courthouse in Fort Smith. The house had sat on a hill which the woman could see from her cabin. She had seen the fire, had seen the flames reaching skyward like souls of the dead.

“He stood up for hisself,” she said.

“And look where it got him,” her husband replied.

Was this, she wondered suddenly, what Ayhkombee had felt? Coming home to find Yankees living in his house, had he felt such an anger hat he had done the only honorable thing remaining?

“Let’s just say I was to do the same thing to that bridge. Let’s just suppose. All right? If I was to do the same thing, what you reckon you’d do?”

Now he looked at her and said, “Do what?”

“What the Choctaw done to that big house of hisn. You know. I seen it. Supposing I was to do the same thing to that bridge?”

Her husband was silent a moment, then said, “Just supposing?”

“Right.”

“Well,” he said, turning his attention back to the mules, “I don’t reckon I’d do much of anything at all. Just supposing.”