

Miss Estelle (an excerpt)

William Woosley

Estelle Herndon began that day annoyed, which in itself was not unusual. Having to leave the comfort and confines of her home always brought irritation, but having to suffer the indignity of descending the knoll, down into the bowels of the working farm, bordered on abuse. Yet that is what Empty Sanders expected her to do, and she fixed her stare on him in protest. Her green eyes were dappled with enough light brown that she could project a useful range of emotions: from the promise of spring to the verdict of rot. But he turned away from the sternness of her gaze, believed it was unwarranted punishment for merely delivering the news about all the commotion. He believed also that she was ill equipped to manage the predicament that visited Sharin Springs that day. He would talk her through it, he reasoned. Over his fifty-six years, he spent a good deal of his time persuading folks of one thing or the other. The need gave him a great economy of action: bathing, shaving, and changing clothes only on Sundays, for example, saved him, by his estimate, at least a day a week. Some took his thriftiness of effort as a sign of laziness. But Empty wasn't nearly as lazy as most folks considered, spending most of his energy planning out the starting and the stopping parts of any particular conversation and every anticipated chore. Organizing he called it.

After Miss Estelle marched down the zigzag path to the bottom lands, she stood there on barren loam, pounded into hard payment through use. As she made her way to Empty, she swept the still August air with her opened parasol. The two stood together, looking like the saddest of couples. Caught in a losing fight against the mid August heat and forced to wander around in a thin layer of smoke, seeping incessantly out of the barns as if the gray swirl were a foreboding midst: him with a paunch, standing three inches shorter than her, wiping continuously at the sweat and tears with what once was a red bandana; her painfully thin, dabbing at her forehead and eyes with a silk scarf—one layer from an ensemble randomly wrapped about her to protect her skin from the sun's brutality, giving her the appearance of a fashionable Lazarus rambling around just outside the tomb.

"A vile day," she said.

"I know it's a vile day, Miss Estelle," Empty said, "and it ain't apt to improve none either, if you is asking me, which you ain't."

She refused to respond to Empty out of what she took as his disrespect and instead walked toward him in the calculated pace of a cat on the trail of an elderly mouse, stalking the man fifteen years her senior, trying to discern whether she ought to slap him or not. The decline in social deportment, especially with the undereducated whites such as Empty, often brought her similar moments of indecision. She explained this alarming fall in civility to the women in her Bible study group at Sinking Fork Baptist Church nearly every Sunday as her daddy had explained it to her every day until his death four years earlier. But being the servant of Christ, as she was, she understood the great difficulty of proper servitude. It made her far too tolerant, she feared, and wondered if the other women of the church did not agree with her. They did, even if they didn't.

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She took measured steps around the bare yard, setting her hands about her hips with her thumbs pointing to the front, and shifting her attention to the crop of fresh cut tobacco—still as green as moss—hanging upside down in the barns. She studied the three barns, as she continued to dab at her person, and appraised the value of the tobacco. If Buck Duke and his New York Tobacco Trust still controlled the market, as she was sure he did, the crop was worth less than half what her family spent to grow it—a context that defined the news Empty brought her, not thirty minutes earlier, as far more threatening than Empty allowed, giving her no choice but to take full control as if she didn't already have it. Her military posture and insistent voice helped her to do just that as she moved her attention to the four other men gathered there. In this way, she was Darius Wright's own daughter as most everyone in three counties was well aware.

"Where did you put Richard?" she said.

"I ain't put him nowhere," Empty said. "He put himself over on the other side of that east barn, right over yonder, sitting in the shade on a stack of hickory slabs I ain't got no idea how many cords long, singing," he said as he pointed back over his shoulder, still mopping at his eyes and forehead with his pinkish bandana. Wary of Miss Estelle, he refused to take his smoke swollen eyes off her, and began to put some distance between them by slowly shifting toward three black fellows and Tobias. Tobias was Empty's boy of 18, the youngest child from a marriage made early in life. All four of them congregated together and waited for Empty to join them behind a mud-caked buckboard turned on its side.

"Singing . . . ?"

"Yes ma'am, singing . . . actually more humming than singing, and whittling."

"What?"

"'Bringing in the Sheaves,' he said, 'the last time I heard, which just was before I come up to the house to tell you about all these troubles.'" He shifted closer to the others as he talked, believing his chatter distracted Miss Estelle, who never paid much attention to his babblings anyway.

"I come up to the house right after it all happened, figuring I best be telling you about all this mess before some other body, I don't know who, come up there telling you, I don't know what, and me getting into all kinds of mess when I ain't done nothing all my days except what you and your daddy told me to do, god rest his soul."

While still talking, Empty walked over to Smack who stood next to Tobias. Billy and Joseph stood from their squat and murmured groans about their arthritic pain, brushed dust off their tattered overalls, and moved next to Tobias. All five remained acutely aware of Miss Estelle's presence and watched her every move as if she was a tetchy wildcat circling her prey.

"What's this? she said.

"Evidence," Empty said.

The five men lowered their faces and cast their eyes down on the filly, a sorrel, laid out in front of the barn: blood flowing from under her head and pooling up around her collar before parched dirt sucked it dry, leaving a beet red crust and the smell of rusting iron behind.

"The first evidence being that that horse ain't even fourteen hands, a pony really. You

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look over here,” he said. Miss Estelle turned, walked over to the buckboard, which had flipped when the horse fell, throwing the right front wheel flat to the ground, and setting the front axle perpendicular. Standing next to it, she peered over the left trace, which was pointing up, inspected the animal, and pretended she understood every word Empty uttered. Empty was the only one of the five who freely talked to Miss Estelle. He so frequently volunteered for the task that the others seldom had an opportunity even if they had been so inclined, which they weren’t.

“You see right there? That ain’t gunshot splatter blood,” he said.

But Miss Estelle didn’t see where the collar wore the horse’s skin raw, leaving traces of blood. She instead saw the bloating and smelled the death, already putrid and rancid, given that the horse lay in 100 degree heat. Seeking relief from the disgust, she turned away from the buckboard and moved toward the open barn doors on the east barn, which in no wise slowed Empty’s chatter. As happened too often for him not to notice, Miss Estelle’s attention wandered away from his ramblings. It did with everyone who became the victim of one of his sentences searching for a period instead of another comma: a nervous tick he picked up as a child. Miss Estelle’s father saw the boy’s knack for gab and the workings of his agile mind, nicknamed him Empty, and forced the child to talk himself out of invented trouble until it became an unshakable habit. Robert Sanders—Empty’s father—knew that Darius Wright looked on the boy as the son he never had. In an unusual sign of affection, Mr. Darius willed Empty one hundred acres of good land, two hundred dollars, and a Winchester .45-40—a point of contention that Miss Estelle accepted only as an entry in the Christian County Record of Deeds and a small reduction in her annual tax bill.

“Worn raw, that horse was, from pulling that fat tobacco buyer fellow—Caulfield being his name—up and down these hills, and all over Christian and Trigg Counties, and that horse ain’t four years old either—plum worn out she was. Caulfield ought to have had a team of mules pulling him, big as he was. Mr. Richard put that horse out of its misery, god rest her soul, and thanks be to Mr. Richard for killing her. When the sheriff comes out here on this matter, you best let me tell him all about this mess with the horse. It’ll help Mr. Richard with the rest of it.”

Miss Estelle stood in a single spot, occasionally sampling Empty’s ramblings, turning to the left and then to right, taking another visual inventory of the situation: the barns spewing smoke to cure the tobacco, mules—still hitched to a flatbed wagon—wandering off in search of fresh grass, farmhands standing around a crippled buckboard, battered and broken.

“Tell Jim Varnell that Richard shot the horse to save the horse?”

“Yes, ma’am”

“A busted-up buckboard and a dead horse . . . How’re you planning on getting Caulfield back to town?”

“I don’t rightly know. You best be asking Mr. Richard about that; Mr. Richard’s the one that kilt that horse. He walked right up to her, said he was sorry life was so cruel, recocked that rifle, and shot her right away. He done it, not me.”

Still sweeping away the heat and smoke with her parasol, Miss Estelle turned away from Empty and walked deliberately toward the dark shadow that hung off the east barn, so dark that

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her husband and the stacked of wood were visible only as shadows within a shadow, devoid of any detail. Empty followed. As she walked, she reviewed the events that took her from her home that morning, ruminated over the possible outcomes, and focused her attention on how she would save Sharin Springs.

“Richard,” she said as she stepped into the shadow.

“Estelle”

“And. . . ?” she said as she stared into his gentle but painfully sad face.

“Called Jim Varnell yet?” he said.

“No.”

“I’d start there,” Richard said. A fit, angular man, short of six foot, wearing a frayed wide brim straw hat, with faded overalls of the old style: a high bib, high underarms, short shoulder straps, pant legs rolled up to make one-size fits all fit all, and with enough patches to question whether it was a pair of overalls or a pair of patches—overuse leaving every stitch of denim tattered and frayed. In this way, all at Sharin Springs were equal.

“And you . . . ?”

“I reckon I’ll sit right here and wait for Varnell.”

“Where’s Caulfield?”

“In there,” Richard said, gesturing toward the barn next to him. “Now Estelle, you sign this crop over to that Tobacco Growers Association if they can actually pull it together,” he said.

“You run the farm.”

“Now, Sugar, you’re going to run the farm. You know that. Empty knows it too. You listen to Jacob Adamson about this tobacco. Don’t sell that tobacco to Buck Duke. Now I mean that, Estelle. Turn the crop over to the Association.”

“I’ll listen to Jacob, Richard,” she said, surprised by her husband’s assertiveness and finding it peculiarly reassuring.

“Estelle, you can give me that much peace about the matter.”

“I will. I’ll take Jacob’s word on it. You can have your peace, if you can find it in all this mess.”

She turned toward Empty, leaned back, and asked him in a quiet voice, “How long—for the Sheriff?” “That Sheriff’s office is near seventeen miles from here. And I know the Sheriff’s going to be bringing deputies and all manner of stuff with him out on something like this, and. . . .”

“How long?”

“Four hours anyway. . . .”

“That’s enough time.”

“Time for what?” Empty said.

“You think Richard needs a sip or two of Mr. Glover’s?”

“Now, you know Mr. Richard ain’t a drinking man as well as I do.”

“Maybe a little to calm him—”

“If you’re asking me, I’m telling you, Mr. Richard is spooky calm already, and me, I’m all stove up with the fear. Ain’t you?”

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“No,” she said. Nevertheless, she was afraid, but knew she could not admit to it. The future would not tolerate it. “A crowd’ll start to gather in a couple of hour or so, once word gets out,” she said. “We best get prepared.”

“Prepared for what?” Empty said.

With that, Miss Estelle stopped, turned, fixed her eyes on the horizon, and scanned it. She wasn’t looking at her farmland with its gentle roll or the half dozen horses grazing in the pasture or the corn, laid-back waiting for Empty and his fellows to finish curing the tobacco before picking the crop. She instead contemplated the four winged dark spots— dwarfed by their distance from the earth—pitching and yawing as they floated on the August updraft, circling over the barns. She stared at them until a flash of sunlight bounced off a child’s mirrored toy and drew her mind to the row of shanty houses. They lined the wagon tracks at the base of the knoll, resting below her home that gave the tobacco plantation its name. Every shanty house looked the same: piers set on limestone rock, weathered horizontal planking covered in tarpaper, a stovepipe sticking out of a tin roof painted black to stave off rust. Yards attended to with some devotion, where eight small children ran and played with handmade toys—fashioned out of sticks, left over ribbon, piece of broken farm implements, corncob dolls clothed in flour sack dresses, pull-along wagons made by fathers working under lantern light—enjoyed with the full pleasures of life known only to a child.

Lost for a moment in the weight of it all, Miss Estelle turned back toward her husband. She smiled at him, offered him the promise of spring in the midst of harvest, turned, and walked back toward Sharin Springs, where she would call the sheriff and receive the crowd that would precede him. She had taken only three steps when Empty noticed her eyes welling up.

“Hush child, you ain’t doing nothing but making our troubles all the harder,” Empty said as his left hand took her left hand, and his right hand found the small of her back with which he gently nudged her forward, in a dance of sorts, leading her toward the speckled brown path— itself some 70 years old, the color of old rust—zigzagging up the slope to her home. She turned and stared at him.

“I can walk, Empty. Thank you,” she said as she stepped back from him. “And for God’s sake, go home bathe, shave, and change your clothes.”

The old man reached with his left hand and pulled off his straw hat, frazzled and unraveled around the end of its wide floppy brim, revealing his bald head in the process. His right hand found his chin and stroked it several times to feel and measure the white stubble that covered his face.

“But Miss Estelle, it ain’t but Tuesday.”