

Shadows on a Cabin Wall

IN THE EVENINGS of that winter, we sat in front of the stone fireplace. Lighter knots, taken from the centers of rotted stumps, sputtered and flickered from the thick, red resin, throwing on the wall shadows that jumped and contracted, only to leap up again, making the walls come alive with fantastic etchings appearing and disappearing, growing and receding. There were long silences while we watched the flames and the dancing shadows. Then Granpa would break the silence with some of his comments on the "readings."

Twice a week, every Saturday and Sunday night, Granma lit the coal oil lamp and read to us. Lighting the lamp was a luxury, and I'm sure it was done on account of me. We had to be careful of the coal oil. Once a month, me and Granpa walked to the settlement, and I carried the coal oil can with a root stuck in its snout, so that not a drop was spilled on the way back. It cost a nickel to fill it, and Granpa showed a lot of trust in me, letting me carry it all the way back to the cabin.

When we went, we always carried a list of books made out by Granma, and Granpa presented the list to the librarian, and turned in the books that Granma had sent

back. She didn't know the names of modern authors, I don't suppose, because the list always had the name of Mr. Shakespeare (anything we hadn't read by him, for she didn't know the titles). Sometimes this caused Granpa a lot of trouble with the librarian. She would go and pull out different stories by Mr. Shakespeare and read the titles. If Granpa still couldn't remember by the title, she would have to read a page—sometimes Granpa would tell her to keep reading, and she would read several pages. Sometimes I would recognize the story before Granpa, and I would pull on his pants leg and nod at him that we had read that one, but it got to where it was kind of a contest—Granpa trying to say before I recognized it, and then changing his mind, and this got the librarian all confused.

She fretted some at first, and asked Granpa what he wanted with books if he couldn't *read*, and Granpa explained that Granma read us the books. After that she kept her own list of what we had read. She was nice and smiled when we came in the door. Once she gave me a stick of red striped candy which I saved until we were outside. I broke it in two and split with Granpa. He would only take the little piece, as I didn't break it exactly even.

We kept the dictionary checked out all the time, as I had to learn five words a week, starting at the front, which caused me considerable trouble, since I had to try to make up sentences in my talk through the week using the words. This is hard, when all the words you learn for the week start with A, or B if you're into the B's.

But there were other books; one was *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* . . . and there were authors like Shelley and Byron that Granma hadn't known about, but the librarian sent them along.

Granma read slowly, bending her head to the book with her long hair plaits trailing to the floor. Granpa rocked with a slow creak, back and forth, and when we got to an exciting place, I always knew, because Granpa stopped rocking.

When Granma read about Macbeth, I could see the castle and the witches taking shape in the shadows, alive on the cabin walls, and I'd edge closer to Granpa's rocker. He'd stop rocking when Granma got to the stabbings and the blood and all. Granpa said none of it would come about if Lady Macbeth had minded doing what a woman was supposed to do and kept her nose out of the business that rightly ought to have been done by Mr. Macbeth, and besides, she wasn't much of a lady, and he couldn't figure out why she was called such, anyhow. Granpa said all this in the heat of the first reading. Later on, after he had mulled it over in his mind, he commented that something was undoubtedly wrong with the woman (he refused to call her Lady). He said, however, he had seen a doe deer one time, that was in heat and couldn't find a buck, go slap-dab mad, running into trees and finally drowning herself in the creek. He said there was no way of knowing, because Mr. Shakespeare didn't indicate as such, but it all could be laid at the door of Mr. Macbeth—and indications was along that line—as the man seemed to have trouble doing just about anything.

He worried about it considerable, but finally settled on laying the biggest part of the fault on Mrs. Macbeth, because she could have taken out her heat-meanness in other ways, such as buttin' her head agin' a wall, if nothing else, instead of killing folks.

Granpa taken the side of Julius Caesar in his killing. He said he couldn't put his stamp on everything Mr. Caesar done—and, in fact, had no way of knowing all he had done—but he said that was the low-downest bunch he'd ever heard of, Brutus and all the others, the way they went slipping up on a feller, outnumbering him and stabbing him to death. He said if they had a difference with Mr. Caesar, they'd ought to made theirselves known and settled it square out. He got so het up about it that Granma had to quiet him down. She said we was, all present, in support of Mr. Caesar at his killing, so there wasn't anybody for

him to argue with, and anyhow, it happened so long ago, she doubted if anything could be done about it now.

But where we run into real trouble was over George Washington. To understand what it meant to Granpa, you have to know something of the background.

Granpa had all the natural enemies of a mountain man. Add on to that he was poor without saying and more Indian than not. I suppose today, the enemies would be called "the establishment," but to Granpa, whether sheriff, state or federal revenue agent, or politician of any stripe, he called them "the law," meaning powerful monsters who had no regard for how folks had to live and get by.

Granpa said he was a "man, full-growed and standing" before he knowed it was agin' the law to make whiskey. He said he had a cousin who never did know, and went to his grave-mound not knowing. He said his cousin always suspicioned that the law had it in for him because he didn't vote "right"; but he never could figure exactly which was the right way to vote. Granpa always believed that his cousin fretted himself into an early grave, worrying at voting time which was the way to vote, in order to clear up his "trouble." He got so nervous about it, he taken to heavy drinking spells, which eventually killed him. Granpa laid his death at the door of the politicians, who, he said, were responsible for just about all the killings in history if you could check up on it.

In reading the old history book in later years, I discovered that Granma had skipped the chapters about George Washington fighting the Indians, and I know that she had read only the good about George Washington to give Granpa someone to look to and admire. He had no regard whatsoever for Andrew Jackson and, as I say, nobody else in politics that I can call to mind.

After listening to Granma's readings, Granpa began to refer to George Washington in many of his comments . . . holding him out as the big hope that there *could* be a good man in politics.

Until Granma slipped up and read about the whiskey tax.

She read where George Washington was going to put a tax on whiskey-makers and decide who could make whiskey and who couldn't. She read where Mr. Thomas Jefferson told George Washington that it was the wrong thing to do; that poor mountain farmers didn't have nothing but little hillside patches, and couldn't raise much corn like the big landowners in the flatlands did. She read where Mr. Jefferson warned that the only way the mountain folk had of realizing a profit from their corn was to make it into whiskey, and that it had caused trouble in Ireland and Scotland (as a matter of fact that's where Scotch whiskey got its burnt taste—from fellers having to run from the King's men and leaving their pots to scorch). But George Washington wouldn't listen, and he put on the whiskey tax.

It hit Granpa deep. He stopped his rocker but he didn't say anything, just stared into the fire with a lost look in his eyes. Granma felt sorry about it for after the reading she patted Granpa on his shoulder and slipped her arm around his waist as they went off to bed. I felt might near as bad about it as Granpa.

It was a month later, when me and Granpa was on the way to the settlement that I realized how he had been taken under. We had walked down the trail, Granpa leading, onto the wagon ruts . . . and then alongside the road. Every once in a while a car passed us but Granpa never looked around for he never accepted a ride. But of a sudden, a car pulled up beside us. It was an open car, without windows, and had a canvas top on it. The man inside was dressed up like a politician and I knew Granpa wouldn't ride, but I got a surprise.

The feller leaned over and hollered above the chugging sound, "Want a ride?"

Granpa stood for just a minute, then said, "Thankee," and got in, motioning for me to get in the back. Down the

road we went, and it was exciting to me at how fast we covered ground.

Now Granpa always stood and sat straight as an arrow, but sitting in the car with his hat on, he was too tall. He refused to slouch, so he was forced to bend, back straight, toward the windshield. This gave him the appearance of studying the driving of the politician at the wheel, as well as the road ahead. It made the politician nervous, I could tell, but Granpa didn't pay him any mind whatsoever. Finally, the politician said, "Going into town?"

Granpa said, "Yep." We rode along some more.

"Are you a farmer?"

"Some," Granpa said.

"I'm a professor at the State Teachers College," the professor said, and I thought he sounded right uppity about it, though I was surprised and pleased that he wasn't a politician. Granpa didn't say anything.

"Are you Indian?" the professor asked.

"Yep," Granpa said.

"Oh," said the professor, like that explained me and Granpa entirely.

Of a sudden, Granpa whirled his head toward the professor and said, "What do you know about George Washington puttin' on the whiskey tax?" You would of thought that Granpa had reached over and slapped the professor.

"The whiskey tax?" he shouted, real loud.

"Yep," Granpa said, "the whiskey tax."

The professor looked red and nervous of a sudden, and it dawned on me that he might have had something personal to do with puttin' the whiskey tax on himself.

"I don't know," he said. "Do you mean the General George Washington?"

"Was they more than one?" Granpa asked him, surprised. It surprised me too.

"Noooo," the professor said, "but I don't know anything about it." Which sounded kind of suspicious to me, and I

could see it didn't set well with Granpa either. The professor looked straight ahead, and it seemed to me we was going faster and faster. Granpa was studying the road ahead through the windshield, and I knew right then why we had taken the ride.

Granpa spoke again, but his tone didn't hold much hope, "Do ye know if General Washington ever got a lick on the head—I mean in all them battles maybe a rifle ball hit him on the side of the head?" The professor didn't look at Granpa and was acting more nervous all the time.

"I, that is," he stuttered, "I teach English and I don't know *anything* about George Washington."

We reached the edge of the settlement and Granpa said we would get out. We wasn't anywheres near into where we was going. When we got out on the side of the road, Granpa taken off his hat to thank the professor, but he didn't hardly wait for us to hit the ground before he spun off in a cloud of dust. Granpa said it was about the kind of manners he expected from folks like that. He agreed that the professor acted suspicious, and that he could have been a politician making out to be a professor. He said lots of politicians moved around amongst honest people claiming they wasn't politicians. But, Granpa said, you couldn't discount him being a professor, for he had heard that more of them was crazy than not.

Granpa said he figured George Washington took a lick on the head some way or other in all his fighting, which accounted for an action like the whiskey tax. He said he had an uncle once that was kicked in the head by a mule and never was quite right after that; though he said he had his private opinion (never stated public) that his uncle used that on occasion; like the time a feller come home to his cabin and caught his uncle in bed with the feller's wife. He said his uncle run out in the yard on all fours, hunkered down like a hog and commenced to eat dirt. But, he said, nobody could tell whether he was puttin' it on or not . . .

leastwise, the feller couldn't. Granpa said his uncle lived to a ripe age and died peaceable in his bedstead. Anyway, he said it wasn't for him to judge. The condition of George Washington sounded reasonable to me and could of accounted for some of his other troubles.