

The Tree

Lars D. H. Hedbor



Brief Candle
Press

Copyright ©2019 Lars D. H. Hedbor

Cyrus Sawyer stood from the table, slurping down the last of his tea, and dashing the dregs into the fire, where they hissed and popped. He set the cup down on the table, swept his shaggy hair back, and slipped his work hat firmly over his head.

“Mind yourself in town, son,” he said, pausing briefly at the door to look at Abe. Already taking his father’s cup from the table to wash it, Abe nodded, and didn’t even look up until after the door had swung closed with a bang.

He finished tidying up, deciding that the water by the hearth would dry by itself. He banked the fire and donned his hat and jacket, picking up the pail and dipper again. The air had warmed as the sun climbed the sky, and birdsong along the track toward the village made it seem almost more like springtime than the early days of autumn.

The first hint of fall’s riotous colors of the hills around the house, though, revealed the season too clearly for any mere birds’ singing to overcome. He returned to the stream and dipped out enough water to soak the beef in, shaking his head at the degree to which the ice had already melted away from the edges of the hole he’d made.

Pouring the water into the raised spider and setting it over the banked fire to just warm it, he pulled out the dried beef and dropped it in. Satisfied, he swung his rucksack over his shoulder and went back out into the bright sunshine and started for the village. He jingled the money in his coin purse, and wished that he could afford some squash,

but that was a battle for another day. Today, he would get just the flour, meal, and eggs, and he knew that his father's flinty figuring would leave him no money for any other luxuries.

He decided to go first to the mercantile for the meal and flour. No sense in chancing the fragile eggs to more travel than was strictly necessary, and he knew, too, that there was always a chance that his aunt would be in a rare talkative mood, and he wanted to be sure that he wasn't held up so long that Mister Harper at the mercantile was already gone for the afternoon.

On the porch at Harper's, there was one of the usual pairs of bored old men, perusing the same old broadsides from down in Boston or Philadelphia, and arguing over their content. As Abe came within earshot, he could hear that the perennial topic of Governor Wentworth's unwelcome energy of late in regard to surveying and inspecting lumber. He stopped just within earshot, interested in hearing the inevitable argument.

"Those accursed surveyors little Johnny has been sending around to lay a measuring rod on every plank and log have been threatening to put the mark on any lumber they like," one old man said, spitting onto the street for emphasis.

"Nay, not just any," said another, holding his hands up in a placating gesture. "The timber or boards must be plainly in violation of the King's Mark."

The Tree

His interlocutor spat again. “And once the mark is set upon the lumber, the sheriff seizes it up, and the owner of the sawmill must pay whatever fine he cares to assess, else say farewell to their lumber and their profits, easy as kiss your hand.” He lifted the back of his hand to his lips and tossed it by way of demonstration.

Again the other man shook his head. “Now, Ephram, you know that ain’t true. The fines are assessed according to the law, which states what fine should be laid on what size timber, all orderly and reasonable-like.”

Ephram grumbled, “All I can say is that I liked Governor Wentworth’s uncle better, when he were Governor over this colony. He was a right reasonable fellow, and tended to his own affairs. Up here in the woods, I like swamp law better’n any mast law, and it troubles me to hear you argue against that, Amos.”

“Have a care, Ephram. If we push the Governor too far, it will give the Parliament cause to tighten the screws even further.”

“Let them try,” Ephram exploded. “What good is it to grant a man a parcel of land, and then deny him the blessings of that soil?”

“Tis but a condition of that grant,” Amos said calmly.

“That condition should be set upon the grant, not changed at a whim later. And when we must beg for the surveyor’s deputy to find the time to come and tell us what we may and may not use from our own land, while fallen timber rots and is wasted, I suppose that you call that but a condition, as well?”

Ephram scowled at the other man, glaring at him until Amos finally shook his head and said, “We are here at the sufferance of the King and Parliament. If you like a grant that you may do with as you please, why not prove out a nice farm instead? I’m sure that you could get Governor Wentworth to make you a nice offer, given enough of an inducement.”

Ephram said nothing in reply, but only spat a third time, rounding on Abe. “You, there. Your Pap, he works that grant of his and has to leave whole stands of trees be, even when experience shows that no more that one out of every twenty will ever be fit for the King’s purposes. How does he like that?”

Abe was startled and alarmed to be drawn into the argument. “Well, uh, to be honest, he hasn’t said, at least not anywhere that I could hear him.”

“Aye, well that one don’t say much where anyone can hear him. You got business with Harper, then?”

“Yes, sir,” Abe said, walking around the two men. He thought he saw Amos giving him a sympathetic look as he passed.

The merchant was glad enough to see him, though he didn’t seem in much of a mood to dicker over prices. In the end, though, Abe was able to purchase the flour he wanted, and even a little more meal than he had anticipated. Perhaps he could make somewhat bigger servings of gruel than usual, and his father would be well enough satisfied that Abe had made a good bargain.

The Tree

By the time he came out, his rucksack bulging with the supplies he'd purchased, the old men were much more amicably discussing the shortcomings of Governor Clinton over in New-York. On that question they apparently had no significant disagreement.

The sun had risen high into the sky, and he was feeling warmed through for the first time since he'd left the kitchen that morning. The songbirds were still out in force, calling back and forth to one another, telling stories of love and desire, possession and warning.

One tree in particular seemed laden down with their tiny bodies, the noise almost deafening as Abe passed underneath. He skirted around the outer boundary of the canopy, not wishing to become as decorated as the ground under it was.

From the other side of the road, he felt a chill come over him as he heard the deep croaking call of the raven, and as he spotted the fell bird sitting on the branch of a tree there, he almost wished that he had chanced the songbirds instead. The black-feathered creature regarded him as he passed, its head cocking from side to side.

When Abe had passed by without acknowledging the raven, it hopped into the air and perched on the next tree along his route, again uttering a hoarse croak at him. Abe glared at it now, and while he couldn't be sure that it was the same animal that had been present in the graveyard when his mother had been laid to rest, something made him feel certain that it was.

The creature's repeated calls and bobbing head seemed almost provocative to him, daring him to respond. He stooped and picked up a pebble to toss at the unwelcome creature. The bird clearly understood what his intention was, and flapped away, calling out disapprovingly as it went. Abe let the pebble drop back to the road and continued, shaking his head at the creature's antics.

The rest of the walk to his aunt's house was without incident, at least, and he was soon walking through the crowd of chickens that stood like guards before the gate to his aunt's house. He knew from experience that there was no point in trying to avoid the birds—they would get out of his way on their own as he walked through the flock.

These birds, at least threatened neither his hat nor his calm, and he was at his aunt's door without delay. As he raised his hand to rap at the door, it flew open, and his aunt stood there, weeping openly, and Abe just stood there dumbfounded at the sight.

She gathered him into her arms, sobbing so hard that he could scarcely understand her. "Oh, you poor boy. You poor, poor lad. I don't know how we're going to make it all work, but I will do what I can for you."

Abe pulled away, bewildered. "Aunt Rosanna, what are you talking about? All I need is some eggs for my father's breakfast tomorrow."

She wailed aloud and dragged him back into a damp embrace. When she could speak somewhat coherently again, she said, "Oh, my poor Abimael, you don't know yet, do you? Your father was struck down by

The Tree

a falling tree, and died instantly. You are an orphan, and will be in my care from this day forward.”