

BENEATH THE COURTHOUSE

Dottie Sines

Downtown Wooster, Ohio, slumbered after another bustling day. Traffic lights cycled red, yellow, and green, if only for the occasional vehicle. A breeze rustled pink petunias hanging from poles. The Wayne County courthouse rose against an indigo sky dusted with glittering stars and lit by a glowing moon. As midnight approached, its bell began to chime in A-flat, pulsing like ocean waves over the city. Nimbus clouds rolled in as if on cue.

Then a staccato smack, the shattering of glass, the pounding of swift footsteps.

Inside the courthouse, a wall sconce cast an amber aura over the hall. A mouse sprinted across the floor. And at the twelfth strike of the bell, the misty form of a man materialized.

Joseph Larwill removed his top hat and shook his head. "Shameful."

"Ah, 'tis indeed distressing."

Larwill pivoted to see a filmy manifestation seated on a wooden bench. "Can it be William Henry?" His accent was British, upper crust.

"It has been awhile, my friend."

The two shook hands, then looked to see a foggy incarnation gliding down the staircase.

“I should have anticipated you two emerging as well,” he said.

“John Bever, what kept you, old bloke?” Henry slapped him on the back. Larwill grasped his hand.

“It takes a might bad situation to draw me out.” Bever’s voice lilted with the brogue of his emerald homeland. “Like the sixty-nine flood. Had me worried, it did.”

“But we’ve emerged also in good times,” Henry said. “Remember the centennial?”

“Ah, the parade, the patriotic buntings,” Larwill said. “Such profound events stir me.”

“Profound, you say? If I’m not mistaken,” Bever said, “you were ogling that world-record ice cream sundae half a century ago.”

“And I recall you hovering over the opening of the brewery several years back.”

“Gentlemen, please,” Henry said. “We’ve established that we return only for matters of, ahem, great gravity. We have more serious concerns now.”

Bever picked up the apple-sized rock that had landed on the black and white checkerboard floor.

Rain pelted in through the jagged hole left in one of the doors. "What has become of Wooster?"

"Its citizens seem angry, at great unrest," Henry said. "And the courthouse suffers. Its glass smashed, words scrawled upon its face."

"Words of political disagreement and racial intolerance." Larwill tapped a finger to his temple.

"Not what we envisioned when we came here in 1808. We surveyed meadow and wood to create a town where people could live in freedom and pursue happiness."

"And we established the first courthouse to protect those rights," Henry said. "Have today's citizens forgotten that all men are created equal?"

Bever propped his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets. "Political and racial division have always existed, everywhere, to be sure. Are Wooster's citizens not battling them?"

"Undoubtedly," Larwill said. "These strong people have a lengthy history of combating such scourges. Remember the fight to build this very courthouse nearly one hundred fifty years ago?"

"The three of us had passed on to our heavenly rewards by then," Henry said. "What say we journey back to 1878 and observe?"

The trio donned their top hats and glided into the drizzly night, and the ceaseless breeze of time lifted them above the patent leather streets of their beloved city, silent now but for the caw of a bird, the faraway whistle of a train.

“I pray the commissioners decline Mr. Yarborough’s offer,” the woman said.

“Something more to eat, dear?” the man asked.

The time travelers had observed the pair in a Liberty Street restaurant discussing the courthouse, so had funneled themselves onto chairs at a nearby table. The structure was to be erected on the northwest quadrant of the square, but a Bennet Yarborough had muddied matters by offering a great sum for the parcel.

“The soup was plenty.” Sadie knew Zachariah’s blacksmith’s income was meager. “I must head home. The meeting commences early.” She drew her flower-bedecked toque hat over her honey-hued chignon, and the two emerged into frigid February flurries.

The three specters joined Sadie the next morning in the previous courthouse’s annex.

“Have you considered the potential revenue, Mayor Dunn?” a commissioner asked.

“Revenue from the sale and the taxes on Yarborough’s establishment,” another offered.

A dark-skinned young lady entered and placed a tray of coffee on the table.

“Thank you, Linnia.”

“Who was that?” the third commissioner asked after the clerk left.

“She is my new clerk,” Sadie Dunn said.

“And she receives compensation?”

“Of course.”

The commissioners exchanged glances.

“If there’s a problem, speak up,” Sadie said. “Otherwise, let’s get back to business.”

“No, I just, uh ... this Yarborough is a Confederate. Can we trust him?”

“He is an American,” Sadie said. “And I’m aware of the financial benefits of his proposal.

However, the courthouse belongs on the square. And Mr. Yarborough has not disclosed his

plans. Do we want some undesirable venture in the heart of Wooster? I urge you to consider these things when voting.”

Crisp bronze and crimson leaves mingled with dirt tossed by Sadie’s and the commissioners’ shovels. Mr. Yarborough’s offer had been refused. The new courthouse would commence rising today.

A bold voice beckoned to Sadie as she headed to her office following the groundbreaking ceremony.

“Mayor Dunn?” The man removed his bowler hat and bowed. “Bennet Yarborough. I extend my goodwill toward your courthouse.”

“Mr. Yarborough. Thank you. I’m surprised you’re still in town.”

“Wooster holds much opportunity.”

“Opportunity for you?”

His smile crinkled his sapphire eyes into pools of agitating waters. “Isn’t free enterprise what this country is about?”

“This country, sir, is about the sacrifices of the men who defended it. But you wouldn’t understand.” She pulled open the door of the annex. While his attempt to purchase the parcel didn’t warrant her curtness, his cavalier attitude did.

Zachariah congratulated Sadie that evening over steaming tea in her small drawing room. “As a lady mayor, you’ve had an uphill battle.”

“It’s wonderful so many people support *this* endeavor,” Sadie said. “The courthouse seems to unite us all. I met Yarborough today, by the way.”

“I’d have thought he’d returned to Atlanta.”

“He’s bent on establishing himself in Wooster. I didn’t much like him.” Sadie savored her tea.

“He seemed flippant, particularly after my mentioning those who fought –” She lowered her head.

“Those who fought and died in the war between the states, your husband included.”

“Those also who survived. Like you, Zachariah.” Sadie’s brow furrowed. “How dare some slick outsider come to our town with the gall to presume to sculpt it to *his* vision?”

“He is free to do so, my dear,” Zachariah said. “The Mason-Dixon Line no longer retains its relevance.”

Zachariah's words reflected his empathetic nature and lessened Sadie's frustration.

"I don't know why I said those things. I'm tired, I suppose."

The following morning, Linnia rushed into Sadie's office. "Come quick, Mayor. Someone has wrecked the courthouse."

The incident proved the first of multiple nocturnal assaults on the budding structure. Windows were bashed, a staircase crumbled, a courtroom torched.

People conjectured as to the culprit. Perhaps a dissenting construction worker or, more likely, that arrogant Rebel, surely disgruntled at his foiled plans. Volunteers, including Zachariah, supplemented police power in standing guard, yet the sabotage continued.

"I miss you, Atticus," Sadie whispered at the marble tombstone one morning. She placed a cluster of daffodils, then stood. Beyond the slope of Madison Hill, the courthouse nestled among rooftops, having risen one crippled hobble at a time. Only its tower remained to be installed. Sadie envisioned it dominating the skyline, its one-ton bell triumphantly pealing.

A breeze taunted her with the prospect of continuing gales of obstruction. Would the courthouse ever be completed? The \$75,000 appropriated for it was long depleted. She worked round the clock toward raising funds. Citizens scraped and schemed to contribute.

A policeman rapped on Sadie's door several nights later. The courthouse vandal had been arrested. The officer who spotted him placing explosives wondered how he'd bypassed the guards but understood when he ordered him to turn around.

The man was Zachariah.

Sadie felt chained to an anchor as she trudged over to Walnut Street in the morning.

Zachariah's eyes seared hers. "You have no business holding office. A female mayor." He spat the words and gripped the cell bars as if to choke them. "You have a Negro clerk – a freed slave, no less. And your political party is wasteful in supporting such an elaborate courthouse. It won't be standing in fifty years."

His words annihilated Sadie's impressions of both him and what he'd felt for her.

The ribbon-cutting occurred beneath a beaming June sun. The magnificent courthouse was designed in the Second Empire style, all the rage in Paris. The Stars and Stripes flapped at its pinnacle, the bell clanged. A band played, orators rambled.

During the ensuing social period, Sadie sought out Mr. Yarborough. "I apologize for my inhospitality toward you."

“No need,” he said. “Have you had refreshments?”

“A beverage would be nice, after all the talking.”

He retrieved glasses of lemonade and plates of cake and led Sadie to a grassy spot, spreading the coat of his sack suit for her to sit on.

“The courthouse is a beauty.” He clinked his glass against hers.

“And a testament to the people.”

“Which is why I’m staying.” He surveyed the assemblage. “These folks have values, grit.”

“Welcome to Wooster.” Sadie raised her parasol. “What will you do?”

“I’ve found another site for my veterans’ center. So many, including from my old platoon, need medical attention, rehabilitation.”

“Veterans’ center? You served ... I didn’t know ...” Sadie rearranged cake crumbs with her fork.

“I was lucky. Not badly injured, stumbled into a lucrative enterprise after the war. I want to help others.”

“Very commendable, Mr. Yarborough.”

“Please call me Bennet,” he said.

And the three spirits soared high above the courthouse and beyond.

“Those people fought political disagreement, racism, and sexism to construct this courthouse.”

Larwill said. “And overcame their mistrust of so-called foreigners.”

The apparitions perched aside Ladies Justice and Liberty high on the courthouse.

“If only today’s people did the same. Look there.” Henry pointed to the northeast quadrant. “A mob of people bearing objects. Heaven help us all.”

“But ‘tis only signs that they bear,” Bever said. “Signs of peace, love, equal rights.”

The demonstrators smiled. Pedestrians waved, passing cars honked in support.

“And what’s this?” Larwill peered down to see half a dozen people scrubbing graffiti from the courthouse. “We forget, in our dismay, that most of our citizens strive to make this, to make the world, an ever-better place.”

“They form organizations to benefit their fellow man,” Henry said. “They tirelessly demonstrate for the causes in which they believe.”

“They fought in 1878, and they fight yet today,” Bever said.

Larwill motioned toward the stone figures flanking the courthouse entrances. “While these Atlantes cannot be expected to bear this building forever, their strength has not yet diminished. There will always be Zachariahs, but we can rest assured that because of its remarkable citizens, Wooster shall thrive beneath that for which the courthouse stands.”

“Thank goodness. I wouldn’t have relished applying other-worldly pressure upon the citizens to change their ways. Boooooooooo,” Bever wailed in a low-pitched rumble, his arms hoisted fearsomely.

The three laughed.

William Henry tipped his hat. “See you on the other side, gentlemen.”

“What say we first swing by the old coal and ice,” John Bever suggested, “to see what sort of business it now houses?”

The three pushed off from the top of the courthouse.

“You know as well as I that it’s a distillery,” Joseph Larwill said. “But has anyone else noticed the aroma of baked goods wafting from the old pharmacy?”

“Gentlemen, please ...”

And the banter of the founding fathers faded with them to the far reaches of Wooster history, surely to return on some future day at some other profound occasion.