

The Dilemma

By Liam Maher

It was late June 1935. The ever-present sun was splitting the many stones making up the gravel path for the entrance to this Alabama town's small courthouse. The brown and grey colours that used to be visible as coin stones for the majestic building had long ago been faded by the hot summers that could reach ninety Fahrenheit, before the end of June. The courthouse was one of the oldest buildings in the town, if not the oldest. It was built in 1871, at the peak of crime in the state, to try looters and other forms of criminals. The rest of the buildings in this town were established after this date. The majority were built in a diamond-array, and after some time, a large square was established at the centre of the town. It was the heart of the town and there was always a couple of old men sitting and discussing political issues in the shade at the squares benches or a group of young children enjoying outdoor games together.

To some people, the most important building that helped make up the diamond shape, was the grocery store owned by Mr Jones. Mr Jones was a very friendly shopkeeper who had a wife with an addiction of chatting to the locals, while her husband worked hard to keep a roof over their heads. The store's delivery came only once a week, on a Thursday morning. Needless to say, with the scarcity of stock delivered each week, the shelves were bare by Thursday afternoon. But this didn't stop Mrs Jones's friends constantly entering the shop for a 'quick word' with her. This grocery store was a 'gossip-hub', for the bored housewives left at home while their partners worked the land for hours upon hours.

In the unusual circumstance of a theft in the store, Mr Jones would run across the square to the police station to fetch Charlie Smith, the town's sheriff. On entering this compact office cluttered with endless files and trash, Mr Jones would notice the balding unattractive Mr Smith, a mere 5foot 9inches in height. Charlie Smith might have improved his overweight appearance had he decided to walk the two hundred yards to his home every night, rather than stroll outside and hop into his 1934 Ford with all green body and black fenders.

Mr Jones would depart the small but modern police station, and on his way to the grocery store, he would pass by the ecclesiastical quarter of the town, the Baptist Church. This large, newly built and community centred church, was overseen by Minister Clarke, the town's one and only Baptist Minister. Minister Clarke had aged extremely well and not many of the town's residents could even contemplate the fact that it was fifty years since his birth. Not a sinner would dare speak poorly of him as he received the utmost respect from everyone on a daily basis. When Minister Clarke was assigned to this parish some fifteen odd years ago, he was branded an outsider. However, through many tedious hours spent with grieving widows and three sermons every Sunday, he managed to work his way into the hearts of all. He was now deemed to be as important to this town of Weston as the ancient clock that sat above the entrance doors to the courthouse.

About a mile beyond the diamond square was the ranch of the wealthiest and most respected family in Weston, the Cunninghams. Before Mr Bob Cunningham moved to Weston, he was nothing more than a labourer on the ranch of a wealthy old Englishman in Montgomery. Mr Cunningham had worked there for almost a decade. This extremely tough manual labour of lifting hay bales and similar duties had caused his large powerful hands to become torn and rough, and his face to become weathered in appearance. His broad, strong shoulders supported his freckled head on which grew the remains of his sun-kissed hair and his face sporting a stern expression.

Mr Bob Cunningham had left his job in Montgomery and worked hard to acquire the very large, fertile ranch he now possessed. After years of repetitive strenuous work, he now had five permanent farm-hands and a half dozen men working part-time. The first man Mr Cunningham hired went by the name of Dwayne Jackson. They had worked together for fifteen years with numerous part-time labourers coming and going. When Dwayne died suddenly at the age of forty, Mr Cunningham decided to hire his sons. The eldest, Leroy, was a hard worker and proved to be a good example for his three younger brothers who also went on to take up the same job at the same low wage.

Leroy was an extremely powerful man of 6foot 4inches. In his twenty six years of life on this planet, he had been discriminated against because of his skin colour at very chance possible. He had never experienced the pride filled joy of being respected. All of the white people in the town did however fear his iron-clad muscles that defined his bulky shoulders and dark brown, gorilla-like chest.

Normally on a beautiful day like this, the ranch would have been in full summer swing. The fields of cotton would be specked by little black dots that were the African-American labourers tending to the crop. Mr Cunningham would be seen strolling around the ranch with a beaming smile, while sporting his usual earth-coloured felt hat. He would walk from labourer to labourer, checking up on them and issuing discriminatory insults if there were discrepancies in their work. Mrs Rachel Cunningham would usually spend her days pruning the rosebushes in front of their large, peach-coloured home.

However, this day was not an ordinary day. Quite the opposite, in actual fact. The Cunninghams had just recently experienced traumatic devastation. The body of the family's youngest daughter, Christine, had been discovered by Mrs Cunningham in a ditch separating their back garden from one of the many cotton-fields belonging to the family. Mrs Cunningham had been taking her evening stroll three days before when she discovered the blood-spattered corpse of her seventeen-year-old daughter. Upon discovery, she overcame her immediate shock to inform her husband of her situation.

Mr Cunningham let no time pass and ran the mile into Weston's diamond square where he located Sherriff Smith. Smith was not in shape to reach the house in the same manner that Mr Cunningham had reached the town so the pair made the journey in the '34 Ford. Upon arrival, Smith identified the case as a cold-blooded murder as a result of the three-inch-in-diameter gash in Christine's skull.

Two days had passed since this dramatic incident and the townspeople had surpassed grief by now. They were furious about the death of a beautiful young girl that had meant so much to the community. Christine had gotten involved in every activity and event and helped out wherever she could. She was adored by everyone. Now, everyone was determined to avenge her murder. These circumstances were out of the ordinary, but there was general consensus that the punishment should be lynching. However a bill against this form of punishment had been brought in in 1931 so they would have to rely on the law to find a suitable punishment for the guilty party.

At the moment, Sheriff Smith was carrying out investigations. He had received no leads on the case until he visited Minister Clarke. Smith entered the Baptist church and wobbled down the centre aisle to Minister Clarke where he began his conversation with:

“Good morning Minister. As you might know, I am in the midst of investigating the murder of Christine Cunningham. I decided to pay you a quick visit today to ask you if you know anything?”

Any onlooker would have noticed the stain on the priest’s starched shirt, as a result of his balmy hands and fingertips fidgeting with his shirt button just below the sternum. They would also notice Minister Clarke’s already chapped fingernails being grinded down on by his lateral incisors. Another police officer would have picked up on these signs and connected the dots, but Sheriff Smith was not an ordinary cop. He had the speed of a snail, reflexes of an ash tree and mind of a ten year old. He should have noticed that the minister failed to make any form of eye-contact in the course of the conversation. Instead, the minister’s gaze was fixed upon a statue of the Pieta in the back of the pew.

“I wonder if you have been told something?” probed the sheriff inquisitively to break the silence that had prevailed for about forty seconds. Minister Clarke was so astonished by this statement that he began to look anxious and confused.

“Yes, maybe your knowledge was acquired in confidence and you refuse to break your vow of silence”, continued the sheriff, while the priest intuitively nodded in response. Without further ado, the sheriff once again wobbled down the main aisle and left the church.

Minister Clarke was slumped in his chair when Smith’s gasoline Ford droned on by. Minister Clarke had been on tenterhooks for the duration of this very short encounter. His heart had been beating extremely fast and the world around him, moving extremely slowly, at the same time. When he calmed himself, he began dissecting his thoughts to isolate those relating to the night of the accident. It all began about six months before. This was the time when Christine Cunningham and Minister Clarke had first met. Christine had been in bother with her school and she had been too afraid to tell her parents. The minister heard of Christine’s minor misdemeanours and vowed to help her. Christine was very grateful and expressed her gratitude by inviting him for a walk in the nearby park. On that day, they discovered the

similarities in their interests. For instance, the pair shared a great interest in Shakespeare and poetry. They began spending a lot of time together and by early spring, they had fallen in love with one another. They were the most unlikely couple and had to keep their relationship private because of her age.

The week prior to this incident, Christine had revealed to him her plans to attend college in Boston, twelve hundred miles away. He had stewed over the idea for five days, and then asked her to visit him once again. He explained that he could not possibly stand to be so far away from his true love. An argument had broken out. Minister Clarke pushed Christine in the heat of the outburst and she had fallen over a log and hit her head off the corner of the stone fireplace. She split her head open to reveal a steady stream of blood. Minister Clarke was so baffled by his mistake that he panicked. He picked her up, walked out to her house that was nearby, and he dumped her once beautiful, now blood-ridden body behind the dry withered bush in her parent's large back garden. Once this was completed, he escaped under the cloak of darkness. Looking back on what had happened, Minister Clarke felt very ashamed and horrified about his actions followed by blatant cowardice. It was unlike him to attempt to avoid consequences for his deeds.

Sheriff Smith had, by now, spent three days carrying out investigations. He had begun by questioning Christine's parents, their neighbours, friends of the family, etc. With no answers, he then tried questioning the shopkeeper to check if he had heard anything. Once again, he had received no leads so he had tried speaking with Minister Clarke. Although this conversation consisted of little speaking on one side, it proved to be somewhat successful. Smith had discovered that he could extract the answer from the Minister if he played his cards correctly. The sheriff would bring his suspect to Minister Clarke and receive silent affirmation. The only thing left for the sheriff to do was to locate a suspect. Having no ambition, the sheriff reluctantly began questioning the second-class citizens of the town, the Negroes. Almost immediately, Smith had pinpointed a suspect by the name of Leroy Jackson. There was circumstantial evidence connecting Leroy to the crime. For instance, the sheriff was quick to point out the location of Leroy's work. Leroy worked for Mr Cunningham on his cotton fields. This in the eyes of the sheriff, along with the strong physique of Leroy, was enough to convict him.

Before Smith was legally allowed to put him under arrest, he was obliged to ask Leroy a few questions relating to the night of the accident.

"Where were you on the night of the seventeenth of June, nigger?" interrogatively asked the sheriff without a greeting or introducing himself.

"I was tendin' to the cotton out on the ranch. Mister Cunningham told me to, every night he says. He tells me to keep an eye out and don't let no strangers onto the ranch", replied the taken-back Leroy. "Do you have an alibi nigger?" grumbled Sheriff Smith while spitting out a piece of tobacco he had been chewing on.

“An alibi mister?” stumbled Leroy, looking as scared and confused as a turkey on Thanksgiving.

“Do you have any proof as to your whereabouts on that night?” spat Sheriff Smith indignantly. Smith was getting fed up and couldn’t wait around much longer for his answer.

“No mister. I don’t have no proof, but you have a black man’s word. I didn’t do nothin’ wrong and I sure as hell didn’t kill nobody. I was tendin’ to them crops like Mister Cunningham told me to. Now mister, I gotta get back to work.”

Leroy Jackson turned his back to the sheriff and began walking rapidly towards the ranch house until he heard the barrel of a piston being twisted and a bullet being put in place. Not a single labourer had eyes on anything other than the sheriff’s pistol. It was very unlike Smith to perform such a gesture. He was known as a push-over that constantly failed to arrest criminals but this was not the case as he strolled over to Leroy, grabbed him by the neck and threw him into his motorcar.

“Good morning Minister”, boomed Sheriff Smith with a triumphant look of satisfaction on his face. “As you may have heard, I have taken into custody a young man, Leroy Jackson, as a suspect in the case” continued Smith.

“Good morning to you too, Sheriff. You are correct in that I had heard about the arrest you made on the Cunningham ranch yesterday evening. Why is it that you felt the need to pay me a visit?” posed the nervous Minister Clarke.

“Would I be right in saying that Leroy is the guilty party?” asked the sheriff. Minister Clarke kept his mouth shut and once again, set his gaze away from the blue eyes of the sheriff, but this time to his black polished shoes. After quite some time of eagerly awaiting a response, Sheriff Smith broke the silence by thanking the minister for his time and quietly leaving the Baptist church.

Sheriff Smith had taken the nerve-driven, agitated signs displayed by the priest, as confirmation of the suspect’s guilt. Minister Clarke could not have revealed a confession, even if it was to aid the law. Smith was delighted with himself as he would be praised as a hero for many years to come and he might even receive a medal of honour for his ‘great’ detective skills. Strange as it may seem, crimes like these never happened in Weston. The locals wouldn’t shed a tear for the death of Leroy Jackson. As far as they were concerned, he was just another ‘useless’ black boy.

However, this conclusion to the case did have a huge impact on Minister Clarke. He had a dilemma on his hands, whether to allow Leroy to be punished for his mistake or to give himself in to the authorities. Even though he had not said an untrue word, his silence had landed Leroy in deep trouble. The instant Sheriff Smith had left, the Minister was overcome with relief. He even went so far as to convince himself of Leroy’s crime in order to withstand the shame that was soon to come. Minister Clarke’s moral outlook was challenged. He didn’t know if he preferred the current situation or if he would prefer to have been arrested.

Three days later, all the inhabitants of Weston were in attendance at the courthouse. “This is the final hearing of the trial of Leroy Jackson for the murder of Christine Cunningham”, declared the middle-aged male judge while scratching his bald patch. Judge Baxter was very well respected in the law community as he had spent seven years studying at Harvard law school. Many of the spectators in the courthouse would look up at Judge Baxter, sitting up high and mightily on his black leather chair, and they would give anything to be able to judge as fairly as he could and have his highly-paid and highly-respected job.

Minister Clarke was sitting down at the back of the room, as silent as a ghost. He didn't shift an inch for fear of being noticed and attracting attention. One might wonder why the Baptist Minister at legal proceedings, had he a vested interest? Clarke's behaviour was a perfect replica of the atmosphere inside the courthouse. He was silent, nervous and extremely uncomfortable. His lack of comfort may have been down to his strong involvement in the case, or it may have been down to the stifling heat in that room. A lack of adequate ventilation had caused droplets of perspiration to form on the faces of all those present in that small courthouse on that late June afternoon.

After quite some time of argument between the defendant's attorney and the prosecutor, the jury left the room. Their exit was followed by the spectators, until the jury returned ten minutes later. The judge's voice began booming out to the packed courtroom once again:

“Having heard both sides of the case, the jury have come to a unanimous decision. Mr Jackson has been found guilty of first-degree murder. He is herewith sentenced by the state of Alabama to death by the electric chair at the state prison in Birmingham, at 2p.m. tomorrow, 24th June. This case is closed.”

Once the judge had finished speaking, all eyes were then fixed upon Leroy. One might have expected to see tears form in those brown eyes of his, but no emotion was shown. He stayed strong, and honourably thanked his attorney before being lead out of the courtroom by the bailiff. Leroy was strong physically and also strong in the mind as he refused to be agitated by the sneering comments passed to him by the spectators leaving the courtroom alongside him.

Had anyone waited around, they would have noticed the Minister still sitting in the back of the courthouse with tears streaming down his face. He was distraught and could only express his anguish and remorse in tears.

The emotionless, stone-cold walls reflected the atmosphere of this small, grey execution room. The middle-aged, extremely pale-skinned guards wore charcoal grey uniforms. The only colour to be seen was the glimmer in the dim light from the expensive gold watch worn by the prison's warden, Mr Tom Bush. Bush had been warden of this Alabama State Prison for almost five years now and in his eyes, today's execution was no different to the other three hundred he had overseen since beginning this job.

Not a sound was heard from the spectators as Leroy Jackson was led into the room by two large prison guards, one on either side. Leroy entered through the back door behind the executioner's table. Even the sound of his unpolished old prison shoes or the heavy steel bangles around his hands and feet, could not break the tense and deathly atmosphere. There was a poor turnout for this execution, set to begin in five minutes, only a couple of prison officials, Leroy's three younger brothers and the executioner.

The Minister had been battling with his conscience since the previous day. How could he, a man of strong religious and moral principles, allow another man to suffer the consequences of his irresponsible behaviour? After thinking long and hard about his dilemma, Minister Clarke had decided that he must own up to the crime and save the life of Leroy Jackson.

Leroy maintained his neutral expression from the previous day and refused to make eye-contact with anyone in the room. The contrast was stark between his orange prison overalls and his dark skin. He was offered the opportunity to say a few last words but declined the offer. The warden glanced around the room, expecting to see the prisoner's priest or minister. So too did Leroy. When he failed to locate Minister Clarke, he bowed his head in silent prayer for a couple of minutes.

The door was flung open, and the Minister burst into the execution room. He was just in time to see what was left of Leroy being wheeled away to the mortuary. He was too late.