

The Way of Transgressors – ISBN 9781990160486

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Chapter One: Halfway to Queensville

JAMES QUINLEVEY, sworn

The prisoner came to me where I was chopping. He showed me a six-shooter and said he would let me see how he could shoot. He put two slugs into a hemlock tree. He said then he was going up to Old Johnston's.

Hard feelings between the farmer and his hired man erupted into the public sphere midweek after a meeting at the Methodist church in Queensville. The hired man, young John Traviss, a nineteen-year-old carpenter, stood four inches taller than six feet. Well built, he had a face that was not at all a bad one. East Gwillimbury was unanimous in that until the rupture, Young John and Old John Johnston appeared well acquainted.

The laity met before dinnertime to confer on various topics, one of which concerned an accounting of the widows' fund. Throughout the meeting in the drafty basement, neither man displayed malice toward the other.

Narrow-shouldered with a long face, Old Johnston hobbled down the stone steps outside. The farmer brushed a powder of snow from the forelocks of his span of horses with his sleighing gloves. A serious man with a stern exterior, he concealed a gentleness of spirit easily overlooked by any unfamiliar with his Midlands upbringing. Arriving in Upper Canada from Kings County, Ireland, three decades previous, Old Johnston had come into money, after which he allotted a half-acre of his holding to the Primitive Methodist Connexion. This place of worship owed its construction to Johnston's wealth.

Farmers stood outside the stone church in pairs and threes at twilight, discussing autumn wheat, a distressing calving, and MacGentry's wrecked harvest. Old Johnston gripped the halter, guiding his cutter from the carriage shed beside the churchyard. Lighting the candle lamps, he readied to leave.

John Traviss and his people worshipped here, as well.

No sectarian element factored into the slaying.

Hired by Old Johnston the previous spring, Traviss and his brothers spent the summer framing and constructing a new, larger farmhouse for the Johnstons. When the work was completed, the brothers' wages were paid in full.

No outstanding accounts contributed to the hostility.

Before Old Johnston departed church property, Traviss charged his sleigh, angry as a wasp, shouting claims the farmer had traduced his name in the community.

"Why?" Traviss bellowed, "Why defame me?"

Johnston casually removed his bone-rimmed spectacles and exhaled on the lens, rubbing them on the checked woollen sleigh robe covering his lap.

Traviss seethed, “I could throttle you, man.”

Johnston remained motionless. The other farmers drew closer. Mr. Porter, a well-knit wheelwright with a successful enterprise in the village, stood between the sparring pair, rubbing his pocked chin.

High-minded and just, Porter was acting county sheriff, appointed by the village reeve for a three-year tenure. The father of seven was in the constant company of his fourteen-year-old son, George, a thin boy with inquisitive eyes. Villagers addressed the youth as “Deputy.” George relished the sobriquet.

The boy mimicked his father and rubbed his unblemished chin.

Barely able to control his rage, Traviss stepped back. He shoved his large hands in the pockets of his great black coat containing several walnuts, a McIntosh apple, a tin of clout nails, boiled lemon sweets wrapped in a stained cambric handkerchief marked *E.N.* and half a quid of tobacco.

He appealed to the farmers, “He whispers I am a tippler but have any seen me in the throes of whisky fever? What’s more, he hints I run with the Tenth Line Blazers. Imagine me, cattle-lifting with those thoroughgoing rascals.”

The farmers stared dispassionately. Traviss drew a handful of walnuts from inside his pocket, crushing several in his callused palm. He hurled shell splinters and nutmeat at the frozen earth, lunging at the sleigh.

“That,” he pointed at the ground, “Is the mess of your brain after I beat your skull for tarnishing my reputation.”

Johnston's team gave a start. He steadied the horses, his countenance showing no sign of intimidation.

Porter nudged Traviss at the shoulder, "Enough, son."

Traviss came at Johnston a second time. Several farmers struggled to hold him back before the teenager broke away.

George was knocked to the ground in the scrimmage. Traviss picked the boy up and righted him. "I'm sorry, Deputy. Are you fine?"

George, frightened by the suddenness of the incident, held in tears. "Fine. I'm fine. Just fine," the boy reassured.