

THE FORTRESS

John Boston

They had only been back in school for a week. It was still brutally hot in Florida this time of year. Emma made certain she let her kids stop for water breaks outside. Zeke had brought a block of ice with him, which Emma kept in a makeshift freezer. She had made the kids lemonade and all were very grateful. She had turned eighty this year and she was doing the same thing she had done every day for the past fifty-nine years. When she saw the ad for a schoolteacher at Gainesville's first integrated school, she jumped at the chance. The superintendent, Mr. Holloway, who interviewed her, asked her four times if she felt she was physically and mentally capable of teaching class for six and a half hours a day.

"The Lord didn't build me for nothing else. It's all I know how to do. I think if I wasn't teaching, well, you might as well just bury me. I wouldn't know what to do with myself." she responded.

"Emma, you do know these are negro children, right?"

"They've got a right to a decent education, just like white children."

"I agree. Unfortunately, many in our community do not. It may get unpleasant out there. I don't want you to think this is going to be a walk in the park. Are you certain you are up to this?"

"Mr. Holloway, if you had anyone but me, who applied, you'd hire them. I'm going to take an educated guess that I am the only one who applied for the position?"

"You would be correct, Emma."

"I had your father in my classroom. I remember he was an excellent speller. He had an amazing ability to just look at a word once and instantly memorize it."

"My father speaks very highly of you. Emma, I'm not going to mince words here, these children desperately need a qualified school teacher. You are certainly qualified, despite your age. I would just be remiss if I sent you out there. It's half an hour into town by auto. There's no electricity and no running water. The kids will have to use the outhouse. There is a separate one for staff. It's pretty spartan out there."

"Why are you trying to talk me out of the job? You know there won't be anyone else who applies."

"Emma, you're old enough to be my grandmother. I certainly wouldn't want my grandmother out there all day," said Mr. Holloway.

"I know your grandmother quite well. How's she doing?"

"She's doing fine. Well, you are the only applicant and we do need someone out there. You know that logging camp is full of Klan members."

"So I hear."

"Those people disgust me, but they're entitled to express their opinions, I can't stop them. I'm sure they'll be visiting the school. You still want the job?"

"When do I start?" she asked.

"How about Monday?"

"Monday would be fine. Let the families know they have a new teacher. I'll expect the students to arrive promptly at eight AM. We have a lot of catching up to do."

"I'll drive out there and let them know. At the first sign of trouble, you call me, not that idiot sheriff. I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him."

"Is there a phone out there?"

"There's one at the logging camp."

"I see. Well, let's hope I never have to make that call."

Emma watched the nine black students and three white ones saunter into the classroom. It was already close to ninety degrees and it was only eight in the morning. Some of the children smiled at her, but most did not. They took their seats. The oldest boy in the school was fifteen. His name was Charles. He was already over six feet tall and weighed close to two hundred and twenty pounds. He was clearly the one who called the shots at the school. Even the white kids obeyed his every command. Emma noticed that many of the children, both black and white were not wearing shoes. Poverty didn't care what color you were. She hoped her church might step in and donate some shoes for the children. She would have to leave out the fact that they were for the negro children.

"Good morning class. My name is Mrs. Sykes. I will be your new school teacher. Now, I expect everyone to be here, ready to learn by eight AM. I will ring the bell five minutes before class begins. We will have recess after lunch. If you get hot, you may excuse yourself and get a drink of water from the well. I know this is not easy children, but it is the best we have, we just have to make do."

"Why do the white kids get electricity and fans and indoor plumbing? Our last teacher didn't even last a week out here." interrupted Charles.

"Well, Charles, it is not I who make the rules. I just live with them like everyone else. Believe me, if it were up to me, this school would be as nice if not better than the ones in the city."

"How old are you, Mrs. Sykes?" asked Grover. A small ten-year-old who was wearing tattered coveralls and nothing else.

"I am eighty years old."

The entire class let out a collective gasp. Emma was an antique. She was the oldest person many of them had ever met.

"So, you were born in the year 1845, is that correct, Ma'am?" asked Mary Bell

"Yes, yes it is."

"So, you were alive during the civil war. You were alive when General Sherman marched through here," said Charles.

"Yes, I was a teenager during the War Between the States. Now, if the younger children would open their notebooks, we can begin our handwriting exercises. The older children can follow along with me. I'm going to read a story by Mark Twain."

The kids all looked at one another. Emma wasn't quite certain what had just happened. None of the kids took out their notebooks.

"Well, what's wrong children? Did you not hear me?"

"Ma'am.....I'm the only one who can read and write in the class," said Mary Bell.

Emma was floored. She couldn't believe it. Mr. Holloway had left out a few key details during the interview.

"Is this true class?"

"Our last teacher just let us play outside all morning. Guess she figured no negro kid should be reading anyway," said Charles sarcastically.

Emma sat down at the table. Her old bones were not what they used to be. This was clearly going to be more challenging than even she had thought.

"Charles, you have to be able to read and write to become a productive member of society."

"Come on, you really think society wants a bunch of black kids to know how to read and right. We might take away white people's jobs if that happens," he said.

"You don't ever look at a book and wonder what's inside? You don't ever look at a newspaper and wonder what's being said? I know I certainly would if I were in your shoes."

Charles looked away. She knew he was the key to maintaining class composure. If he could get him on her side, the rest of them would be easy. She just had to get him there. He had some very strong opinions for being so young.

"Well, let's begin. I'm going to start at the very beginning. By the time I'm done with you, everyone in this class will know how to read."

"What if we don't want to learn how to read?" asked Charles

"Well, I guess this is going to be a very long year for you," she said and started writing on the blackboard.

The weather finally broke during the first week in August. It rained for several days afterward. Some of the children were even wearing jackets. Everyone was getting along. The white kids were playing with the black kids, at least during school hours. Emma would bring treats for the students. Mary Bell had never had a lollipop before. Junior had never played baseball before. Even Charles was beginning to come around. Emma made feeders for the animals in the forests. Every morning, she would see several deer and their fawns feeding from it. Pretty soon, there would be foxes and birds, even a black bear, which were thought to have been hunted to almost extinction in these parts. The children wanted to learn. They wanted to learn how to read and write. If nothing else, she was going to make certain they could before she retired for good at the end of the school year. Things were going along well for being in rural Florida in the year 1925. The insanity of the Great War had ended. The roaring twenties were in full swing. Jack Dempsey was the heavyweight champion of the world and even here in this tiny hamlet in the wilds of Florida, there was hope for the future, at least she had thought there was hope for the future. That all changed one morning when Emma stopped by the local store and bought a newspaper. She couldn't believe what she had read. A prominent negro civil rights attorney was found *unresponsive* in his jail cell. He had been arrested the day before for handing out pro negro literature in the Gainesville Central Park. The Klan was suspected but never mentioned in the article. Emma just had to hope that her children were okay. This was not going to be easy for them to understand.....*it wasn't easy for her to understand either*. It just didn't make any sense. She just couldn't understand why some people refused to accept others as members of the human race. As far as Emma was concerned, we were all God's children and some of us were in need of a good spanking.

That November morning, it was cool and drizzling outside. It was Junior who first saw the men standing outside the small schoolhouse.

"Junior, take your seat," said Emma as she began writing on the blackboard.

"Junior!" she said. He didn't even acknowledge her and continued to stare out the window.

"Mrs. Sykes.....I think we have company," said Mary Bell as she looked out the window.

Emma put down her chalk and walked over to the window. She nearly had a heart attack as she saw half a dozen men emerge from some cars and surround the schoolhouse. These men were not welcome here at all. They were all dressed in Klan outfits. Emma had dreaded something like this happening. She knew they were not here with good intentions, people like them never had good intentions. Everywhere they went, trouble seemed to follow.

"Charles?"

"Yes?"

"I'm going to go out there. If anything should happen to me, I want you to go get everyone out of here and back to the logging camp, is that understood?"

"Let me go out there, with you."

"No.....no. You have to make sure everyone else is safe. Promise me, you'll do that." said Emma, shaking.

She could see Charles was both hurt and angry. He put his head down and simply nodded.

"No problem, Mrs. Sykes. Those men lay a hand on you and it's on," he said defiantly.

"You go out here and they'll kill you for sure. That's just what they want you to do. Don't fall into their trap."

Emma opened the front door and walked down the steps. She held the handrail so as to not slip. The men got very quiet all of a sudden. Emma saw the gas cans. She knew exactly what they wanted.

"What do you want?" she asked

"Come on, Emma. Let's not make this any harder than it has to be." said one of the men wearing a white hood.

"Get out of here. None of you are welcome here. This is a schoolhouse for goodness sake."

"Emma, you can't have nigger kids with white kids. You know that." said another man wearing a hood.

"What business is it what color my students are? They have a right to a decent education."

"Emma, your school is the only one in the state that takes colored kids with white kids. You see the problem we have here?"

"No, I do not. These children aren't bothering anyone. Now, get out of here before I call the authorities." she said.

"Emma, get the kids out of there. There's no need for them to be killed." said one of the men as he began pouring gasoline on the side of the building.

Emma grabbed the gas can out of the man's hands. She grabbed his hood and yanked it off. The man looked away quickly. It was too late. Emma immediately recognized him.

"Well, nice to see you again, Mr. Watts. I'm guessing the other idiots with you must be Mr. Finch and Mr. Archer. Come on boys, take the hoods off. Your secret is out."

"Emma, nobody has to get hurt here. Let's just get this over with and we can all go on with our day," said Mr. Archer.

"Mr. Watts, when I had you in my classroom, I distinctly recall the time you had an accident during recess. Do you recall?"

"Emma, what are you talking about?"

"You shit your pants. We changed your pants in the bathroom so no one would ever know. I never said a word to anyone until now."

"That was a long time ago, Emma."

"I would do the same for these kids, black or white. I don't base my decisions about people based on the color of their skin. It's what's in their hearts that matters."

"Well, that's great to hear, Emma. Unfortunately, the Klan has decided that this school needs to be destroyed. We can't have black kids going to the same school as white kids. It's against God's will." said one of the men wearing a hood.

"God's will. What would any of you know about God?"

"Emma, just get the kids out here, unless you want them burned along with the school."

"You burn this school, you may as well burn me right along with it."

"Come on, Emma, don't be ridiculous. Why on Earth would this little schoolhouse mean so much to you?"

"It isn't just a schoolhouse. This building is a fortress against people like you. People with hate in their hearts and evil in their eyes. A place where everyone is welcome, regardless of who they are or what they look like. This a place of refuge for the weak and the wounded. This schoolhouse doesn't turn anyone away. Jesus didn't and I won't either."

"You would die, for these nigger kids and this stupid schoolhouse?" asked Mr. Watts.

"If I have to, then yes."

"Emma, you never did do anything the easy way."

The men walked back to their cars and horses and some of them took out gas cans. Just as they were about to start pouring, Charles emerged at the top of the steps. He was holding a tire iron in his hands. The men stopped as soon as they saw him.

"Charles, get the kids outside.....NOW!" said Emma

"I ain't afraid of you. You want trouble, you found it," he said walking down the steps

"Charles, you should do what Emma says. Unless of course, you really are that stupid," said Mr. Archer.

Charles turned and hit him as hard as he could, knocking the man down. The rest of the men started attacking him, hitting him and restraining him.

"Hey, boy! You wouldn't be the first nigger I ever put in the ground and you won't be the last one either." said the leader of the men, who was still wearing his hood.

The men held him while the leader took turns hitting him. Charles was strong, but there were too many of them. Emma was getting nervous after seeing Charles bleeding from their strikes.

"Guess we're going to have a little fun here after all." said the leader as he began to kick Charles.

Emma began to pray for a miracle. She ran over to Charles to help him but knew she was powerless to stop the men. The men had enough and decided to take a break, lighting up cigarettes and taking drinks from a flask of whiskey. Emma knelt beside him and held his head in her arms.

"Charles, that was foolish. Look what happened."

"Those dumb crackers. I had to create a diversion."

"For what?"

"I sent Peanut back to camp to get help. They never saw him."

"Oh, child. Let's hope he makes it," she said and helped him up.

The men took their time and had to recover their strength before they started. In those precious few minutes, Peanut, who could run like the wind, made it back to camp and ran right to the camp foreman's office and told him what was happening. Mr. Nesbit had a reputation as a hard-nosed, no-nonsense company man who took zero bullshit from anyone. He reached into his desk drawer and pulled out his revolver. He called for several other camp members and they raced out to the schoolhouse.

Emma saw them arrive just in time. They were about to ignite the gasoline. She had gotten the children out of the building. They were huddled beside her in fear. Her heart nearly leaped out of her chest as she saw the men arrive. They surrounded the Klan vehicles to block their escape. Mr. Nesbit was the first to emerge. Mr. Watts quickly put his hood back on, but it was too late. He was recognized by some of the camp workers. Nesbit walked right up to Mr. Archer and stood in front of him.

"Is there a problem here, gentlemen?"

"Nope, nothing that involves you or your men. This is Klan business, it does not involve you."

"This schoolhouse was built by the owner of the camp, so yes, it is my business," he said standing in front of the man on the horse.

"You really want to mess with the Klan? We run these parts. There isn't a cop or politician that doesn't take orders from us."

"Well, that may be true, but the Klan doesn't run the camp. Quite a few Klan members work at the camp. What would happen if the owner were to shut it down and cease all logging operations in these parts? You'd put a hundred men out of work and work is already scarce in these parts. How would that go over?"

"They ain't gonna shut this camp down. He's bluffing," said Mr. Archer.

"Archer, if your ass isn't back to work in ten minutes, you're fired."

"Yes sir," he said and quickly scurried away.

"You guys should really think about what I said. The owner is a rich Yankee who doesn't take too kindly to his employees being threatened. It certainly wouldn't take too much to sway his opinion. You can tell your bosses what I said. I ever see you out here again and this camp is done. Am I clear?" said Nesbit.

"I'll pass it along," said the leader of the men.

The six men wearing Klan outfits decided to make a *tactical retreat* and head back into town. Shortly after they left, dozens of black workers from the camp arrived at the schoolhouse to assist Mr. Nesbit.

"Show's over. Everyone is back to work. We got quotas to make," he said

"Emma, are you alright?" he asked.

"Nothing a shot of whiskey won't fix."

"Do you want me to leave some of my men here with you?"

"No, the Klan may be evil, but they aren't stupid. They won't do anything against us if they think it will result in the camp shutting down," she said.

"I guess we just have to hope my bluff worked," he said and helped Charles to his feet.

"A boy your size out to be out with us working," said Mr. Nesbit.

"My pa wants me to get an education. I'm going to be the first one in my family who can read and write." Charles said, wiping the blood away from his nose.

"Well, you got a good teacher, take care of her."

"Yes sir, we will," said Charles.

"That was very foolish, Charles.....and very smart. If you relied more on your brain and less on your fists, you could really make something of yourself in this world." Emma said smiling.

"I gotta learn how to read and write good first," he said.

"Then, let's get started. Children, back inside, we have a lot of catching up to do," she said as she rounded up the children.

The Klan never did return. They left Emma and the schoolhouse alone. Emma continued to teach, right up until the week she died at the ripe old age of 91. She continued to educate and inspire, believing that for evil to thrive, it requires ignorance, something that she had spent her entire life trying to fight. Some of her kids found success, some did not. Charles not only learned how to read and write but was the first in his family to be accepted into a college. He wrote to Emma, thanking her for what she did that day. Emma and the fortress are still there to this day, like a bright light in an otherwise dark world, the fortress endures.