Forces

Volume 1989 Article 4

5-1-1989

The Right Thing

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by Jerry L. Harris

Mine heritage is unto me as a speckled bird,
The birds round abour are against her
--Jeremiah 12:9

Issac Havard was a happy man.

From where he sat, Issac could barely see the red Prince Albert Tobacco can on the mantel above the fireplace. Sara put that Prince Albert up there, he thought, knowing full well that nobody around here uses it. He had momentarily lost the story about why it was there. Trying to solve mysteries made Issac tired. Using a long black poker, he feebly punched at several charred oak logs until he had the flames in the fireplace to his liking, and then he settled back in his rocking chair to listen to the radio announcer. The War News was on, and Issac didn't want to miss a word of it. He had forgotten why the United States was involved in the war. But it don't matter, he thought, as he looked up at the red tobacco can, we're in it cause we've got no choice. It's the right thing. Right's right and wrong's wrong. "My memory ain't too bad," he said aloud into the fireplace. But his memory seemed to fade in and out like the radio announcer's voice. He looked at a picture of his father, Fate, hanging just above the red can. "I still know who you are," he chuckled. He looked at another picture to the left of the red can. "I still know who you are too. You're Henry. What became of you, Henry?" Issac scratched his head and looked down into the blazing fire. "Oh well, I don't guess it matters much now," he chuckled. Issac had always been a happy man.

When he was a small boy, his father had told him, "Yeah-yeah lad, you work at what's right and you'll always have a clear conscience; you'll always be able to sleep. Do the right thing—what our Heavenly Father expects us to do—and the Lord will bless you with a happiness and peace of mind like that of a nursing babe." Issac had taken his father's advice: he had always worked at doing the right thing—it wasn't hard—and people marveled at how he could, at any time or place, slip into a deep, peaceful sleep. Once, when he was a young man, he had gone to sleep while plowing a field of corn. Without a conscious guide, the mule had veered from the straight furrow toward the field gate that crossed the road leading to the barn. Issac had wakened when the mule stopped at the closed gate. He had looked back over his shoulder at a curving swath the mule had plowed through the corn and laughed.

The voice on the radio was coming in clearly now. The announcer was saying something about Premier Stalin, something about a Russian offensive, but Issac couldn't quite understand. He twisted the radio's knobs and beat on its dry cell battery. "You're more trouble than you're worth," he muttered good naturedly. I never should have bought you." Issac was not one to spend money foolishly, but his grandson, Frank, had badgered him for days. All Frank had talked about was *The Grand Ole Opry*. And when that subject had worn thin, he'd started in on current events. "Germany and France may go to war," he'd told Issac, "and we might never know it." Issac had reluctantly ordered the dry cell radio from Sears & Roebuck. And now it buzzed anbd whistled with static.

Issac looked up at the red Prince Albert Tobacco can. Why, that Prince Albert belongs to Billy and Bobby Johnson, he thought. Every Saturday night for at least a year after Issac had bought the radio, the Johnson brothers had ridden horseback from Plum Ridge to Havard Hill and listened with Issac and his family to *The Grand Ole Opry*. Issac's son, Tom, had said that listening to the radio was a waste of time, but he had listened just the same; Issac's daughter-in-law, Sara Lou, had wondered how music could fly through the air and be caught in a box with knobs. Issac had never understood how the radio worked, and had never really wanted to. But he had sensed that it was a pretty good gadget—just knowing men had made it to bring music and happiness assured him that people were trying to do the right thing. And the music of *The Grand Ole Opry* was the best that Issac had ever heard. Prince Albert Tobacco had helped sponsor the broadcast. Wanting to help keep the show on the air, Billy and Bobby Johnson had started smoking. Billy had carried in the breast pocket of his overalls the slim red can of tobacco which bore on its side the likeness of a dapper gentleman wearing formal attire and sporting a neatly trimmed beard. Bobby had carried the Prince Albert Cigarette Papers. Every Saturday night at the beginning of *The Grand Ole Opry* broadcast, Billy had passed the slim red can to Bobby, and Bobby had sprinkled some brown Prince Albert Tobacco into a white Prince Albert Cigarette Paper. He had then rolled the paper and tobacco into a crooked cigarette, lit it, and passed the can and lighted cigarette back to Billy. At first, Bobby hadn't been able to inhale the smoke without coughing. Issac hadn't paid any attention to their smoking. He had always focused his attention on what was coming through the radio. He'd been enthralled by the singing of Roy Acuff, and he hadn't wanted to miss a note of it. Issac's grandson had never liked Roy Acuff. "He's too plain; too simple," he'd said. And he'd made the same charge against The Blue Sky Boys. "They're too simple; too hillbilly," he'd explained to Issac. But Issac had paid him no mind. Once, when Acuff was singing "The Great Speckled Bird"

Issac had felt like crying, but he didn't. He had been afraid of what the others might think.

The newscaster was saying something about a shake up in Prime Minister Churchill's War Cabinet. But Issac couldn't quite understand. He twisted the radio's knobs. The radio popped and whistled. "You make about as much sense as Franklin does," he chuckled. About six months after Issac had bought the radio, his grandson had talked him into buying a fiddle. In a short time Frank could play the most complicated fiddle tunes "by ear." When the radio's reception had been good, when *The Grand Ole Opry* had been loud and clear, Frank had played his fiddle along with The Smokey Mountain Boys. The high notes of the fiddle had pierced the thick darkness of the piney woods. And on some of those Saturday nights, Billy and Bobby Johnson had sung along with The Blue Sky Boys on songs like "Jesus Told Me So" and "There'll Come A Time." Billy and Bobby had echoed so well the high nasal harmonies of The Blue Sky Boys that only by the occasional pop and crackle of static had Issac been able to distinguish the singing of The Blue Sky Boys in Nashville from the singing of the Johnson brothers on his front porch.

Issac leaned closer to the radio. The announcer was saying something about Jews in Warsaw, but Issac couldn't quite understand what it was all about. Things were changing, he thought. "Change is always with us," he said to a big yellow cat that lay stretched out in front of his rocking chair. "Change is always with us, and we can't do a thing about it." When the war came, Bobby Johnson had gone to Lufkin and joined the army; Billy Johnson had gone to Beaumont to work in the shipyards. Frank had left—taking his fiddle with him—for college in Huntsville. Sara Lou had left Havard Hill to be with her dying father in San Augustine. Tom had started cutting and selling the pine timber on the place.

Issac never questioned change. Solving mysteries made him tired. And sleepy.

The radio popped and crackled, and Issac's foggy memory cleared. He rocked back and forth, back and forth, remembering the advice he had given his younger brother after Henry learned that he was going to be drafted and would have to fight in World War I. Fate and Isaac had sat on the front porch talking with him. And now Isaac gazed into the flames of the fireplace, remembering that conversation in great detail.

"I got a good mind not to go. I got nothin' against no Germans. Hell! I don't even know what a German looks like! What you think I orter do, daddy?"

"Yeah-yeah lad, when I fought in the War of Secession there was never a question, never a doubt in my mind as to what I should do. The infidel of the North had invaded and defiled our lands. I volunteered. Rode my own horse. Used my own .45. But your case is different. Kaiser Bill is a long, long way from Havard Hill. Yeah-yeah, Henry, this World's War is not your fight, and you've got no business gettin' mixed up in it. I'll give you some money and my black mare. You ride over into Looz-anna till this business blows over."

"You might as well join up, Henry. You've got no choice. If you run off to Looz-anna, they'll find you and bring you back—and we'd all be shamed. You might as well do the right thing and join up."

"I reckon that settles her then. I'll go."

The radio announcer's voice startled Issac. The memory of the conversation shimmered, then vanished into the fog of senility. Issac leaned toward the radio, trying to hear every word of the War News. The announcer was saying something about President Roosevelt, something about Japanese Americans in California. Issac smiled and shook his head from side to side. "I must need a new battery," he said aloud into the fire.

Henry had died of pneumonia on board the transport ship that had carried him from New York to Winchester, England. He never saw a German. He never fired a shot. He was buried with full military honors in the small cemetery on Havard Hill, and only the immediate family attended his funeral. Fate said God hadn't intended for Henry to join the Armed Forces, but Issac never doubted for a moment that his younger brother had done the right thing.

The voice on the radio was saying something about Adolf Hitler. Issac listened. The War News was on, and he didn't want to miss a word of it. From where he sat, he could barely see the red Prince Albert Tobacco can that lay on the mantel above the fireplace. He scratched his head and tried to remember. He had momentarily lost the story about why it was there. "It don't matter," he chuckled as he rocked back and forth, back and forth in front of the fireplace.

He had always found it easy to do the right thing, and he had been blessed with a happiness and peace of mind like that of a nursing babe.