

The White Circle

by John Bell Clayton

AS SOON AS I SAW ANVIL SQUATTING UP IN THE TREE LIKE some hateful creature that belonged in trees I knew I had to take a beating and I knew the kind of beating it would be. But still I had to let it be that way because this went beyond any matter of courage or shame.

The tree was *mine*. I want no doubt about that. It was a seedling that grew out of the slaty bank beside the dry creek-mark across the road from the house, and the thirteen small apples it had borne that year were the thirteen most beautiful things on this beautiful earth.

The day I was twelve Father took me up to the barn to look at the colts—Saturn, Jupiter, Devil, and Moonkissed, the whiteface. Father took a cigar out of his vest pocket and put one foot on the bottom plank of the fence and leaned both elbows on the top of the fence and his face looked quiet and pleased and proud and I liked the way he looked because it was as if he had a little joke or surprise that would turn out nice for me.

“Tucker,” Father said presently, “I am not unaware of the momentousness of this day. Now there are four of the finest colts in Augusta County; if there are four any finer anywhere in Virginia I don’t know where you’d find them unless Arthur Hancock over in Albemarle would have them.” Father took one elbow off the fence and looked at me. “Now do you suppose,” he asked, in that fine, free, good humor, “that if I were to offer you a little token to commemorate this occasion you could make a choice?”

“Yes sir,” I said.

“Which one? Father asked. “Devil? He’s wild.”

“No sir,” I said. “I would like to have the apple tree below the gate.”

Father looked at me for at least a minute. You would have to understand his pride in his colts to understand the way he looked. But at twelve how could I express how *I* felt? My setting such store in having the tree as my own had something to do with the coloring of the apples as they hung among the green leaves; it had something also to do with their ripening, not in autumn when the world was full of

apples, but in midsummer when you *wanted* them; but it had more to do with a way of life that had come down through the generations. I would have given one of the apples to Janie. I would have made of it a ceremony. While I would not have said the words, because at twelve you have no such words, I would have handed over the apple with something like this in mind: Janie, I want to give you this apple. It came from my tree. The tree stands on my father’s land. Before my father had the land it belonged to his father, and before that it belonged to my great-grandfather. It’s the English family land. It’s almost sacred. My possession of this tree forges of me a link in this owning ancestry that must go back clear beyond Moses and all the old Bible folks.”

Father looked at me for that slow, peculiar minute in our lives. “All right, son,” he said. “The tree is yours in fee simple to bargain, sell, and convey or to keep and nurture and eventually hand down to your heirs or assigns forever unto eternity. You have a touch of poetry in your soul and that fierce, proud love of the land in your heart; when you grow up I hope you don’t drink too much.”

I didn’t know what he meant by that but the tree was mine and now there perched Anvil, callously munching one of my thirteen apples and stowing the rest inside his ragged shirt until it bulged out in ugly lumps. I knew the apples pressed cold against his hateful belly and to me the coldness was a sickening evil.

I picked a rock up out of the dust of the road and tore across the creek bed and said, “All right, Anvil—climb down!”

Anvil’s milky eyes batted at me under the strangely fair eyebrows. There was not much expression on his face. “Yaannh!” he said. “You stuck-up little priss, you hit me with that rock. You just do!”

“Anvil,” I said again, “climb down. They’re my apples.”

Anvil quit munching for a minute and grinned at me. “You want an apple? I’ll give you one. Yaannh!” He suddenly cocked back his right arm and cracked me on the temple with the half-eaten apple.

I let go with the rock and it hit a limb with a dull chub sound and Anvil said, “You’re fixin’ to git it—you’re real-ly fixin’ to git it.”

“I’ll shake you down,” I said. “I’ll shake you clear down.”

“Clear down?” Anvil chortled. “Where do you think I’m at? Up on top of Walker Mountain? It wouldn’t hurt none if I was to fall out of this runty bush on my head.”

I grabbed one of his bare feet and pulled backwards, and down Anvil came amidst a flutter of broken twigs and leaves. We both hit the ground. I hopped up and Anvil arose with a faintly vexed expression.

He hooked a leg in back of my knees and shoved a paw against my chin. I went down in the slate. He got down and pinioned my arms with his knees. I tried to kick him in the back of the head but could only flail my feet helplessly in the air.

“You might as well quit kickin’,” he said.

He took one of my apples from his shirt and began eating it, almost absent-mindedly.

“You dirty filthy stinkin’ sow,” I said.

He snorted. “I couldn’t be a sow, but you take that back.”

“I wish you were fryin’ in the middle of hell right this minute.”

“Take back the stinkin’ part,” Anvil said thoughtfully. “I don’t stink.”

He pressed his knees down harder, pinching and squeezing the flesh of my arms.

I sobbed, “I take back the stinkin’ part.”

“That’s better,” Anvil said.

He ran a finger back into his jaw to dislodge a fragment of apple from his teeth. For a moment he examined the fragment and then wiped it on my cheek.

“I’m goin’ to tell Father,” I said desperately.

“‘Father’” Anvil said with falsetto mimicry. “‘Father.’ Say ‘Old Man.’ You think your old man is some stuff on a stick, don’t you? You think he don’t walk on the ground, don’t you? You think you and your whole stuck-up family don’t walk on the ground. Say ‘Old Man.’”

“Go to hell!”

“Shut up your blubberin’. Say ‘Old Man.’”

“Old Man. I wish you were dead.”

“Yaannh!” Anvil said. “Stop blubberin’. Now call me ‘Uncle Anvil.’ Say ‘Uncle Sweetie Peetie Tweetie Beg-Your-Pardon Uncle Anvil.’ Say it!”

“Uncle Sweetie . . . Uncle Peetie, Tweetie Son-of-a-bitch Anvil.”

He caught my hair in his hands and wallowed my head against the ground until I said every bitter word of it. Three times.

Anvil tossed away a spent, maltreated core that had been my apple. He gave my head one final thump upon the ground and said “Yaannh!” again in a satisfied way.

He released me and got up. I lay there with my face muscles twitching in outrage.

Anvil looked down at me. “Stop blubberin’,” he commanded.

“I’m not cryin’,” I said.

I was lying there with a towering, homicidal detestation, planning to kill Anvil—and the thought of it had a sweetness like summer fruit.

There were times when I had no desire to kill Anvil. I remember the day his father showed up at the school. He was a dirty, half crazy, itinerant knickknack peddler. He had a club and he told the principal he was going to beat the meanness out of Anvil or beat him to death. Anvil scudded under a desk and lay there trembling and whimpering until the principal finally drove the ragged old man away. I had no hatred for Anvil then.

But another day, just for the sheer filthy meanness of it, he crawled through a classroom window after school hours and befouled the floor. And the number of times he pushed over smaller boys, just to see them hit the packed hard earth of the schoolyard and to watch the fright on their faces as they ran away, was more than I could count.

And still another day he walked up to me as I leaned against the warmth of the schoolhack shed in the sunlight, feeling the nice warmth of the weather-beaten boards.

“They hate me,” he said dismally. “They hate me because my old man’s crazy.”

As I looked at Anvil I felt that in the background I was seeing that demented, bitter father trudging his lonely, vicious way through the world.

“They don’t hate you,” I lied. “Anyway I don’t hate you.” That was true. At that moment I didn’t hate him. “How about comin’ home and stayin’ all night with me?”

So after school Anvil went along with me—and threw rocks at me all the way home.

Now I had for him no soft feeling of any kind. I planned—practically—his extinction as he stood there before me

commanding me to cease the blubbering out of my heart.

“Shut up now,” Anvil said. “I never hurt you. Stop blubberin’.”

“I’m not cryin’,” I said.

“You’re still mad though.” He looked at me appraisingly.

“No, I’m not,” I lied. “I’m not even mad. I was a little bit mad, but not now.”

“Well, whattaya look so funny around the mouth and eyes for?”

“I don’t know. Let’s go up to the barn and play.”

“Play whut?” Anvil looked at me truculently. He didn’t know whether to be suspicious or flattered. “I’m gettin’ too big to play. To play much anyway,” he added undecidedly. “I might play a little bit if it ain’t some sissy game.”

“We’ll play anything,” I said eagerly.

“All right,” he said. “Race you to the barn. You start.”

I started running toward the wire fence and at the third step he stuck his foot between my legs and I fell forward on my face.

“Yaannh!” he croaked. “That’ll learn you.”

“Learn me what?” I asked as I got up. “Learn me what?” It seemed important to know that. Maybe it would make some difference in what I planned to do to Anvil. It seemed very important to know what it was that Anvil wanted to, and never could, teach me and the world.

“It’ll just learn you,” he said doggedly. “Go ahead, I won’t trip you any more.”

So we climbed the wire fence and raced across the burned field the hogs ranged in.

We squeezed through the heavy sliding doors onto the barn floor, and the first thing that caught Anvil’s eye was the irregular circle that father had painted there. He wanted to know what it was and I said “Nothing” because I wasn’t yet quite ready, and Anvil forgot about it for the moment and wanted to play jumping from the barn floor out to the top of the fresh rick of golden straw.

“I said, “No. Who wants to do that, anyway?”

“I do,” said Anvil. “Jump, you puke. Go ahead and jump!”

I didn’t want to jump. The barn had been built on a hill. In front the ground came up level with the barn floor, but in back the floor was even with the top of the straw rick, with four wide, terrible yawning feet between.

I said, “Nawh, there’s nothin’ to jumpin’.”

“Oh, there ain’t, hanh!” said Anvil. “Well, try it—”

He gave me a shove and I went out into terrifying space. He leaped after and upon me and we hit the pillowy side of the straw rick and tumbled to the ground in a smothering slide.

“That’s no fun,” I said, getting up and brushing the chaff from my face and hair.

Anvil himself had lost interest in it by now and was idly munching another of my apples.

“I know somethin’,” I said. “I know a good game. Come on, I’ll show you.”

Anvil stung me on the leg with the apple as I raced through the door of the cutting room. When we reached the barn floor his eyes again fell on the peculiar white circle. “That’s to play prisoner’s base with,” I said. “That’s the base.”

“That’s a funny-lookin’ base,” he said suspiciously. “I never saw any base that looked like that.”

I could feel my muscles tensing, but I wasn’t particularly excited. I didn’t trust myself to look up toward the roof where the big mechanical hayfork hung suspended from the long metal track that ran back over the streaming mows of alfalfa and red clover. The fork had vicious sharp prongs that had never descended to the floor except on one occasion Anvil knew nothing about.

I think Father had been drinking the day he bought the hayfork in Staunton. It was an unwieldy involved contraption of ropes, triggers, and pulleys which took four men to operate. A man came out to install the fork and for several days he climbed up and down ladders, bolting the track in place and arranging the various gadgets. Finally, when he said it was ready, Father had a load of hay pulled into the barn and called the men in from the fields to watch and assist in the demonstration.

I don’t remember the details. I just remember that something went very badly wrong. The fork suddenly plunged down with a peculiar ripping noise and embedded itself in the back of one of the work horses. Father said very little. He simply painted the big white circle on the barn floor, had the fork hauled back up to the top, and fastened the trigger around the rung of a stationary ladder eight feet off the floor, where no one could inadvertently pull it.

Then he said quietly, “I don’t ever want anyone ever to touch this trip rope or to have occasion to step inside this circle.”

So that was why I didn’t now look up toward the fork.

“I don’t want to play no sissy prisoner’s base,” Anvil said.

“Let’s find a nest of young pigeons.”

“All right,” I lied. “I know where there’s a nest. But one game of prisoner’s base first.”

“You don’t know where there’s any pigeon nest,” Anvil said. “You wouldn’t have the nerve to throw them up against the barn if you did.”

“Yes, I would too,” I protested. “Now let’s play one game of prisoner’s base. Get in the circle and shut your eyes and start countin’.”

“Oh, all right,” Anvil agreed wearily. “Let’s get it over with and find the pigeons. Ten, ten, double ten, forty-five—”

“Right in the middle of the circle,” I told him. “And count slow. How’m I goin’ to hide if you count that way?”

Anvil now counted more slowly. “Five, ten, fifteen—”

I gave Anvil one last vindictive look and sprang up the stationary ladder and swung out on the trip rope of the unpredictable hayfork with all my puny might.

The fork’s whizzing descent was accompanied by that peculiar ripping noise. Anvil must have jumped instinctively. The fork missed him by several feet.

For a moment Anvil stood absolutely still. He turned around and saw the fork, still shimmering from its impact with the floor. His face became exactly the pale green of the carbide we burned in our acetylene lighting plant at the house. Then he looked at me, at the expression on my face, and his Adam’s apple bobbed queerly up and down, and a little stream of water trickled down his right trouser leg and over his bare foot.

“You tried to kill me,” he said thickly.

He did not come toward me. Instead, he sat down. He shook his head sickly. After a few sullen, bewildered moments he reached into his shirt and began hauling out my apples one by one.

“You can have your stinkin’ old apples,” he said. “You’d do that for a few dried-up little apples. Your old man owns everything in sight. I ain’t got nothin’. Go ahead and keep your stinkin’ old apples.”

He got to his feet and slowly walked out of the door.

Since swinging off the trip rope I had neither moved nor spoken. For a moment more I stood motionless and voiceless and then I ran over and grabbed up the nine apples that were left and called, “Anvil! Anvil!” He continued across the field without even pausing.

I yelled, “Anvil! Wait, I’ll give them to you.”

Anvil climbed the fence without looking back and set off down the road toward the store. Every few steps he kicked his wet trouser leg.

Three sparrows flew out of the door in a dusty chattering spiral. Then there was only the image of the hayfork shimmering and terrible in the great and growing and accusing silence and emptiness of the barn.

Assessing the Reading:

1. Do the opening lines of the story draw you in and make you curious to read on? Why or why not?
2. At what point is the tone of the story clearly established. When do you begin to get a pretty good idea of the direction the story is going?
3. How does the author make his characters ‘three-dimensional’? Are some characters more believable than others in the story? Why or why not?
4. What are your feelings about the conclusion of the story? Does it feel confusing, like things have been resolved, or just open-ended? Why do you think the author chose to end the story this way?
5. What *themes* can you identify from the story?