

John Taylor  
The Timon of the Back Woods Bar and Pulpit

I can never forget the first vision of John Taylor. It was in the court house at Lewisburgh, Convey county, Arkansas, in the summer of 1838. The occasion itself possessed terrible interest. A vast concourse of spectators had assembled to witness the trial of a young and beautiful girl on indictment for murder. The judge waited at the moment for the sheriff to bring in his prisoner, and the eyes of the impatient multitude all centered on the door, when suddenly a stranger entered whose appearance riveted universal attention.

Here is his portrait—a figure tall, lean, sinewy, and straight as an arrow; a face sallow, billions, and twitching incessantly with nervous irritability; a brow broad, soaring, and massive, seamed with wrinkles but not from age; for he was scarcely forty; eyes reddish yellow, like the watchful eagle, as bright and piercing; and finally a mouth with lips of cast iron, thin, curled, cold, and sneering, the intense expression of which looked the living embodiment of an unbreathed curse. —He was habited in a suit of new buckskin, ornamented after the fashion of Indian costume, with hues of every color of the rainbow. Elbowing his way through the crowd, and apparently unconscious that he was regarded as a phenomenon, needing explanation, this singular being advanced, and with the haughty air of a king ascending his throne, seated himself within the bar, thronged as it was with the disciples of Coke and Blackstone, several of whom, it was known, esteemed themselves as far superior to those old and famous masters. The contrast between the outlandish garb and disdainful countenance of the stranger, excited, especially, the risibility of the lawyers; and the junior members began a suppressed titter, which grew louder, and soon swept around the whole circle. They doubtless supposed the intruder to be some wild hunter of the mountains, who had never before seen the interior of a hall of justice. Instantly, the cause of the laughter perceived, he turned his head gradually, so as to give each laughers a look; his lips curled with a killing smile of infinite scorn; his yellow eyes shot arrows of lightning; his tongue, protruding through his teeth, literally writhed like a serpent, and ejaculated its asp-like poison in a single word:

“Savages!”

No pen can describe the defiant force which he threw into that term; no pencil can paint the infernal *furor* of his utterance, although it hardly exceeded a whisper. But he accented every letter as if it were a separate emission of fire that scorched his quivering lips; laying horrible emphasis on S, both at the beginning and end of the word— “*SavageS!*”

It was the growl of a red tiger and the *hiss* of a rattle snake. “*Savages!*”

The general gaze, however, was immediately diverted by the advent of the fair prisoner, who then came in surrounded by the guard. The apparition was enough to drive a saint mad. —For hers was a style of beauty to bewilder the tamest imagination and melt the coldest heart, leaving in both the imagination and heart a gleaming picture enameled in fire and fixed in a frame of gold from stars. —It was the spell of an enchantment to be FELT as well as seen. You might feel it in the flash of her countenance, clear as the iris; in the contour of her features, symmetrical, as if cut by the chisel of an artist; in her hair of rich auburn ringlets flowing without a braid, softer

than silk, finer than gossamer; in her eyes, blue as the heaven of southern summer, large, liquid, beamy; her motions, graceful, swimming, like the gentle waftures of a bird's wing in the sunny air; in the figure, slight, ethereal—a sylph's or a seraph's, and more than all, in the everlasting smile of rosy lips so arched, so serene, so like starlight, and yet possessing the power of magic or of magnetism, to thrill the beholder's heart.

As the unfortunate girl, so tastefully dressed, so incomparable as to personal charms, calm and smiling, took her place before the bar of the judge, a murmur of admiration arose from the multitude, which the prompt interposition of the court, by a stern order of "silence," could scarcely redress from swelling to a deafening cheer. The judge turned to the prisoner:

"Emma Minor, the court has been informed that your counsel, Col. Linton, is sick; have you employed another?"

She answered in a voice sweet as the nightingale, and clear as the song of the sky-lark:

"My enemies have bribed all the lawyers—even my *own, to be sick*; — but God will defend the innocent!"

At this response, so touching in its simple pathos a portion of the auditors buzzed applause, and the rest wept. On the instant, however, the stranger, whose appearance had previously excited so much merriment, started to his feet, approached the prisoner, and whispered something in her ear. She bounded six inches from the floor, uttered a piercing shriek, and then stood trembling as if in the presence of a ghost from eternity; while the singular being, who had caused her unaccountable emotion, addressed the court in his sharp ringing voice, sonorous as the sound of bell-metal:

"May it please your honor, I will assume the task of defending the lady."

"What!" exclaimed the astonished judge, "are you a licensed attorney?"

"The question is irrelevant and immaterial," replied the stranger with a venomous sneer, "as the recent statute entitles any person to act as counsel at the request of a party."

"But does the prisoner request it?" inquired the judge.

"Let her speak for herself."

"I do," was the answer, as a long drawn sigh escaped, that seemed to rend her very heart-strings.

The case immediately progressed, and as it had a tingle of romantic mystery, we will epitomize the substance of the evidence. About twelve months before, the defendant had arrived in the village, and opened an establishment of millinery. Residing in a room connected with her shop, and all alone, she prepared the articles of her trade with unwearied labor and consummate taste. Her habits were secluded, modest and retiring; and hence she might have hoped to avoid notoriety, but for the perilous gift of that extraordinary beauty, which too often, and to the poor

and friendless always proves a curse. She was soon sought after by all those glittering fire-flies of passion, the profession of whose life, everywhere, is seduction and ruin. But the beautiful stranger rejected hem all with unutterable scorn and loathing. Among these rejected admirers was one of a character from which the fair milliner had everything to fear. Hiram Shore belonged to a family at once opulent, influential and dissipated. He was himself licentious, brave and ferociously revengeful—the most famous duelist in the Southwest. It was generally known that he had made advances to win the favor of the lovely Emma—and had shared the fate of all other wooers—a disdainful repulse.

At 9 o'clock on Christmas night, 1837, the people of Lewisburgh were startled by a loud scream, as of one in mortal terror; while following that, with scarcely an interval, came successive reports of fire arms, one, two, three—a dozen deafening roars. —They flew to the shop of the milliner, whence the sounds proceeded, pushed back the unfastened door, and a scene of horror was presented. There she stood in the center of the room, with a revolver in each hand, every barrel discharged, her features pale—her eyes flashing wildly, but her lips parted with a fearful smile. And there at her feet, weltering in his warm blood, his bosom literally riddled with bullets, lay the all-dreaded duelist, Hiram Shore, gasping in the last agony. He articulated but a single sentence:

“Tell mother that I am dead and gone to hell!” and instantly expired.

“In the name of God who did this?” exclaimed the appalled spectators.

“I did it,” said the beautiful milliner; “I did it to save my honor.”

As may be imagined, the deed caused intense excitement. Public opinion, however, was divided. —The poorer classes crediting the girl's version of the facts, lauded her heroism in terms of measureless eulogy. —But the friends of the deceased, and his wealthy family, gave a different and darker color to the affair, and denounced the lovely homicide as an atrocious criminal. Unfortunately for her, the officers were devoted comrades of the slain, and displayed their feelings in a revolting partiality. The judge committed her without the privilege of bail, and the sheriff chained her in the felon's dungeon. Such is a brief abstract of the circumstances developed in the examination of witnesses.

The testimony closed and the pleading began.

First of all, three advocates spoke in succession, for the prosecution; but neither their names nor their arguments are worth preserving. Orators of the blood thunder genius, they about equally partitioned their howling eloquence betwixt the prisoner and her leather-robed counsel, as if in doubt who of the twain was then on trial. As for the stranger, he seemed not to pay the slightest attention to his opponents, but remained motionless, with his hands, like one buried in deep thought or slumber.

When the proper time came however, he suddenly sprang to his feet, crossed the bar, and took his position almost touching the jury. He then commenced in a whisper, but it was a whisper so wild, so clear, unutterably ringing and distinct, as to fill the hall from the floor to the galleries. —

At the outset he dwelt in pure logic, separating and combining the proven facts, till the whole mass of confused evidence looked transparent as a globe of glass, through which the innocence of the client shone brilliant as a sunbeam; and the jurors nodded to each other, signs of thorough conviction; that thrilling whisper and fixed concentration and the language, simple as a child's had convinced all.

He then changed his posture so as to sweep the bar with his glance, and began to tear and rend his legal adversaries. His sallow face glowed like a heated furnace; his eyes resembling living coals, and his voice become the clangor of a trumpet. I have never, before or since, listened to such murderous denunciations. It was Jove's eagle charging a flock of crows; it was like Jove himself, hurling red-hot thunder bolts among the quaking ranks of a conspiracy of inferior Gods. And yet, in the highest temper of his fury, he seemed calm; he employed no gesture save one—the flash of a long bony fore-finger, direct in the eyes of his foes. He painted their venality and unmanly meanness, in coalescing for money to hunt down a poor friendless woman, till a shout of stifled rage arose from the multitude, and even some of the jury cried “shame.”

He changed his theme once more. —His voice grew mournful as a funeral song, and his eyes filled with tears, as he traced a livid picture of man's cruelty and woman's wrongs, with particular illustrations in the case of his client, till one half of the audience wept like children. But it was in the peroration that he reached his zenith, at once of terror and sublimity. His features were vivid as those of a corpse; his very hair seemed to stand on end; his nerves shook with a palsy; he tossed his hands wildly towards heaven, each finger stretched apart and quivering like the flame of a candle, as he closed with the last words of the deceased, Hiram Shore:

“Tell my mother I am dead and gone to hell!”

His emphasis on the word hell embodied the ideal of all horror; it was a wail of immeasurable despair. No language can depict the effect on us who heard it. Men groaned, females screamed, and one poor mother fainted and was borne away in convulsions. The whole speech occupied but an hour.

The jury rendered a verdict of ‘not guilty’ without leaving the box, and three cheers, like successive roars of an earthquake, shook the old court house from dome to corner stone.

After the adjournment, which occurred near sunset, the triumphant advocate arose and gave out an appointment—

“I will preach in the hall tonight at 8 o'clock.”

He then glided off through the crowd, speaking to no one; though many attempted to draw him into a conversation.

At 8 o'clock the court house was again thronged, and the stranger, according to promise, delivered a sermon. It evinced the same attributes as his previous eloquence at the bar; the same compact logic, the same burning vehemence, and increased bitterness of denunciation. Indeed,

misanthropy revealed itself as the prominent emotion. The discourse was a tirade against infidels, in which class the preacher seemed to include everybody but himself; it was a picture of hell, such as Lucifer, might have drawn, with a world in flames for his pencil. But one paragraph pointed to heaven, and that only demonstrated the utter impossibility that any human being should ever get there.

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