

Classical Tongues (1938)

If there was one thing that Curtis Chastain disliked more than hoeing, it had to be Latin. At least with hoeing the benefits were apparent. Fewer weeds, he had learned, meant a larger crop yield. A good crop could be sold at market for much needed currency. An abundant harvest also meant plenty of canned vegetables to last through the winter months.

Latin was a different story. It was a dead language only used, or so he had been told, in the worship services of the Papists. Nonetheless, Hampton Falls required all students in grades seven and above to pass at least one unit of Latin. This was part of the school board's effort to promote the classics and an educated yeomanry in the Jeffersonian tradition.

For over 20 years, the youth of the Chauga Valley had learned Latin from Wilma Barron. Being a spinster, Miss Barron was able to pour her full energies into educating the willing, and frequently unwilling, children from the various farmsteads. She had heard every conceivable plea as to why a child should be exempted from her class. Hence, Curtis' protestations were familiar and earned him a swift rebuke.

"Mister Chastain, the fundamental pillar of a sound education is Latin grammar. I tell you this not because Latin is a hoary language with roots in antiquity, but because even a basic knowledge of this language will reduce the labor and pain of learning almost any other subject. It fosters precision and discipline in thinking—both qualities in which you could use much improvement."

Unable to answer Miss Barron and figuring that an audience with the school board would be unlikely, Curtis muddled through the conjugation of verbs and the memorization of vocabulary words. He struggled mightily at first. This was more from an aversion to doing something he resented rather than the difficulty of the work. Even as he began to get the knack

of the language, Curtis still complained. Ever since the upheaval of the previous year, his aspiration was to quit school as soon as his mother would let him and find a job. He had just turned thirteen. Surely that would be soon. He planned to travel to a city far away from the Chauga Valley. He would earn money, perhaps in a factory, and would be able to help his mother financially so she could have her own home once again and leave the poor farm. Latin, it seemed to him, would not further his endeavor.

Buck Marcengill, the superintendent of the Hampton Falls poor farm, tried to encourage Curtis with his studies and serve as a father-figure to the boy and other children at the farm. Curtis' father, a master cobbler in town, had died suddenly in February 1937. Avery Chastain had made or repaired the shoes of almost everyone in Hampton Falls. Living in town had been a big deal to Curtis and gave him a false sense of superiority. Hampton Falls just barely qualified for the moniker of township, but it did have a train station, Burchfield's Grocery, a hardware store, and a few other businesses. From the upstairs window of his father's building, Curtis had spent hours watching the goings-on at the train station and dreaming about the distant places seen by the train and its passengers.

All that changed in February 1937 when his father took to his bed with a fever. Within one week he was gone. Curtis was 12 at the time and had been less than diligent in learning the cobbling trade. His parents had indulged him and rarely scolded him for slothfulness. When he should have been downstairs in the shop helping and learning, Curtis was more often than not in the upstairs' window surveying the streets. With the Depression, his youth, and lack of skills, there was no way he and his mother could keep the shop. The bank foreclosed on the Chastains' building and, because they had no kin in the state, the poor farm was the only option.

Similar to Latin, Curtis at first resisted farm labor. Undeniably, the boy had a lazy streak. He had several confrontations with Buck until the two finally came to an understanding after Curtis took a swing at him in the barn and Buck administered an old-fashioned whipping that somewhat cured the boy of his brazenness. Although Curtis would not say it aloud, he had come to respect the Marcengills and was amazed how they were able to feed the farm's two dozen or so residents. Buck's encouragement to take education seriously, on some days at least, made an impression on Curtis.

Curtis' assigned semester project for Miss Barron's class was the recitation of a portion of a speech from Cicero. "Mister Chastain, anyone with a modicum of education should be familiar with Tully's work. I'm not asking you to memorize the entire speech," Miss Barron explained, "but a mere paragraph. Now stop bellyaching and persevere!"

When he voiced his complaints about the assignment, Curtis received even less sympathy at the poor farm. Gladys Dixon, a petite but work-hardened woman, immediately sat him down and delivered a sermon on the value of laboring through adversity. "The Good Book tells us that we should exult in all tribulation. These momentary and passing afflictions breed perseverance, character, and hope. Be thankful for the opportunity to learn and use this little trial for God's glory."

Although Curtis failed to see what glory God would receive by him learning a speech given by a pagan lawyer, he thanked Mrs. Dixon and fled her presence. He climbed the steps to the room he shared with his mother in the main house. He told her and Mrs. Marcengill that he needed to practice the oration in front of the mirror. This got him out of some afternoon chores, secured a bit of privacy, and permitted him to slip off into the realm of imagination. In distant cities, Curtis marveled at the skyscrapers that glistened in the afternoon sun. He watched motor

cars speed through the busy streets. He noticed that a hum hung in the air from the sounds of various engines, both large and small. Looking into the sky, he could see vapor trails from airplanes whisking passengers to exotic locales.

While in the city streets, Curtis was no lanky boy with a mop of disheveled blond hair. Catching a glimpse of himself in a shop window, he appeared to be full grown, sported a chiseled physique, and his blond hair was cut short and slicked back like the movie stars. No one bumped or jostled him as he navigated the city's sidewalks. The people parted and made way for the dashing figure to pass.

At his job in the city, Curtis operated a gigantic milling machine that cut and shaped rare metals used for rockets like the kind he heard described on the Buck Rogers radio program. Curtis took extra care in guiding the sheets of metal through the machine to make sure that the hulls of the rocket ships would retain their structural integrity. He knew the astronauts were counting on him.

With the constant activity at the main house, it did not take long for someone to discover that Curtis was not studying but instead lost in a daydream. While searching for her broom, Mrs. Marcengill found Curtis reclining on the bed with no hope of convincing her that he was meditating on the words of Cicero. He knew the drill. She marched him downstairs, equipped him with the loathsome hoe, and directed him to the garden patch.

The hoe's wooden handle was familiar to Curtis and smooth from the grip of many hands over the years. The metal head, in the shape of a half moon, showed signs of having been recently sharpened at a grinding wheel. The metal on the sharpened edges was shiny where dirt and rust had been ground away. Curtis hoped that the newly applied edge would make his task somewhat easier.

The garden behind the main house was itself a small farm. The garden was about 15 to 20 yards wide and nearly 35 yards long. Mrs. Marcengill shepherded him to the two long rows of okra. With a hang of the head and a sigh, he began the assault on the small weeds peeking through the soil. It being so early in the season, the okra plants weren't much taller than some of the weeds. Curtis had learned from the Marcengills that okra was a hot weather plant and that it would not put on a growth spurt until June.

Curtis used the blade of the hoe to penetrate the soil and get under the roots of the weeds. He would then lift and hopefully dislodge the invader. Once he uprooted several of the weeds, Curtis used the edge of the hoe to chop the weeds into pieces.

The very nature of hoeing perturbed Curtis. The work was too transitory. Within a few days, a row cleared of all signs of weeds would begin to look as it had before the hoeing. The cycle vexed him. He could not understand how weeds could be chopped into pieces on one day and reappear the next day.

He was careful not to complain too much about the hoeing in front of Gladys Dixon. If he did, he would earn a sermon on the Fall. Mrs. Dixon was not afraid to give a message twice. On several occasions she had explained to him that thorns and thistles were the punishment for Adam and Eve distrusting God. As a result, only by hard and monotonous labor—the sweat of a man's brow—could we cultivate and eat.

Upon reaching the end of the first row, Curtis tossed the hoe aside and walked to the well to get a drink. He pushed down on the pump's handle, retrieved the metal cup hanging on the side, and enjoyed the cool water. While leaning against the pump, he noticed a thin plume of smoke rising from the woods beyond the pasture.

Intrigued, Curtis put the cup down and started in the direction of the swarthy vapor ascending into the atmosphere. Carefully stretching the strands of barbed wire, he slipped through the fence and started off toward the tree line. As he looked up into the sky, the smoke seemed to have dispersed inasmuch as the wind was picking up. The disappearing smoke comforted him because it meant that a forest fire was unlikely. The combustion was isolated.

He began to speculate on the cause of the smoke. Maybe one of the transient workers carelessly discarded a cigarette butt when walking back from the river. Perhaps Amos Skelton, Buck's de facto adjutant at the farm, had caught a fish and couldn't wait to get back to cook it. More likely, Curtis thought, Amos didn't want to share his catch with anyone and was preparing it on a spit somewhere in the woods.

Attempting to stay in the correct direction, Curtis fixed his eyes on the sky just above the tree tops. Not looking where he was going, he felt his boot sink into a cow patty. He cursed under his breath but continued on into the woods.

He estimated that the smoke plume couldn't have been more than 150 to 200 yards from the far edge of the pasture. He figured he would sneak up on Amos and give him a good scare. Like the Marcengills, Amos had been patient with the boy and his mother. However, when especially aggravated by Curtis' indolence, Amos did not hesitate to administer a tongue lashing. Curtis, as the offspring of indulgent parents, was not used to such frank talk. This caused him to view Amos as something of a rival and to seize any opportunity to play a prank on him. The boy giggled at the thought of Amos jumping out of his sable skin and knocking the fish over into the fire.

The trees in this area were mostly hardwoods and the forest floor was covered by thick ferns. Curtis spied several poison oak plants and did his best to avoid them. When he first came

to the farm after his father's death, Curtis had no idea what poison oak looked like. After a couple of exposures, he soon became an eager student of local flora.

Curtis pressed on deeper into the woods. A gust of wind brought him a hint of food cooking. He knew he had to be close to Amos. Curtis started to creep along and the smell of a camp fire strengthened. Even on his tiptoes in an effort to be stealthy, he seemed to find every dry branch on the forest floor to snap with the least bit of pressure.

Just as he began to peek out from behind a post oak tree, he felt a tug on the straps of his overalls where they crossed in the back. His feet lifted off the ground and his body sailed through the air like the planes of his daydreaming. Although he was not airborne for more than two or three seconds, Curtis perceived the event in slow motion. He thought he had flown a mile—especially when feeling the jolt of the ground.

“Who the hell do you think you're sneaking up on, boy?”

It was not the voice of Amos Skelton. When Curtis opened his eyes, he saw two men standing over him. Both men wore flat hats, soiled dungarees, and blue work shirts like the local mechanic dressed in.

“It ain't neighborly to spy on somebody just having a bite to eat,” the smaller man said.

The larger man reached down and pulled Curtis to his feet. They drug him over to the remnants of the camp fire where Curtis noticed several roasted potatoes in the ashes. The larger man pushed Curtis down beside the fire.

From his position on the ground, the man looked like a giant. Curtis especially noticed the man's hands. They were covered with red clay and what appeared to be ash or soot. Curtis figured that the man could easily palm a honeydew melon and certainly could crush the skull of a

teenage boy. The man exuded a pungent odor as if he had gotten too close to a polecat and taken no remedial measures to wash his clothes or body.

The smaller man stood about three yards away from the giant and looked on with his hands on his hips. His torso was round and did not match his thin legs. His face was flushed and the tip of his nose gave off a purplish hue. With the frown on his face, Curtis thought that he looked like an angry apple with popsicle sticks for legs.

“Get my dinner out of those embers,” the larger man commanded.

Without thinking, Curtis reached down and picked up a truly hot potato. As he bounced it from hand to hand, the men laughed.

“You best not drop that if you hope to see home tonight,” the larger man said.

The man let Curtis toss the potato back and forth a few more times before snatching it from him and placing on a rock that served as a plate.

“So kid, what’s your name? Where you from?” the smaller man asked.

Tears welled up in Curtis’ eyes and he just gawked at the men.

“You better tell us. We might be the last people on this side of Sheol that you’ll have the pleasure of conversing with,” the smaller man warned.

Both the larger man and Curtis gave the smaller man a puzzled look.

“Sheol is the Hebrew word for the land of the dead. Don’t tell me that y’all aren’t students of the Scriptures? One of you,” the smaller man said glaring at Curtis, “best recollect the promises of the Bible and make his peace with Jehovah. And soon, if he don’t start talking.”

“I’m ... I’m ... Curtis Chastain. I live over that rise at the county poor farm.”

“Over that rise, huh? Well, you poor bastards did a fine job with your potato crop this year. We helped ourselves to a few and were about to enjoy them before you got to snooping.”



The smaller man paused. “Now don’t look at us all judgmental you lil’ son-of-a-bitch. Things are rough down in Atlanta. Ain’t no jobs even if a man is willing to do dirty and hard work. Not that we’re acquainted with either one.”

“He’s telling the truth,” the giant interjected. “I’ve stood in line over an hour at a downtown soup kitchen only to be turned away. Times like these can test a person’s will to survive. So we headed north, crossed the state line, and seen that you farming folk was doing better than your city cousins as these tasty taters testify to.”

“Enough about this sad state of the world,” the smaller man said. “Such talk is depressing and can spoil a man’s appetite. How’s about a little entertainment? Dance a jig for us while we eat and decide what to do with you. The better your performance the better your chances are of seeing home again.”

“Mister, I never learned any dancing. Mrs. Dixon says dancing is not anything but a march to a beat played by the devil.”

“She’s a fundamentalist idiot,” the smaller man replied. “If you ever see her again, ask her why David, a man after God’s own heart, danced when they brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem.”

“Seems like the boy needs some motivation,” the larger man said as he walked around closer to the fire pit. Taking about a 12-inch piece of bark in hand, the man used it as a trowel and scooped up several coals from the fire. Keeping his eyes locked on Curtis, he strode up to him and flashed a grin that displayed a mouthful of yellowish, jagged teeth.

“Now, if you don’t commence to entertaining us with a jig, I’m gonna pour these right down your scrawny throat.”

Terror gripped Curtis and he felt his stomach turn. He had known fear and experienced it when he watched his father slowly die from the fever. Standing by the bedside, Curtis had felt a sense of helplessness that brought on physical pain. He had felt as if he'd swallowed a piece of broken glass that turned and twisted inside his belly. He'd not felt this way in months, but that ache returned as he looked into the faces of the hobos.

From the passing of his father, Curtis had learned the reality of death and that it can appear unexpectedly. But his youthful assumption of personal immortality had not been shaken. He understood that others would die, but only when focusing on the coals and recalling the harsh words of his captors did Curtis realize his mortality. This epiphany horrified him. Had he told his mother that he loved her that morning? He hoped he had and regretted not telling her more often.

With his body trembling and panic overtaking his thoughts, Curtis began to hop from his left to his right foot. He closed his eyes and imagined Old Screwtape beating on a fiery red drum. Behind the devil, a choir of demons stood clapping their hands in unison to the beat set by their master. Each time they clapped a puff of smoke arose. The air became hazy and unpleasant.

The two hobos, reveling in his humiliation, demanded a song.

“Belt out a tune like Helen Forrest,” the larger man roared. “Stretch them vocal cords for us or we'll stretch you out.”

The boy's mind raced to recall some song he had heard on the radio or in church. He tried to recollect the hymns from last Sunday's service, but nothing materialized.

“Feed him those coals,” the smaller man instructed with a grin.

In a last ditch effort to produce some melody or sound, all Curtis could recall was his Cicero.

“Nescire autem quid ante quam natus sis acciderit, id est semper esse puerum.” (Not knowing what happened before you were born is to be stuck in childhood forever.)

The men shared a baffled look as Curtis continued.

“Quid enim est aetas hominis, nisi ea memoria rerum veterum cum superiorum aetate contextitur?” (What does a person's life amount to without the historical consciousness that weaves one's life into the life of earlier generations?)

Now jumping up and down, Curtis began to repeat “Nescire autem quid ante quam natus sis acciderit, id est semper esse puerum.”

“Oh Lord,” the smaller man exclaimed. “The Holy Ghost done lit on him and imparted the heavenly language of the angels. He’s got the gift of tongues! It’s a sign that the Lord’s rod of discipline is sure to fall on us.”

Dropping the bark with the coals, the larger man staggered back, tripped over a log, and fell into the dying fire. He let out a howl as the remaining embers singed his hindquarters. The smaller man yanked him out of the pit and both scampered toward the river.

Curtis stood motionless as he watched the hobos tripping over each other and hazards hidden in the undergrowth. After a minute, he came to himself and wasted no time in running the other direction. Once he got back to the farm, he saw Buck standing in front of the barn and hastened to his side. As words came to him through the sobs, Curtis explained what had happened and how the hobos had stolen from the farm and almost did him in.

Wrapping his right arm around Curtis, Buck offered assurance. “Son, it’s okay now. I ain’t gonna let nobody feed you any coals. We’ll go in, call the sheriff, and Amos and I’ll take a

look through the woods to make sure no one else is out there. It's over. Now, let's go find your momma and let her know everything is all right. You've had one heck of a day."

After supper, Curtis did not stray too far from his mother's side. The Marcengills relieved them of clean up duty that night and the boy and his mother sat on the porch rocking and taking in the cool breeze of the evening. The back and forth movement of his chair soothed Curtis and caused the dissipation of the shards of glass that he had earlier felt in his stomach.

Not since they lost their shop and apartment above it in town had Curtis felt so at home as that night after his escape from the hobos. The noise all about the house did not stop him from going to sleep early. In fact, it comforted him to know that there were so many others around. Fellow travelers who shared his poverty, had experienced the cruelties of the world, and who could—if he would let them—empathize with his hurt. While the main house was nothing like his old apartment, in a sense it was more of a home than he had ever known.

As the spring moved into the summer heat, the Marcengills found that Curtis was slowly becoming a right reliable worker when tending to the livestock and doing odd jobs around the barn. His daydreaming sessions were fewer and his respect for his elders grew. To everyone's amazement, Curtis earned an A from Miss Barron and even signed up for another unit of Latin to be taught in the fall. Hoeing, however, still raised his gorge and frustrated the boy to no end.