A Jury of her Peers

by Susan Glaspell

A JURY OF HER PEERS

1  Martha Hale opened the storm door and felt the cutting north wind. She ran back inside for her big wool shawl. She was unhappy with what she saw there in her kitchen. Her bread was all ready for mixing, half the flour sifted and half unsifted. She hated to see things half done. But it was no ordinary thing that called her away. It was probably further from ordinary than anything that had ever happened in Dickson County.

2  She had been sifting flour when the sheriff drove up with his horse and buggy to get Mr. Hale. Sheriff Peters had asked Mrs. Hale to come, too. His wife was nervous, he said with a grin. She wanted another woman to come along. So Martha Hale had dropped everything right where it was.

3  "Martha!" her husband's voice came, "don't keep the folks waiting out here in the cold!"

4  She tied the wool shawl tighter and climbed into the buggy. Three men and a woman were waiting for her. Martha Hale had met Mrs. Peters, the sheriff's wife, at the county fair. Mrs. Peters didn't seem like a sheriff's wife. She was small and thin and ordinary. She didn't have a strong voice. But Mr. Peters certainly did look like a sheriff. He was a heavy man with a big voice, very friendly to folks who followed the law. But now, Mrs. Hale thought, he was going to the Wrights' house as a sheriff, not a friend.

5  The Wrights' house looked lonely this cold March morning. It had always been a lonely-looking house. It was down in a valley, and the poplar trees around it were lonely-looking trees. The men were talking about what had happened there: her husband, Sheriff Peters, and the county attorney, Mr. Henderson. She looked over at Mrs. Peters.

6  "I'm glad you came with me," Mrs. Peters said nervously.

7  When the buggy reached the doorstep, Martha Hale felt she could not go inside. She had often said to herself, " I must go over and see Minnie Foster." She still thought of her as Minnie Foster, though for twenty years she had been Mrs. Wright. But there was always something to do, and Minnie Foster would go from her mind. She felt sad that she had come only now.
8 The men went over to stand by the stove. The women stood together by the door. At first, they didn't even look around the kitchen.

9 "Now, Mr. Hale," the sheriff began. "Before we move things around, you tell Mr. Henderson what you saw when you came here yesterday morning."

10 Mrs. Hale felt nervous for her husband. Lewis Hale often lost his way in a story. She hoped he would tell it straight this time. Unnecessary things would just make it harder for Minnie Foster.

11 "Yes, Mr. Hale?" the county attorney said.

12 "I started to town with a load of potatoes," Mrs. Hale's husband began. "I came along this road, and I saw the house. I said to myself, 'I'm going to see John Wright about the telephone.' They will bring a telephone out here if I can get somebody else to help pay for it. I'd spoken to Wright before, but he said folks talked too much already. All he asked for was peace and quiet. I guess you know how much he talked himself. But I thought I would ask him in front of his wife. All the women like the telephone. In this lonely road it would be a good thing. Not that he cared much about what his wife wanted . . . "

13 Now there he was!-saying things he didn't need to say. Mrs. Hale tried to catch her husband's eye, but luckily the attorney interrupted him with:

14 "Just tell what happened when you got there, Mr. Hale."

15 Mr. Hale began again, more carefully. "I knocked at the door. But it was all quiet inside. I knew they must be up-it was past eight o'clock. I knocked again, louder, and I thought I heard someone say, 'Come in.' I opened the door-this door"- Mr. Hale pointed toward the door where the two women stood. "And there, in that rockingchair"- he pointed to it- "sat Mrs. Wright."

16 "How did she look?" the county attorney asked.

17 "Well," said Hale, "she looked-strange."

18 "How do you mean-strange?"
The attorney took out a notebook and pencil. Mrs. Hale did not like that pencil. She kept her eye on her husband, as if to tell him, "No unnecessary things. They'll just go into that notebook and make trouble." Hale spoke carefully, as if the pencil made him think more slowly.

"Well, she didn't seem to know what she was going to do next. I said, 'How do, Mrs. Wright. It's cold isn't it?' And she said, 'Is it?,' and sat there fingering her apron, nervous-like.

well, I was surprised. She didn't ask me to come in and sit down, but just sat there, not even looking at me. And so I said, 'I want to see John.'

"And then she-laughed. I guess you'd call it a laugh.

"I said, a little sharp, 'Can I see john?'

"'No,' she said, kind of dull. 'Isn't he home?' said I. 'Yes,' says she, 'he's home.' 'Then why can't I see him?' 1 asked her. Now I was angry. 'Because he's dead,' says she-all quiet and dull. She fingered her apron some more.

"'Why, where is he?' I said, not knowing what to say.

"She just pointed upstairs-like this," said Hale, pointing. " Then I said, 'Why, what did he die of ?'

"'He died of a rope around his neck,' says she, and just went on fingering her apron. "

Nobody spoke. Everyone looked at the rockingchair as if they saw the woman who had sat there yesterday.

"And what did you do then?" The attorney at last interrupted the silence.

"I went upstairs." Hale's voice fell. "There he was-lying on the-he was dead, all right. I thought I'd better not touch anything. So I went downstairs.

"'Who did this, Mrs. Wright?' I said, sharp, and she stops fingerling her apron. 'I don't know,' she says. 'You don't know?' said I. 'Weren't you sleeping in the same bed with him? Somebody tied a rope around his neck and killed him, and you didn't wake up?'

"'I didn't wake up,' she says alter me.
"I may have looked as if I didn't see how that could be. After a minute she said, 'I sleep sound.'

"I thought maybe she ought to tell her story first to the sheriff. So I went as fast as I could to the nearest telephone-over at the Rivers' place on High Road. Then I came back here to wait for Sheriff Peters.

"I thought I should talk to her. So I said I had stopped by to see if John wanted to put in a telephone. At that, she started to laugh, and then she stopped and looked frightened. . . ."

The attorney spoke to the sheriff. "I guess we'll go upstairs first-then out to the barn and around there. You made sure yesterday that there's nothing important here in the kitchen?"

"Nothing here but kitchen things," said the sheriff with a laugh.

The attorney was searching in the cupboard. After a minute he pulled out his hand, all sticky.

"Here's a nice mess," he said angrily.

"Oh-her fruit," Mrs. Peters said. She looked at Mrs. Hale. "She was worried about her fruit when it turned cold last night. She said the stove might go out, and the jars might break."

Mrs. Peters' husband began to laugh. "Well, how about that for a woman! Held in jail for murder, and worrying about her jars of fruit!"

The attorney answered, "I guess before we finish with her, she may have something more important to worry about."

"Oh, well," Mr. Hale said, "women are used to worrying about nothing."

"And yet," said the attorney, "what would we do without the ladies?" He smiled at the women, but they did not speak, did not smile back.

The lawyer washed his hands and dried them on the dishtowel.

"Dirty towels!" he said. "Not much of a housekeeper, eh, ladies?" He kicked some messy pans under the sink.
"There's a lot of work to do around a farm," Mrs. Hale said sharply. "And men's hands aren't always as clean as they might be."

"Ah! You feel a duty to your sex, I see!" He laughed. "But you and Mrs. Wright were neighbors. I guess you were friends, too."

"I've not seen much of her these years."

"And why was that? You didn't like her?"

"I liked her well enough. Farmers' wives have their hands full, Mr. Henderson. And then—it never seemed like a very happy place . . ."

"You mean the Wrights didn't get on very well together?"

"No. I don't mean anything. But I don't think a place would be happier if John Wright was in it."

"I'd like to talk to you more about that, Mrs. Hale. But first we'll look upstairs."

The sheriff said to the attorney, "I suppose anything Mrs. Peters does will be all right? She came to take Mrs. Wright some clothes—and a few little things."

"Of course," said the attorney. "Mrs. Peters is one of us. Maybe you women may come on a clue to the motive—and that's the thing we need."

Mr. Hale smiled, ready to make a joke. "Yes, but would the women know a clue if they did come upon it?"

The women stood silent while the men went upstairs. Then Mrs. Hale began to clean the messy pans under the sink.

"I would hate to have men coming into my kitchen, looking around and talking about my housework."
"Of course, it's their duty," Mrs. Peters said. But Mrs. Hale was looking around the kitchen herself. She saw a box of sugar. Next to it was a paper bag---half full.

"She was putting this in there," she said to herself. Work begun and not finished? She saw the table—a dishtowel lay on it. One half of the table was clean. What had interrupted Minnie Foster?

"I must get her things from the cupboard," Mrs. Peters said.

Together they found the few clothes Mrs. Wright had asked for. Mrs. Hale picked up an old black skirt.

"My, John Wright hated to spend money!" she said. "She used to wear pretty clothes and sing in the church, when she was Minnie Foster . . ." Martha Hale looked at Mrs. Peters and thought: she doesn't care that Minnie Foster had pretty clothes when she was a girl. But then she looked at Mrs. Peters again, and she wasn't sure. In fact, she had never been sure of Mrs. Peters. She seemed so nervous, but her eyes looked as if they could see a long way into things.

"Is this all you want to take to the jail?" Martha Hale asked.

"No, she wanted an apron and her woolen shawl. "Mrs. Peters took them from the cupboard.

"Mrs. Peters!" cried Mrs. Hale suddenly. "Do you think she did it? "

Mrs. Peters looked frightened. "Oh, I don't know," she said.

"Well, I don't think she did," Mrs. Hale said. "Asking for her apron and her shawl. Worrying about her fruit. "

"Mr. Peters says it looks bad for her," Mrs. Peters answered. "Saying she didn't wake up when someone tied that rope around his neck. Mr. Henderson said that what this case needs is a motive. Something to show anger—or sudden feeling."

"Well, I think it's kind of low to lock her up in jail, and then come out here to look for clues in her own house," said Martha Hale.

"But, Mrs. Hale," said the sheriff's wife, "the law is the law. "

Mrs. Hale turned to re-light the stove. "How would you like to cook on this broken thing year after year-?"
Mrs. Peters looked from the broken stove to the bucket of water on the sink. Water had to be carried in from outside. "I know. A person gets so down-and loses heart."

And again Mrs. Peters' eyes had that look of seeing into things, of seeing through things.

"Oh, look, Mrs. Hale. She was sewing a quilt." Mrs. Peters picked up a sewing basket full of quilt blocks.

The women were studying the quilt as the men came down stairs. just as the door opened, Mrs. Hale was saying, "Do you think she was going to quilt it, or just knot it?"

"Quilt it or knot it!" laughed the sheriff. "They're worrying about a quilt!" The men went out to look in the barn.

Then Mrs. Peters said in a strange voice, "Why, look at this one." She held up a quilt block. "The sewing. All the rest were sewed so nice. But this one is so messy-"

Mrs. Hale took the quilt block. She pulled out the sewing and started to replace bad sewing with good.

"Oh, I don't think we ought to touch anything Mrs. Peters said helplessly.

"I'll just finish this end," said Mrs. Hale, quietly.

"Mrs. Hale?"

"Yes, Mrs. Peters?"

"What do you think she was so nervous about?"

"Oh, I don't know. I don't know that she was-nervous. Sometimes I sew badly when I'm tired."

She looked quickly at Mrs. Peters, but Mrs. Peters was looking far away. Later she said in an ordinary voice, "Here's a bird cage. Did she have a bird, Mrs. Hale? It seems kind of funny to think of a bird here. I wonder what happened to it."

"Oh, probably the cat got it."
89 "But look, the door has been broken. It looks as if someone was rough with it."

90 Their eyes met, worrying and wondering.

91 "I'm glad you came with me, Mrs. Hale. It would be lonely for me-sitting here alone."

92 "I wish I had come over here sometimes when she was here," answered Mrs. Hale. "I stayed away because it wasn't a happy place. Did you know John Wright, Mrs. Peters?"

93 "Not really. They say he was a good man."

94 "Well-good," Mrs. Hale said. "He didn't drink, and paid his bills. But he was a hard man. His voice was like the north wind that cuts to the bone. You didn't know-her, did you, Mrs. Peters?"

95 "Not until they brought her to the jail yesterday."

96 "She was-she was like a little bird herself. . . . Why don't you take the quilt blocks in to her? It might take up her mind."

97 "That's a nice idea, Mrs. Hale," agreed the sheriff's wife. She took more quilt blocks and a small box out of the sewing basket.

98 "What a pretty box," Mrs. Hale said. "That must be something she had from a long time ago, when she was a girl." Mrs. Hale opened the box. Quickly her hand went to her nose.

99 Mrs. Peters bent closer. "It's the bird," she said softly. "Someone broke its neck."

100 Just then the men came in the door. Mrs. Hale slipped the box under the quilt blocks.

101 "Well, ladies," said the county attorney, "have you decided if she was going to quilt it or knot it?" He smiled at them.

102 We think," began the sheriff's wife nervously, "that she was going to-knot it."

103 "That's interesting, I'm sure," he said, not listening. "Well, there's no sign that someone came in from the outside. And it was their own rope. Now let's go up stairs again . . . " The men left the kitchen again.

104 "She was going to bury the bird in that pretty box," said Mrs. Hale.
"When I was a girl," said Mrs. Peters softly, "my kitten—there was a boy who murdered it, in front of my eyes. If they hadn't held me back, I would have hurt him.

They sat without speaking or moving.

"Wright wouldn't like the bird. A thing that sang. She used to sing. He killed that, too," Mrs. Hale said slowly.

"Of course, we don't know who killed the bird," said Mrs. Peters.

"I knew John Wright," Mrs. Hale answered. "There had been years and years of—nothing. Then she had a bird to sing to her. It would be so silent—when it stopped."

"I know what silence is," Mrs. Peters said in a strange voice. "When my first baby died, after two years..."

"Oh, I wish I'd come over here sometimes. That was a crime!" Mrs. Hale cried.

But the men were coming back. "No, Peters, it's all clear. Except the reason for doing it. If there was some real clue... Something to show the jury... You go back to town, sheriff. I'll stay and look around some more."

Mrs. Hale looked at Mrs. Peters. Mrs. Peters was looking at her.

"Do you want to see what Mrs. Peters is bringing to the jail?" the sheriff asked the attorney.

"Oh, I guess the ladies haven't picked up anything very dangerous," he answered. "After all, a sheriff's wife is married to the law. Did you ever think of your duty that way, Mrs. Peters?"

"Not—just that way," said Mrs. Peters quietly.

The men went out to get the buggy, and the women were alone for one last moment.

Mrs. Hale pointed to the sewing basket. In it was the thing that would keep another woman in jail.

For a moment Mrs. Peters did not move. Then she ran to get the box. She tried to put it in her little handbag, but it didn't fit.
120 There was the sound of the door opening. Martha Hale took the box and put it quickly in her big pocket.

121 "Well, Peters," said the county attorney jokingly, "at least we found out that she was not going to quilt it. She was going to-what do you call it, ladies?"

122 Mrs. Hale put her hand against her pocket. "We call it-knot it, Mr. Henderson."