

Alternate History

# The Invisible Empire

By John Kessel



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*by John Kessel*

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*Inspired by Karen Joy Fowler's story*

*"Game Night at the Fox and Goose"*

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When Henrietta and Hiram Patterson arrived at the church that Sunday, Henrietta's arm was bound to a splint, tied up in a sling made from a blue kerchief. In the quiet chat of the congregation before we entered the church, Henrietta allowed as how she had been kicked by the mule, but I was not the only observer to notice Hiram's sidelong watchfulness, and the fact that their two boys kept their mother between themselves and their father at all times.

The congregation was more subdued than usual in the wake of the news of that week. Robert and I sat in the third pew; Sarah sat with her husband and three children a row ahead of us. Lydia Field, her black hair piled high beneath a modest straw hat, kept watch from the choir loft. Beautiful Iris sat in front with her beau Henry Fletcher. Louellen was not a church-goer, and Sophonsiba attended the colored church.

As the Pattersons took seats in our pew, I nodded toward them. Hiram, shaved clean and his hair parted neatly in the middle, nodded gravely back. Henrietta avoided my gaze. Their older boy took up a hymnal and paged through it.

The service began with the singing of "When Adam Was Created"

When Adam was created,  
He dwelt in Eden's shade;  
As Moses has related,  
Before a bride was made.

I looked up at Lydia in the choir. Her eyes closed, she sang as sweetly as an angel; one would think her the picture of feminine submission. Another angel was Sarah, mother and homemaker. Certainly Henry Fletcher considered Iris an angel sent from heaven to entice him.

I felt for Robert's hand, and held it as I sang.

This woman was not taken  
From Adam's head, we know;  
And she must not rule o'er him,  
It's evidently so.  
The husband is commanded  
To love his loving bride;  
And live as does a Christian,  
And for his house provide.  
The woman is commanded  
Her husband to obey,  
In every thing that's lawful,  
Until her dying day.

As the song ended the Reverend Hines climbed to the pulpit. He stared down for some time without speaking, the light from the clerestory gleaming off his bald pate. Finally he began.

"I take my text, on this day of retribution, from the letter of St. Paul to the Ephesians, chapter 5, verses 22 through 24. 'Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as

the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.'"

The minister rested his hand on the Bible. "My brothers and sisters, the sword of a righteous God is raised over the heads of those rebellious women who walk among us today. They think that by hiding in the dark, we will not see them. But to the Lord God Almighty, there is no darkness but the darkness of eternal perdition to which those women condemn themselves. God saw Eve when she ate of the forbidden fruit; He sees you now."

Did God see when a father in Bristol, Connecticut knocked the teeth of his eighteen-year-old daughter down her throat because she entertained the attentions of a boy he did not approve? Did He see when Charles S. Smith, a married man, got with child the simple-minded eleven year old Edith Wilson in Ostego County, New York?

"But my message today is not only to the wives," Hines went on. "Brothers, I ask you: Why was Adam cast from the garden? It was not because he ate of the apple! I put it to you that he was cast out because he sacrificed his judgment to that of his wife. The minute Adam saw Eve with the apple of which she had eaten, he knew she was damned. Adam's sin was that he loved Eve too much. He loved her so much that, despite his knowledge that in violating the injunction of the Lord God she had committed the gravest crime, he could not bear to see her damned by herself. So he ate of the apple too, and damned himself, and all of his posterity, with her.

"From that one act of submission to a wrongheaded woman have come five thousand years of suffering.

"My word today to you wives is obvious: obey your husband. He is born to a wisdom you cannot grasp; his hand is the hand of the Lord. When you turn against a man, you turn against the utmost power of the universe. If you have transgressed, the Lord demands that you confess. Remember, Jesus forgave even the woman taken in adultery; he awaits your repentance with arms open in sweet forgiveness. But for those whose hearts are hardened, only the angel of death awaits. Speak now, and be saved, or hold your tongues and be damned for all eternity.

"My word today to you husbands, in particular and most direly to those who know of the sins of your wives yet keep silent out of love, is simply this: you must act! You bear the burden of the Lord's command, to be the head of your wife. Your own salvation, her salvation, and the salvation of the community depend on it. Do not think that, by protecting her, you show mercy, any more than by joining Eve, Adam did. By protecting evil, you condemn yourself, and your children, and the children of every other man in this civilization to evil.

"All across our land, in these days of rebellion, this challenge is put to all, male and female. 'Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.'

"Let us pray."

As Reverend Hines led the Lord's Prayer, I bowed my head and recited the words with the others, but my ears were burning. Beside me, Robert's eyes were closed. I glanced over my shoulder and saw Lydia held her head rigidly forward.

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After the prayer, the reverend called on the congregation to testify. "Now is the time! Do not be afraid of your neighbors' reaction. Do not wait, thinking perhaps that tomorrow, or next week, will be soon enough. Tomorrow or next week you may be dead and burning in hell; no man knows the hour of his judgment!"

He waited. The church lay silent. I saw Iris's golden head tremble; Iris is a foolish girl. I remembered how she had fretted at the talk she had aroused when she'd worn red bloomers to the cotillion. Her commitment went little farther than reading smuggled copies of *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly*. But she did not rise.

In the end, no one did. Reverend Hines' scowl told all that was needed of his displeasure.

After the service, as we stood beneath the huge oak outside the church, I made a special point to take the reverend's hand. I thanked him for calling us to our conscience and deplored the lack of a response from the congregation.

"God have mercy on their souls," he said. "For I will have none."

"I hope their silence only signifies the personal repentance that must precede the public one," I said, and stepped aside.

As Robert shook hands with Hines, Lydia Field touched my arm, and mentioned to me that the quilting circle needed to get together soon.

\* \* \* \*

Robert is a carpenter: he built our house with his own hands, on an acre of ground a mile outside of town. It is a



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finer house than our income warrants, with extra bedrooms that we have not had cause to use. In truth, the house, like our lives, is a work in progress, perhaps never to be finished. In the evenings, after quitting his shop, Robert works laying oak flooring, mounting crown molding, trimming windows.

I fell in love with Robert when I saw him work. He is never a talkative man, but in his workshop he becomes a silent one, except for the aimless and off-key tunes that he hums, unaware.

He leans over the bench, feeds a long strip of maple through the saw, pumping the treadle steadily with his foot. He inspects the result, measures it, marks it, and slides it into the miter box. His eyes are quiet. His lips are closed in an expression that is the faintest prelude to a smile, but not a smile itself. His hands are precise. He takes up a box saw. He does not hurry, he does not dawdle. A shock of hair falls into his eyes, he brushes it away, and it falls back. In the mornings I shake sawdust from his pillow.

After we had returned from the church and had eaten our dinner, Robert changed out of his Sunday suit and went to work on the stair rail in the front hall.

"It's Sunday," I said, wiping my hands. "The day of rest."

"But we aren't the sort who regulate our lives by the Bible, are we."

He did not return my stare. "Would you have me be the kind of woman Jordan Hines prefers?"

He shrugged the canvas strap from his shoulder and set down his long toolbox. "I don't look to Jordan Hines for my

conscience. But some things are wrong. Killing a man in cold blood is wrong."

"But killing a woman in hot passion is all right. And breaking her arm is not worth notice."

"Don't put words in my mouth."

"Henrietta Patterson is a mouse; she wouldn't take a step outside her kitchen without her husband's leave—more's the pity. Name a man in this town who has been killed."

"Susannah, can you blame me if I am troubled? This cannot go on much longer before you are found out."

"For every woman found out a hundred more will rise. Laura D. Fair was murdered by a mob in Seneca Falls ten years ago. Did that stop anything?"

He knelt beside the box and took up one of the balusters he had turned on the lathe that week. "I did not marry Laura D. Fair. At least, I didn't think I was marrying her. I married for love and a family, not revenge and violence."

I turned from him and went to the kitchen. He laid down the baluster and followed me. As I stood at the counter, my back to him, he touched my shoulder.

"I didn't mean it that way," he said. "If we never have a child, I'll still have you. That's why I'm so worried. I could not bear to lose you."

I had not seen my woman's bleeding in more than a month, but I wouldn't get our hopes up only to suffer another loss. "I won't sit by and watch a woman like Henrietta Patterson pretend to be kicked by a mule when everyone in town knows it was her drunken husband." I turned from him and went to our room.

"Susannah!"

I closed the door and lay on the bed, dry eyed, heavy with sudden fatigue. He did not follow. After a while I heard the sound of his boots in the hall, and the snick of the folding rule as he measured the stairway. Our cat Dinah jumped onto the bed and curled up beside me. As the afternoon declined I fell asleep

When I woke it was evening. I took off my dress and donned a pair of men's trousers and a man's shirt. Worn, sturdy shoes, leather work gloves. I found Robert in the kitchen, the sleeves of his work shirt rolled to his elbows, eating bread and cheese. On the table lay the newspaper from the day before.

\* \* \* \*

## 'SISTERS OF FURY' EXECUTED

Presidential Assassins Hanged in Philadelphia

The 'Drop' Falls at Three Minutes Past Six O'clock

President Hendricks Declares 'Justice Done'

Female Protests Quelled

\* \* \* \*

Philadelphia, July 22

The last chapter of the conspiracy to assassinate the President is finished.

Saturday, at six in the morning, the twelve women convicted of treason and murder in the assassination of President Cleveland were put to death. In execution of the sentence of the Military Commission, duly approved by the President, the prisoners were hanged by the neck until dead in the courtyard of the federal penitentiary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The painful scene was unattended by either extraordinary accident or incident, and was conducted in the most solemn and quiet manner.

Witnesses report that the last words of Helen Araminta Macready, leader of the hooded women who assaulted the President last May during the monthly tea held on the White House lawn, were "Death to all seducers."

Robert looked up at me. His eyes slowly passed over my clothing. He didn't speak.

"I am going out tonight," I told him. "Don't wait up for me."

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\* \* \* \*

The six of us gathered at the barn at the Compson place at midnight. In the hardscrabble fields remained only twisted, dry stalks of last year's corn; the burnt shell of the house stood stark in the moonlight, the brick chimney rising like a sentinel over the ruin.

Sophonsiba crawled into the hearth and pulled our robes out of the chimney. She hurried back to the barn, her dark face gleaming, and handed around the robes and hoods.

Lydia had brought the horses, and we mounted and rode east along the Maryville Road. I am not the best rider—Lydia has been a horsewoman since her youth—but my skill exceeded that of the awkward Sarah and Louellen. Still, we had all made progress in the last year. It was a hot night; the air hung heavy with not a breath of breeze. I felt the sweat gather at the back of my neck. The sound of cicadas in the oaks was deafening.

The Patterson farm stood near the junction of Swift Creek and the Manahoc, forty poorly tended acres of cleared forest planted to corn and beans. We tied the horses in the woods near the road and moved silently up to the ramshackle house.

The back door was open. We crept through the kitchen, past the room where the boys slept, to their parents' room. Henrietta lay on her back cradling the broken forearm against her breast, waiting for us, her eyes glinting in the dark.

Sophonsiba motioned her to be quiet. Patterson stank of whiskey, and snored loudly, lost to the world. We fell upon him: One woman to each arm, and a pillow over his face.

"No!" Henrietta cried, "don't hurt him!" But it was mostly show.

"Megaera!" Lydia told Louellen. "Hold her back." Louellen pulled Henrietta away from the bed. Patterson struggled, but in a moment we had him bound and gagged. Lydia lit a lamp; when he saw the hooded figures standing around the bed, his eyes went wide.

We dragged him to his feet and pushed him out into the yard. "No, please," Henrietta whimpered.

The oldest boy, no more than eight or nine, woke and ran after us. His mother had to hold him back, wrapping her good arm about him. He stood barefoot in the dirt watching us with big eyes. His little brother came out and clutched his mother's nightgown. "Mama?" he asked.

"Hush," his mother said, weeping.

Sarah and Iris fetched the horses. Sophonsiba knocked Patterson's feet out from under him and the drunken man fell hard. He cursed through the gag, rolling in the dust as Lydia tied him by a long rope to the pommel of her saddle.

We dragged him out to the bridge over the creek. There we stripped him naked and tied him to the bridge.

"His figure falls far short of the Greek ideal," Iris said slyly.

"Be quiet, Tisiphone," Lydia commanded in a guttural voice. I do think that Lydia could find work as a medium, and it would not be a show—for I had seen enough of her to know that, when she spoke like this, she was indeed being moved by some spirit that was not quite herself.

"Hiram Patterson. We are the ghosts of women dead at the hands of men. We are told you come of a good family. If that

is so, it is time for you to get down on your knees in church next Sunday, confess your sins, and beg the forgiveness of your dear wife. You are marked. We will be watching. If you fail, rest assured that there is no place in Greene County that is beyond our reach."

Lydia extended her arm, pointing a black-gloved finger at him. "You will not receive another warning. We *will* have good husbands, or we will have none."

Then she turned to me. "Alecto," she said. "Do your work."

Sophonsiba advanced with the torch. I took out the straight razor and unfolded the blade. When Patterson saw the torchlight gleam along it, he let out a muffled howl and lost control of his bladder. The urine splashed down the front of my robe. I slapped his face.

Disgusted, I crouched before him. He writhed. "Keep still, or this will not go well for you!" I said. His legs trembled like those of a man palsied. When I touched the razor to his groin, he fainted. His body slumped, and he fell against the blade. Blood welled and ran down his leg.

"I'm afraid I have nicked him," I said.

"Finish quickly."

He bled a deal, but the wound was far from mortal. I shaved his pubic hair, and delicately cut a circle and dependent cross on his chest.

I was withdrawing the bloody razor from my work when Louellen hissed, "Someone's coming!"

A half dozen horses came galloping down the road.

Sophonsiba hurled the torch into the creek while the rest of us ran to our mounts. My horse shied from the flash of our

robes, tossing his head and flipping the reins from my fingers. I stumbled forward and grasped them, then awkwardly pulled myself into the saddle.

"Halt!" one of the men shouted. A gunshot rang out; Sarah's head snapped back and she dropped like a stone from her horse, her foot caught in her stirrup. The horse began to run, dragging her.

Sophonsiba pulled a pistol from beneath her robe and fired at the men; at the sound of the shot her horse reared, almost throwing her. The men drew up and fired back. Louellen and Iris were already gone, and Sophonsiba kicked her horse's flanks and surged away. I hesitated, thinking of Sarah, but Lydia grabbed my robe and tugged. "Ride!" she shouted, and we were off.

We set off down the road toward Parson's Knob, away from the creek. A couple more shots whizzed past us. When we crested the ridge, I spied Sophonsiba, Louellen and Iris ahead of us. Instead of following, Lydia veered right, into the trees.

"This way," she called. I jerked the reins, almost losing my saddle, and swerved with her between the trees.

Clouds had blown in, and a wind had picked up. In the dark it was hard to see the branches that whipped across us; I ducked and dodged trying to keep up. We descended through a series of gullies toward the river. After ten frantic minutes Lydia halted, and held up a hand for me to be quiet. We heard further shots in the distance.



"The men must have been covering the road," Lydia said. "They wanted us to flee that way. Louellen rode them right into an ambush."

"Will they tell?" We had all vowed death before betrayal.

Lydia's masked face turned toward me. "Louellen will not. Sophonsiba most definitely will not. Iris would—if she hasn't already."

"What?"

"Do you think they fell upon us by accident? They were forewarned. We have a traitor among us."

"It can't be. If they knew, why weren't they waiting when we came for Patterson?"

"I don't know."

We rode north along the river, picking our way quietly through the trees. The foliage was so thick here we had to dismount and lead the horses, and eventually we moved away from the river so as not to come out onto the road near the ferry landing.

Leaves rustled in the stiffening breeze, broken by the occasional hoot of an owl. The temperature was falling and it felt like rain.

I pondered what had happened to the other women. Sarah was surely dead. If caught, Sophonsiba would be summarily shot—and the others? Last winter the Martyred Marys had been hanged in Trenton. The governor had vowed "to expunge the viper of female vigilance organizations" from the state. Victoria Woodhull's press had been destroyed; even Bloomer's timid *The Lily* was forced to print in secret. In the

aftermath of the president's assassination, every man in the country would be on the alert.

My horse nickered nervously, tossed his head, and I shortened my grip on the reins. Lydia held up a hand. "Willet's Road," she whispered and, handing me her horse's reins, crept forward to peer into the clearing in the trees, looking, in her black robe, for all the world like some monstrous crow.

She came back. "It's clear. Let's try to make it to the barn. I'll take the horses from there and we can creep back into town before first light."

We remounted and rode west, away from the river. The road was deserted, and the sinking moon, dipping beneath the cloud cover, shone eerily, the oak trees with their sprays of leaves black against the sky. Twenty minutes later, as the Compson place arose out of the darkness, we heard the sound of horses.

"Quickly!" Lydia hissed, and kicked her horse into a canter, heading for the barn just as the clouds opened and the rain began. I raced after her, and we jumped off the horses, pulling them inside. We peered out toward the road a hundred yards away through the increasing downpour as three horsemen trotted by from the direction we had come. One of them was towing a horse that looked like it might have a body thrown over the saddle.

The rain drummed on the roof, drizzling through gaps in the boards. Neither of us spoke for some time. Lydia took off her robe and tucked it under her saddle pad. Mine reeked of Patterson's urine. I buried it in some rotting straw in the

corner of a stall and tucked the hood into the waistband of my trousers. "I'll take the horses back to Martha's stable," Lydia said. "You can get back to town on foot."

"Who do you think those men were?" I asked. "I don't see them coming from our town."

"I expect they were from Maryville. Maybe joined by a few from town, but not many. We'll find out tomorrow."

"I don't believe Iris betrayed us. The men fired as soon as they saw us. Would they do so if their informer was among us?"

"I would not hazard to guess what a man might do," Lydia said.

I sat back in the straw of the barn's floor, and watched the glint of a spider's web in the corner of the doorway. "I begin to wonder if we can ever change them."

Lydia turned to me; her voice was fierce. "If men were capable of change, then reason would have done it years ago. For most, the only answer is death."

"How can you say that?"

"You and your precious Robert! What do you think we have been doing? We aren't changing their minds—we're forcing them to stop abusing us because they know if they don't stop they will be punished."

"That's a counsel of despair. If you're right, men and women will never live together in peace."

"Do you think Hiram Patterson is capable of having his mind changed?"

"Maybe Hiram Patterson isn't—but other men."

"Any men persuaded are regarded by others with contempt. Men like Patterson and Hines run the world."

I wanted to protest, to point out that no one had come forward in answer to Hines' call at church. Instead I brooded. "If it comes down to open war between men and women, women will lose."

She tugged at the hood at my waist. "Why do you think you wear this?"

Just then my horse neighed and backed up into the darkness. I turned and saw men in the road. They pulled up, sitting motionless in their saddles, and stared at the barn. We froze. I prayed they would pass. Instead they moved off the road toward us through the steady rain.

Lydia grabbed her horse's reins, fitted her boot into the stirrup and pulled herself astride. "Sneak out the back. Stick to the woods. I'll ride out front and outrun them."

Without waiting for my protest she kicked her horse's flanks, crouched behind his head and raced out of the barn. The men were startled; Lydia veered past them and out to the road. One drew a pistol and fired; I saw the muzzle flash in the dark.

I did not wait to see what happened next. I crawled out the back of the barn and ran slipping through the mud toward the tree line fifty yards away through Compson's abandoned cornfield. I did not look back until I was under the trees; the men were gone, chasing after Lydia down the Maryville Road.

I ran for a long time. I had played in these woods as a girl, running with the boys, climbing trees, building forts, fighting General Lee and Napoleon and wicked King John in a

thousand childish games. But though I knew the woods well, in the darkness and rain it was hard for me to keep my direction, and I became lost. I was still stunned by Sarah's death. Perhaps it was a delayed reaction, or fear, or some late understanding of how mad our project had been, but I found myself sitting beneath the trees, soaked to the skin, sobbing.

It must have been approaching dawn when the rain stopped and the clouds blew away. I could make out my surroundings and realized I was not far from home. I tried to stand, but a wave of nausea swept over me and I leaned one hand against the bole of a tree, bent over, vomiting.

I had emptied my stomach and was wiping my hand against my mouth when I was seized from behind and thrown to the ground.

"Susannah Mueller! Does your husband know you are out here at night?"

I twisted my head and saw, standing above me, Everett Smith, who hung around the dry goods store and had occasionally done odd jobs for Robert. He had a bottle in his left hand and a pistol in his right.

"In such a mannish mode of dress—" Smith waved the pistol at my outfit, "—anyone might take you for a wicked girl."

"All right, Everett," I said. "You've captured me. You'd best take me to the sheriff."

"What's the sheriff ever done for me?"

He took a swig from the bottle, emptied it, and flung it aside, where it hit the tree and shattered. Pistol still on me,

he fell to his knees, grabbed the front of my shirt and yanked it up. When I tried to struggle, he slapped me across the face and pressed me down.

We wrestled in the wet leaf mulch, but he was too strong for me. He tore at my clothes, his hot breath stinking of whiskey, his forearm across my neck. Unable to move him, I felt with my hands in the ground around us, hoping for a rock or tree limb. My hand fell upon the neck of the broken bottle.

Without a thought, I jabbed the neck of the bottle into his throat. He yelped and surged up, clutching at his neck, and I could feel the hot blood spurting over my cheek and shoulder. Smith fell back, making sounds like a hurt dog.

"What—what've you done?" he gasped. His hand fumbled for the pistol.

I kicked it away from him. He coughed, shuddered, and leaned back against the trunk of the tree. After a moment I crawled to him and tried to stanch the bleeding with my hood, with mud and leaves, with my hands. Nothing worked. I could barely make out his eyes as they glazed over. I sat watching as he bled to death.

\* \* \* \*

I stuffed my bloody hood into a hollow log and made my way in the lessening darkness back home. My legs were heavy with weariness, yet my mind whirled. Whenever I closed my eyes, I again saw Sarah's head snap back from the force of the shot. I prayed that Lydia was wrong about Iris. I wondered if the others had escaped, and realized that, if they had not, it would be better for me if they had been killed. Yet how could I face the day hoping for such a disaster, and

knowing that Everett Smith's body lay half a mile from our house?

When I reached home, I crept quietly into the kitchen, undressed, and washed the blood from my face and hands with water from the kitchen pump. Dinah came in and sat on her haunches, watching me with feline imperturbability. I crammed my shirt and trousers into the wood stove, where the coals set them smoldering.

As I climbed back into bed, Robert lifted his head. "Thank God you're back. I've been lying awake all night. Will this ever stop, Susannah?"

"It's stopped," I said, resting my head in the crook of his arm.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'm fine."

He kissed me on the cheek, and fell asleep. I lay there waiting for the dawn, my hand resting on my belly, thinking about whether I wanted it to be a boy, or a girl, or nothing at all.

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