

Loyalty Story

A Public Scene With Eugene

The local townspeople could hardly believe the rumor that Eugene was going to testify against his boss, Mr. McGee, the owner of a large nearby tobacco plantation. The other farmers in town liked Mr. McGee, and since Eugene helped manage the operation, they were perplexed at how the young man could betray his boss.

Eugene, who found himself surrounded on the steps of the county courthouse, tried to explain his position to the small, angry crowd of townspeople.

“Friends, I’m not a lawyer, but I do know this: If a man is guilty, his lawyer is likely to defend him as though he were innocent. And the prosecuting attorney, on the other hand, usually seeks to convince the jury that the defendant is guilty no matter what. So justice often depends on witnesses who will come forward like good citizens and tell the truth.”

“We know that,” said a man in faded overalls, “but what’s that got to do with testifying against McGee? He’s a good man and has helped this town in many ways. You should be defending him. You wouldn’t have a paycheck if it weren’t for him.”

“You’re right in some respects,” Eugene responded. “Mr. McGee is a good man in many ways. He pays fair wages to his workers. For years he has taken good care of his migrant tenants who return each year to work for him. But as you probably know, several of the field hands got sick and one died. The hospital report indicated that all of them had been poisoned. The police said one of the wells from which the workers drank was polluted with toxic chemicals.

“Mr. McGee hired an engineer to test the well. The engineer confirmed that it was polluted and ensured us it was the result of toxic runoff from Sawmill, a textile company three miles upstream from the farm.

A woman in the crowd shouted, “Sure, they got their reports. You don’t have to tighten the rope around McGee’s neck. Plus, it ain’t Sawmill that’s on trial — it’s just poor ol’ McGee.”

Eugene continued. “When Mr. McGee and I approached Sawmill about this several months ago, they insisted they had not violated any environmental regulations and that the contamination must have come from somewhere else. But when I suggested going to the Environmental Protection Agency, Mr. McGee told me he would handle it.”

Eugene shifted his weight on the steps. Above him, framed between two white Doric columns, was an engraving which read, “Hall of Justice.” He paused for a moment, then said, “I’m going to tell the truth. That’s the only way we can find justice.”

“I suppose you mean well,” said the man, “but you’re just plain stupid. A man’s duty is to his company. If that’s who allows you to put food on your family’s table, you lie to help them. You don’t join the prosecution.”

“The truth is that we all knew Well #4 was contaminated,” Eugene explained. “But the real reason I feel I have to testify against my boss is that I discovered he has taken a lot of money from Sawmill in exchange for promising not to report them to the E.P.A.”

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The crowd gasped.

“Mr. McGee told the workers not to drink from that well. Still, that’s not enough. If he were a trustworthy man with real integrity, he would not have taken Sawmill’s and he would have had something done about the contamination. I feel partly responsible for not contacting the proper authorities on my own. Hopefully this case will help prevent future tragedies and provide a record for us to hold Sawmill accountable. They certainly bear responsibility for this tragedy too.”

The group was left speechless as Eugene made his way up the courthouse steps.