The Ordways

William Humphrey

Author of HOME FROM THE HILL

THE ORDWAYS

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A panorama of Texas life, *The Ordways* extends backward into the Civil War and forward into the 1930s, chronicling the history of this family, a large clan of gritty, human, and memorable people. At the heart of the book is Sam Ordway —both as an old man telling his grandson of his younger days spent searching for his kidnapped son, and as that young father himself. In *The Ordways* we meet politicians, sheriffs, con men, bogus preachers, lonely isolated women, desperate widows—a rich and varied rural population which enhances our understanding of the Texas character, both in the 1930s and in the present day.

By the Same Author

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HOME FROM THE HILL

THE LAST HUSBAND
and other stories

THE ORDWAYS

A NOVEL BY

William Humphrey

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PART 1
In a Country Churchyard

I

In a Country Churchyard

CLARKSVILLE is in Texas—but only barely. Take a map and place the index finger of your right hand on Clarksville, your middle finger will rest in Oklahoma, your ring finger in Arkansas, and your little finger in Louisiana. It lies fifteen miles south of the Red River, on the road from the ferry which transported the first colonists to Texas. Standing on the edge of the blackland prairie, it was the first clearing they came to out of the canebrakes and the towering pines which choke the broad river bottom. Southerners, those first settlers were, and in the towns of northeast Texas, such as Clarksville, the South draws up to a stop. Mountain men, woodsmen, swampers, hill farmers, they came out into the light, stood blinking at the flat and featureless immensity spread before them, where there were no logs to build cabins or churches, no rails for fences, none of the game whose ways they knew, and cowered back into the familiar shade of the forest, from there to farm the margins of the prairie like a timid bather testing the water with his toe. The Texas of cattle herds and cowboys, of flat little sun-swept towns with low sheet-iron buildings strung-out along a single main street, the Texas of the West, lies farther on, in time as well as space. The shady streets of Clarksville radiate from a spacious square, from the plaza in the centre of which, bedded in wild roses, rises a tall marble shaft surmounted by a Confederate foot-soldier carrying a bedroll on his back and a canteen at his side, resting his musket, and shading his eyes to gaze over the rooftops towards the southwest, in which direction the view is almost limitless.

The first colonists, and some later immigrants like my own great-grandfather, who drew back appalled from those vast and lonely prairies, went no farther, but settled in the town and in the farm hamlets which cling like children to its skirts. They felled timber and planted cotton and some brought in slaves while others did their own picking, and before long

they were calling their town the long-staple-cotton capital of the world. Two blocks north of the public square they laid out another, and raised, of imported yellow stone, a courthouse eight stories high which to travellers on the oceanic prairie looked like a lighthouse, in the plan of a Greek cross topped by a tower with a tapered spire carrying on each of its four sides a great white clockface that could be read for miles, this in turn capped by a belfry from which on the quarter hour the bells rolled out over the town like a peal of thunder. After that there was no disputing that Clarksville would be the seat of Red River County. West of the courthouse they built a large jail and north of it a cotton compress and storage shed and a railway depot and a sawmill to finish the logs brought out unendingly from the river bottom.

Thirty years ago, when I was a boy there, Clarksville was already an old, old town. In fact, thirty years ago, before the discovery of oil nearby, Clarksville was an older town than it is today. Shoals of autos thronging the streets now fill with bleat and roar the square where then the rumble of iron bound wheels on *bois d'arc* paving bricks was heard, and the snapping and crackling of a wagonbed carried like rifle shots around the four sides. Seated along the tailgate of the wagon with their legs dangling, the country children, stolid, neuter creatures all with the same homemade Buster Brown haircut, bobbed up and down like corks riding the waves. Now high in octane, the air then was spiced with the tang of fresh-cut pine, and in ginning season, when cotton lint lay in drifts against the curbs like snow, with the appetizing aroma of fresh-pressed cottonseed meal. On Saturday mornings the farmers hunkered in groups on the corners of the square, whittling. Asked to carve something other than shavings from his bittle of wood, one of them would have looked at you as if you had asked him to bake you a cake. At noon when they folded away their knives and stood up and brushed off their laps, it looked as if a sheep had been sheared on the spot, the shavings as curly and fine as wool. Market Square—where one went with one's mother to buy fresh vegetables from out of the farmers' wagons, and where it was a common sight, if there were many younguns in a family, and there always were, to see a pallet

spread on the ground in the shade of the wagonbed and a row of them, crawling with flies, napping there—is a parking lot now. It occupied the large empty area in front of the county jail, and when business was slack the farmers would often hear the mournful wail of a French harp (harmonica, that is) from high up in the hard-faced old jailhouse. The bars were spaced too closely for any heads to be thrust out, but late in the day when the sun sank low in the west and sent a raking light into the dark interiors of the cells, then the farmers could see the prisoners' faces, striped with shadows. Conversations were often carried on between those behind the bars and those beside the wagons, and not infrequently the visit, though loud, had a familial intimacy. The rooftops are trellised with TV aerials now, and from studios in Dallas come the revival meetings and the medicine shows which thirty years ago were staged on the courthouse lawn on Saturday afternoons.

Then too an old custom, an annual rite, was still observed. The less well-to-do of Clarksville—which included the Ordways—were at most one generation removed from the farm, and all had country kin; and once a year, in late October, after crops had been gathered and after the first frosts had brought hog-killing time with presents from the farm of fresh pork sausage and sorghum syrup, after the west winds sweeping in off the prairie filled with the rustle of dry corn stalks and the rattle of empty cotton bolls had stripped the trees and dumped a blizzard of yellow leaves upon the streets before blowing themselves out, there came a Saturday when we got up early, and finding the weather clear and still, put on old clothes, packed a lunch basket, and drove out of town to our ancestral homes for graveyard working day. In our case it was to Mabry, where among the cedars and the now bare-branched elms beside the small white clapboard church my father's people all lay buried.

For some, those from whose family circle an accustomed face was missing, in whose burial plot was a raw dirt mound on which as yet no grass had grown, no weeds to be plucked, but instead a browned and weathered wreath of flowers with weathered, faded ribbons to be removed and taken down back

of the graveyard and thrown upon that common heap of dried bouquets and wire skeletons with colourless shreds of matter left clinging to them, for such as those, I say, graveyard working day was a time of sorrow and lamentation. On meeting they fell sobbing and wailing into one another's arms. For most, however, graveyard working day, though tinged with melancholy, was not so mournful an occasion as the name might suggest. The greater number found themselves reunited without recent loss. Old friends met, and though their conversations were weighted with sighs, though their eyes grew misty as they recounted the year's toll among their common acquaintance, though they said they too must soon follow after and doubted that they would meet again until they met in heaven, they were glad to be there and pleased to see one another. Younger gravetenders were not noticeably oppressed by the thought that others would someday do the same office for them. Many a mating in the community, later solemnized in the church, had had its beginning as boy and girl pulled weeds side by side on graveyard working day, and among the grove of trees behind the schoolhouse was one tall beech in the bark of which, high above my head, was carved a pair of hearts joined by an arrow and monogrammed with my father's initials and those of my mother's maiden name.

We children were licensed to run and play as usual (though actually it was more fun to help with the work, where little pitchers with big ears might overhear, from the lips of relatives or from visitors to the family burial plot, the most intriguing anecdotes and reminiscences of their ancestors), were encouraged to, in fact, without restraint; as I remember it, even that dire warning not to step on any graves arose from our own superstitiousness rather than from any parental admonishment. One knew which families were in mourning, and play was steered away from them. As much piety was expended upon our right to enjoy our animal spirits, indeed our powerlessness to resist them, as upon the dead. "They don't know any better," was the statement frequently heard. "They'll learn soon enough. Let them be happy while they can."

For our family, at the time I am writing about, graveyard

working day was a time of quiet rejoicing. My father was one of ten children, not counting two half-sisters and one half-brother, all then still living. Year after year (minus always that one half-brother, who was "out west" and unable ever to get home for this or any other of our family reunions) they had all met there with none missing from their ranks. It was thirty-five years since any Ordway had died, and that last was one whose death, even had it been more recent, we were not expected to mourn, not one of "us"—by which I mean my father's side of the family. This was my grandfather's first wife, Agatha, the mother of my Aunts Winifred and Beatrice and of that dim, distant half-uncle of mine whose name was Edward and who would be a man of thirty-five (born the day his mother died) but who for some reason was always referred to (the rare occasions that he was mentioned) by the double diminutive Little Ned. But he had been gone a long time, so long he was all but forgotten—intentionally, I seemed to sense, and already I had learned that I was not to question too closely into the circumstances of his leaving home or the reasons for his prolonged absence. In any case, he was not missed, nor did Agatha Ordway cast any shadow upon our day—not even, I am sorry to say, upon my grandfather's day. Poor soul, she appeared to have been taken at her word, which, engraved upon her tombstone, was: "Weep not for me, but be content." Aunt Winnie and Aunt Bea could hardly be expected to remember their mother; they were only children when she died. As for my grandfather, well, he could hardly be expected to grieve for his first wife after all those years; still it used to embarrass me to hear him, in saying grace over our dinner spread on the ground just a few feet from where poor Agatha Ordway lay buried, thank God for having spared him *all* those whom he held dear, and rejoining him with them all once again.

As though the prairieland had been a pool into which the town was dropped, Clarksville was ringed with low wavy hills, flattening, growing fainter as they spread away. Mabry, ten miles due west, sat on the outermost ripple; beyond stretched Blossom Prairie, endless, treeless, smooth as water. The settlement consisted of just four buildings: the store and the

house of its owner squatting along the narrow dusty road, and behind them, thrown down like a pair of dice upon the faded green baize of their yard, the one-room schoolhouse (in which my grandmother, years ago, before she married my grandfather, had once taught for a time) and the church. Lacking a bell, they shared between them a large iron-rod triangle suspended between two wooden trestles, of the kind sometimes to be seen outside farmhouse kitchen doors by which the men are summoned from the field for dinner. The length of rod for beating the triangle was kept inside the schoolhouse, the temptation to bang out a triplet or two being more than passing boys could be expected to resist. Tempo quickening as schoolmarm or preacher got into the swing of it, like a locomotive accelerating from a dead stop, its ringing tricornered clang grew hexagonal and finally circular, rolling westward unobstructed into infinity, and long after the beating had ceased the triangle went on vibrantly humming to itself.

The church, simple as a child's drawing, the architectural semblance of the elemental creed it housed, needed only a span of oxen yoked on in front to pass for one of those prairie schooners which had brought its builders to the spot, and, lent a footloose and somewhat reckless air by its poverty, appeared to be sniffing the wind blowing in its face from off the wide open land stretching before it, and thinking of trying its luck farther on. Inside, the walls were as bare as outside. A rusty potbellied stove sat on a tattered zinc mat in the centre of the room; supported by wires dropped from the ceiling, the rusty, flaking stove pipe ran overhead and out the flue at the rear. The benches were each the handiwork of a different member of the original congregation, in a variety of woods and workmanship, heights and depths, uniform in one thing only, the perpendicularity of their backs. The altar was a kitchen table, the altarcloth a yellowed lace doily. On it always stood, one inside the other, the two wooden collection plates lined with faded and moth-eaten purple felt into which one dropped one's penny, then passed it on down the row, where at one end my grandfather and at the other Mr. Bartholomew, the elders, stood waiting with abstracted mien to receive it. On the back wall behind the rickety low pulpit hung a