Clyatt Vs. United States

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Appellant : Clyatt

Respondent : United States

Judgement :

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U.S. Supreme Court Clyatt v. United States, 197 U.S. 207 (1905)

Clyatt v. United States

No. 235

Argued December 13-14, 1904

Decided March 13, 1905

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CERTIORARI TO THE CIRCUIT COURT OF

APPEALS FOR THE FIFTH CIRCUIT

SYLLABUS

Peonage is a status or condition of compulsory service based upon the indebtedness of the peon to the master. The service is enforced unless the debt be paid, and however created, it is involuntary servitude within the prohibition of the Thirteenth Amendment to the federal Constitution. While the ordinary relation of individuals to individual are subject to the control of the states and not to that of the general government, the Thirteenth Amendment grants to Congress power to enforce the prohibition

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against involuntary servitude, including peonage, and to punish persons holding another in peonage, and 1990, 5526, Rev.Stat. are valid legislation under such power and operate directly on every person violating their provisions, whether in state or territory and whether there be or not any municipal ordinance or state law sanctioning such holding. Conviction cannot be had under an indictment charging defendants with returning certain persons to a condition of peonage unless there is proof that the persons so returned had actually been in such condition prior to the alleged act of returning them thereto.

Where the bill of exceptions, after referring to the empaneling of the jury, contains recitals that the plaintiff produced witnesses, followed in each case by the testimony of the witness at the close of all of which there were farther recitals that the parties rested, these statements are sufficient, even in the absence of a technical affirmative recital to that effect, to show that the bill of exceptions contains all the testimony, and defendant is not to be deprived of a full consideration of the question of his guilt by such omission, and even in the absence of a motion to instruct the jury to find for the defendant, this Court may examine the question where it is plain that error has been committed.

No matter how severe may be the condemnation due to the conduct of a party charged with crime, it is the duty of the court to see that all the elements of the crime are proved or that testimony is offered which justifies a jury in finding those

elements.

Sections 1990 and 5526, Rev.Stat., read:

"SEC. 1990. The holding of any person to service or labor under the system known as peonage is abolished and forever prohibited in the Territory of New Mexico, or in any other territory or state of the United States, and all acts, laws, resolutions, orders, regulations, or usages of the Territory of New Mexico, or of any other territory or state, which have heretofore established, maintained, or enforced, or by virtue of which any attempt shall hereafter be made to establish, maintain, or enforce, directly or indirectly, the voluntary or involuntary service or labor of any persons as peons, in liquidation of any debt or obligation, or otherwise, are declared null and void."

"SEC. 5526. Every person who holds, arrests, returns, or causes to be held, arrested, or returned, or in any manner aids in the arrest or return of any person to a condition of peonage shall be punished by a fine of not less than one thousand nor

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more than five thousand dollars, or by imprisonment not less than one year nor more than five years, or by both."

On November 21, 1901, the grand jury returned into the Circuit Court of the United States for the Northern District of Florida an indictment in two counts, the first of which is as follows:

"The grand jurors of the United States of America impaneled and sworn within and for the district aforesaid, on their oaths present, that one Samuel M. Clyatt, heretofore, to-wit: on the eleventh day of February, in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and one, in the County of Levy, State of Florida, within the district aforesaid, and within the jurisdiction of this Court, did then and there unlawfully and knowingly return one Will Gordon and one Mose Ridley to a condition of peonage by forcibly and against the will of them, the said Will Gordon

and the said Mose Ridley, returning them, the said Will Gordon and Mose Ridley, to work to and for Samuel M. Clyatt, D. T. Clyatt, and H. H. Tift, copartners doing business under the firm name and style of Clyatt & Tift, to be held by them, the said Clyatt & Tift, to work out a debt claimed to be due to them, the said Clyatt & Tift, by the said Will Gordon and Mose Ridley; contrary to the form of the statute in such case made and provided, and against the peace and dignity of the United States."

The second count differs only in charging that defendant caused and aided in returning Gordon and Ridley. A trial resulted in a verdict of guilty, and thereupon the defendant was sentenced to confinement at hard labor for four years. The case was taken on appropriate writ to the Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, which certified to this Court three questions. Subsequently the entire record was brought here on a writ of certiorari, and the case was heard on its merits.

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MR. JUSTICE BREWER delivered the opinion of the Court.

The constitutionality and scope of 1990 and 5526 present the first questions for our consideration. They prohibit peonage. What is peonage? It may be defined as a status or condition of compulsory service, based upon the indebtedness of the peon to the master. The basal fact is indebtedness. As said by Judge Benedict, delivering the opinion in *Jaremillo v. Romero,* 1 N.M.190, 194: "One fact existed universally: all were indebted to their masters. This was the cord by which they seemed bound to their master's service." Upon this is based a condition of compulsory service. Peonage is sometimes classified as voluntary or involuntary, but this implies simply a difference in the mode of origin, but none in the character of the servitude. The one exists where the debtor voluntarily contracts to enter the service of his creditor. The other is forced upon the debtor by some provision of law. But peonage, however created, is compulsory service -- involuntary servitude. The peon can release himself therefrom, it is true, by the payment of the debt, but otherwise the service is enforced. A clear distinction exists between peonage and

the voluntary performance of labor or rendering of services in payment of a debt. In the latter case, the debtor, though contracting to pay his indebtedness by labor or service, and subject, like any other contractor, to an action for damages for breach of that contract, can elect at any time to break it, and no law or force compels

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performance or a continuance of the service. We need not stop to consider any possible limits or exceptional cases, such as the service of a sailor, *Robertson v. Baldwin,* 165 U. S. 275 , or the obligations of a child to its parents, or of an apprentice to his master, or the power of the legislature to make unlawful, and punish criminally, an abandonment by an employee of his post of labor in any extreme cases. That which is contemplated by the statute is compulsory service to secure the payment of a debt. Is this legislation within the power of Congress? It may be conceded, as a general proposition, that the ordinary relations of individual to individual are subject to the control of the states, and are not entrusted to the general government; but the Thirteenth Amendment, adopted as an outcome of the Civil War, reads:

"SEC. 1. Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

"SEC. 2. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation."

This amendment denounces a status or condition, irrespective of the manner or authority by which it is created. The prohibitions of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments are largely upon the acts of the states, but the Thirteenth Amendment names no party or authority, but simply forbids slavery and involuntary servitude and grants to Congress power to enforce this prohibition by appropriate legislation. The differences between the Thirteenth and subsequent amendments have been so fully considered by this Court that it is enough to refer

to the decisions. In the *Civil Rights Cases,* 109 U. S. 3 , 109 U. S. 20 -23, Mr. Justice Bradley, delivering the opinion of the Court, uses this language:

"This amendment, as well as the Fourteenth, is undoubtedly self-executing without any ancillary legislation, so far as its terms are applicable to any existing state of circumstances. By its own unaided force and effect, it abolished slavery, and

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established universal freedom. Still, legislation may be necessary and proper to meet all the various cases and circumstances to be affected by it, and to prescribe proper modes of redress for its violation in letter or spirit. And such legislation may be primary and direct in its character, for the amendment is not a mere prohibition of state laws establishing or upholding slavery, but an absolute declaration that slavery or involuntary servitude shall not exist in any part of the United States. . . ."

"We must not forget that the province and scope of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments are different; the former simply abolished slavery: the latter prohibited the states from abridging the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States, from depriving them of life, liberty, or property without due process of law, and from denying to any the equal protection of the laws. The amendments are different, and the powers of Congress under them are different. What Congress has power to do under one it may not have power to do under the other. Under the Thirteenth Amendment, it has only to do with slavery and its incidents. Under the Fourteenth Amendment, it has power to counteract and render nugatory all state laws and proceedings which have the effect to abridge any of the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States, or to deprive them of life, liberty, or property without due process of law, or to deny to any of them the equal protection of the laws. Under the Thirteenth Amendment, the legislation, so far as necessary or proper to eradicate all forms and incidents of slavery and involuntary servitude, may be direct and primary, operating upon the acts of individuals, whether sanctioned by state legislation or not; under the Fourteenth, as we have already shown, it must necessarily be, and can only be, corrective in its character, addressed to counteract and afford relief against state regulations or proceedings.

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In *Plessy v. Ferguson,* 163 U. S. 537 , 163 U. S. 542 , MR. JUSTICE BROWN, delivering the opinion of the Court, said;

"That it does not conflict with the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery and involuntary servitude except as a punishment for crime, is too clear for argument. Slavery implies involuntary servitude -- a state of bondage, the ownership of mankind as a chattel, or at least the control of the labor and services of one man for the benefit of another, and the absence of a legal right to the disposal of his own person, property, and services. This amendment was said in the *Slaughter House Cases,* 16 Wall. 36, to have been intended primarily to abolish slavery, as it had been previously known in this country, and that it equally forbade Mexican peonage or the Chinese coolie trade, when they amounted to slavery or involuntary servitude, and that the use of the word 'servitude' was intended to prohibit the use of all forms of involuntary slavery, of whatever class or name."

Other authorities to the same effect might be cited. It is not open to doubt that Congress may enforce the Thirteenth Amendment by direct legislation, punishing the holding of a person in slavery or in involuntary servitude except as a punishment for crime. In the exercise of that power, Congress has enacted these sections denouncing peonage, and punishing one who holds another in that condition of involuntary servitude. This legislation is not limited to the territories or other parts of the strictly national domain, but is operative in the states and wherever the sovereignty of the United States extends. We entertain no doubt of the validity of this legislation or its applicability to the case of any person holding and wherever the sovereignty of the United whether there be a municipal ordinance or state law sanctioning such holding. It operates directly on every citizen of the Republic, wherever his residence may be.

Section 5526 punishes "every person who holds, arrests, returns, or causes to be held, arrested, or returned." Three distinct acts are here mentioned -- holding, arresting, returning.

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The disjunctive "or" indicates the separation between them, and shows that either one may be the subject of indictment and punishment. A party may hold another in a state of peonage without ever having arrested him for that purpose. He may come by inheritance into the possession of an estate in which the peon is held, and he simply continues the condition which was existing before he came into possession. He may also arrest an individual for the purpose of placing him in a condition of peonage, and this whether he be the one to whom the involuntary service is to be rendered or simply employed for the purpose of making the arrest. Or he may, after one has fled from a state of peonage, return him to it, and this whether he himself claims the service or is acting simply as an agent of another to enforce the return.

The indictment charges that the defendant did

"unlawfully and knowingly return one Will Gordon and one Mose Ridley to a condition of peonage by forcibly, and against the will of them, the said Will Gordon and the said Mose Ridley, returning them, the said Will Gordon and the said Mose Ridley, to work to and for Samuel M. Clyatt."

Now a "return" implies the prior existence of some state or condition. Webster defines it "to turn back; to go or come again to the same place or condition." In the Standard dictionary, it is defined "to cause to take again a former position; put, carry, or send back, as to a former place or holder." A technical meaning in the law is thus given in Black's Law Dictionary: "The act of a sheriff, constable, or other ministerial officer, in delivering back to the court a writ, notice, or other paper."

It was essential, therefore, under the charge in this case, to show that Gordon and Ridley had been in a condition of peonage to which, by the act of the defendant, they were returned. We are not at liberty to transform this indictment into one

charging that the defendant held them in a condition or state of peonage, or that he arrested them with a view of placing them in such condition or state. The pleader has seen

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fit to charge a return to a condition of peonage. The defendant had a right to rely upon that as the charge, and to either offer testimony to show that Gordon and Ridley had never been in a condition of peonage or to rest upon the government's omission of proof of that fact.

We must therefore examine the testimony, and the first question that arises is whether the record sufficiently shows that it contains all the testimony. The bill of exceptions, after reciting the impaneling of the jury, proceeds in these words:

"And thereupon the plaintiff, to maintain the issues upon its part, produced and offered as a witness, James R. Dean, who, being first duly sworn, did testify as follows."

That recital is followed by what purports to be the testimony of the witness. Then follows in succession the testimony of several witnesses, each being preceded by a statement in a form similar to this: "The plaintiff then introduced and offered as a witness, H. S. Sutton, who, being first duly sworn, did testify as follows." At the close of the testimony of the last witness named is this statement:

"Whereupon the plaintiff rests its case."

"Defendant rests -- introduces no testimony."

"And the said judge, after charging the jury on the law in the case, submitted the said issues and the evidence so given on the trial, to the jury, and the jury aforesaid then and there gave their verdict for the plaintiff."

It is true there is no affirmative statement in the bill of exceptions that it contains all the testimony, but such omission is not fatal. This question was presented in *Gunnison County Commissioners v. Rollins,* 173 U. S. 255 , a civil case, brought

to this Court on certiorari to the circuit court of appeals, which court had held that the bill of exceptions did not purport to contain all the evidence adduced at the trial, and for that reason did not consider the question whether error was committed in instructing the jury to find for the defendant. MR. JUSTICE HARLAN, delivering the unanimous opinion

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of the Court, disposed of that question in these words (p. 173 U. S. 261):

"We are of opinion that the bill of exceptions should be taken as containing all the evidence. It appears that, as soon as the jury was sworn to try the issues in the cause, 'the complainants, to sustain the issues on their part, offered the following oral and documentary evidence.' Then follow many pages of testimony on the part of the plaintiffs, when this entry appears: 'Whereupon complainants rested.' Immediately after comes this entry: 'Thereupon the defendants, to sustain the issues herein joined on their part, produced the following evidence.' Then follow many pages of evidence given on behalf of the defendant, and the evidence of a witness recalled by the defendant, concluding with this entry: 'Whereupon the further proceedings herein were continued until the 20th day of May, 1896, at 10 o'clock A.M.' Immediately following this entry: 'Wednesday, May 20th at 10 o'clock, the further trial of this cause was continued as follows.' The transcript next shows some discussion by counsel as to the exclusion of particular evidence, after which is this entry:"

"Thereupon counsel for defendant made a formal motion under the evidence on both sides that the court instruct the jury to return a verdict for the defendant."

"Although the bill of exceptions does not state in words that it contains all the evidence, the above entries sufficiently show that it does contain all the evidence."

The present case is completely covered by that decision. If, in a civil case, such recitals in the bill of exceptions are sufficient to show that it contains all the testimony, *a fortiori* should this be the rule in a criminal the question of his guilt by an omission from not be deprived of a full consideration of the question of his

guilty by an omission from the bill of the technical recital that it contains all the evidence.

While no motion or request was made that the jury be instructed to find for defendant, and although such a motion is the proper method of presenting the question whether there is evidence to sustain the verdict, yet *Wiborg v. United States,*

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163 U. S. 632 , 163 U. S. 658 , justifies us in examining the question in case a plain error has been committed in a matter so vital to the defendant.

The testimony discloses that the defendant, with another party, went to Florida, and caused the arrest of Gordon and Ridley on warrants issued by a magistrate in Georgia for larceny, but there can be little doubt that these criminal proceedings were only an excuse for securing the custody of Gordon and Ridley and taking them back to Georgia to work out a debt. At any rate, there was abundant testimony from which the jury could find that to have been the fact. While this is true, there is not a scintilla of testimony to show that Gordon and Ridley were ever theretofore in a condition of peonage. That they were in debt, and that they had left Georgia and gone to Florida without paying that debt does not show that they had been held in a condition of peonage, or were ever at work, willingly or unwillingly, for their creditor. We have examined the testimony with great care to see if there was anything which would justify a finding of the fact, and can find nothing. No matter how severe may be the condemnation which is due to the conduct of a party charged with a criminal offense, it is the imperative duty of a court to see that all the elements of his crime are proved, or at least that testimony is offered which justifies a jury in finding those elements. Only in the exact administration of the law will justice in the long run be done and the confidence of the public in such administration be maintained.

We are constrained, therefore, to order a reversal of the judgment, and remand the case for a new trial.

MR. JUSTICE Mc KENNA concurs in the judgment.

MR. JUSTICE HARLAN:

I concur with my brethren in holding that the statutes in question relating to peonage are valid under the Constitution of the United States. I agree also that the record sufficiently shows that it contains all the evidence introduced at the trial.

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But I cannot agree in holding that the trial court erred in not taking the case from the jury. Without going into the details of the evidence, I care only to say that, in my opinion, there was evidence tending to make a case within the statute. The opinion of the court concedes that there was abundant testimony to show that the accused, with another, went from Georgia to Florida to arrest the two negroes, Gordon and Ridley, and take them, against their will, back to Georgia to work out a debt. And they were taken to Georgia by force. It is conceded that peonage is based upon the indebtedness of the peon to the master. The accused admitted to one of the witnesses that the negroes owed him. In any view, there was no motion or request to direct a verdict for the defendant. The accused made no objection to the submission of the case to the jury, and it is going very far to hold in a case like this, disclosing barbarities of the worst kind against these negroes, that he trial court erred in sending the case to the jury.