

The flicker of a small fire, a tiny pinprick of light that came and went like a Bull Durham quirly tinkled the black coolness of the night; a beacon to the predators that silently closed the distance to their quarry.

At the fire a single man worked in the dim light making up three bedrolls near the fire. When he was finished it looked like three men were sleeping there, but the bedding held only pine boughs. The man moved into the even darker shadow of a large jagged chunk of rock that appeared to erupt from the earth. He cocked both dog-ear hammers with one audible click, both nipples of the ten gauge coach gun were capped and ready. He slid his feet around checking the footing pushing a few small rocks out of tripping distance. Assured of his footing he leaned against the rock loose, but ready like a colts hammer spring.

Maybe he was wrong and there was nothing out there. He fished out a twist from his vest pocket and bit a small chunk of sweetened tobacco rolling it to that comfortable place and let the nicotine do its job. Then he heard or felt the presence of close danger three years of hunting and being hunted they were the same. The small fire flickered a little more rapidly and at the edge of firelight a form crouched straining to see what was around the fire.

The ten gauge rose to the shoulder of the rock shrouded man, his eyes looking past the crouching man knowing he was just the scout. He caught the movement in the black void as two more moved in, a faint glint from the rifles they carried.

He heard a whispered "Three." as the scout stood up.

"Knives." was hissed as the other two joined him. The three men drew their knives.

KABOOM, both barrels the big ten gauge belched smoke, fire and a lethal load of buckshot.

He set the shotgun down and drew his Remington waiting for the smoke to clear before he could see all three were on the ground. One man was still writhing, a .44 round ball broke his skull and he stopped.

The fire was almost out the man holstered his sidearm and put more wood on the fire. He sat down and reloaded the fired cylinder with powder and ball recapping he set the hammer on a empty chamber. "Carry a six shooter with five but never with four." he said to no one in particular.

He went to one of the bundles took off the blanket and rolled up in it he went to sleep. To dark to see who he had killed, they would be there in morning light.

The black of night faded to a murky gray, the small west wind picked up some. He broke some of the pine bows and the fire flared back to life warming last night's coffee. He drank the luke warm coffee savoring the burnt bitter taste as he looked over at last night's work.

Draining the cup he retraced his steps to last night's hide out in the rocks retrieving his shot gun he reloaded it. The light was good now with the sun was taking the chill out of the morning. Cradling the scattergun loosely he walked to the three bodies sprawled in grotesque lumps. The first one, the scout even dead looked like a mean wizened white man. He checked the pockets and haversack finding some dirty biscuits, cotton wrapped pork, forty paper cartridges, small tin of caps. These he set aside he would use them.

The second man was the one he put a ball in his head, both eyes were bulging from the pressure of the ball entering his skull. His pockets held a tobacco pouch and pipe, three different sutlers shinplasters, a deck of playing cards with dirty pictures on the back. He kept the tobacco.

The third man was a soldier what side he couldn't tell, it didn't matter anyway. All his accoutrement were of the Army of Northern Aggression, but the tattered clothing said Southron. He felt some empathy for him. He was going home too.

He took nothing from the soldier and buried him deep, the other two he rolled into the ravine.

It was mid afternoon when he shouldered his haversack and headed west going home. He used the natural cover never fully exposing himself like the veteran battlefield skirmisher he had been four days ago. His eyes always searching for the best path his body reacting automatically his mind went back to when he received the news from home.

He fought for Nathan Bedford Forest sometimes mounted but most times on foot.

They had just taken a supply train he was sitting with his back against a wagon wheel smoking a cigar liberated from the dead blue coat laying at his feet. Nearby the Captain who led the raid was sitting his horse surveying his handiwork when a dispatch rider rode up and handed him a dispatch. He read it and handed it back, "What do you know about this?"

"Just that those Irish have been catching hell from Bushwhackers and the Blue Belly's."

The Captain said, "Well keep it to yourself, I can't afford any of my men heading home now."

The man against the wagon stood up, his family lived in the Irish wilderness. He held the shotgun but had his rifle slung, and the Remington holstered.

The movement attracted the Captain and dispatch riders attention. Their eyes locked, "Where you going Trooper?"

The Trooper said nothing he turned to the west letting the shotgun cover the two riders as he turned. He strode away in the long loping strides of a infantryman to cover distance quickly.

"You going to let him go," The dispatch rider asked?

"Did you see his eyes? I do not even know his name I always called him Trooper. He just showed up once and stayed. He is a helluva Soldier, but only does what he wants and it looks like he wants to go home now. I'd have to kill him to stop him, and that outcome is not assured."

Trooper's mind returned to the now of his situation, he was standing on the bank of crick and the sun was low on the horizon. He did not have any matches but he had a fire going with a couple of strikes with flint and steel. He soon had slices of hairy blue pork sizzling in his fry pan. He broke up the yankee hardtack biscuit on a rock and stirred it in the bacon grease. A soldiers meal, Cush supplied by a dead man. Tomorrow he would in the forests of the ridge huge white oaks, big fat pines closer to home. There was a small Catholic Irish community on the Eleven Point River, but his home was not there. He and Tilly a local raven haired Ozark hill girl, had built on a no name crick that fed the Eleven Point River. It was well hidden and secluded it did not need a road as the old forest growth permitted a wagon to be driven through it.

He and Tilly never married in the church or in the law. They just fancied each other and Tilly's kin accepted that fact, most of them weren't church'd either. They had no children yet, all they did was work hard which satisfied them both. They worked hard for children too, as the farm could use some extra hands.

When the War came they talked it over accepting the fact that Trooper would be called so he might as well get it over with. So they got the crop in and butchered, then Trooper walked to war. He came upon a small skirmish and fought with the men who looked more like him. They won the skirmish but Nathan Bedford Forrest usually won his battles, as did Trooper.

Now there was troubles at home and Tilly was alone. Her old mother lived a mile down the crick so she wasn't entirely alone. He would fight for his home and Tilly now. He made up his bedroll and fell asleep to the plaintive call of the Whip-or-will.

Morning came while it was still dark the moon small in the West. He wanted to get to the old forest woods by daylight. Breakfast was crick water and hard yankee biscuit with a chaw in place he waded the crick and set out in that farmer infantryman walk so many men had now.

There were bushwhackers like the three he had killed, and patrols from both armies to be avoided. If he could make the forests he would be harder to be seen, so he had to make good use of the dark and move fast.

He entered the forest canopy as the sun was half way up the horizon. He stopped just inside the tree line and carefully checked his back trail for any hunters of men. After a long drink from his water bottle he headed towards his home. There were three homesteads along the way These were Catholic Irish families of Father John Hogan's parish who did not want to live in the settlement. Good farm folk.

The first cabin came into view, Trooper slowed down something was wrong. There was no chimney smoke, no cow, no pigs or chickens. The roof was partially burnt and the west wall blackened. O'Neil has been burnt out. He cautiously entered the yard and cabin. It was gutted burnt out only the black burnt walls stood.

Trooper did not waste any time at O'Neils he fell into a faster lope until Donnelon's place came into view. He ran on by as it was in the same condition as O'Neils.

He was starting to get a helpless feeling now, something he never had in battle. What if Tilly was gone or worse. "Oh God no do not let it be Tilly." He was running now.

Horan's place came into view and was burnt to the ground with all the out building gone too.

A terrible sense of dread possessed him bone chilling dread. He ran full out until he had to slow to a walk he was blown. He was getting close, he crossed the crick the ground did not look to have been torn up by horses or marching men. He was getting his lungs back and a icy calm took over.

There was a half a mile to go, he paused and checked his weapons. Then hit his ground eating stride observing everything in front of him. Everything looked normal. He slowed just over this knoll he would be able to see his home.

There through the trees was the little three room cabin just as he left it and Tilly was hanging out the wash her mother sitting on the front step enjoying the sun. His breathing slowed as he watched, "Thank You God."

He watched for several minutes composing himself he stepped through the trees.

He was home. The only war he would fight would be right here if any man tried to take it away from him.

He lived a long life with Tilly. They had four children and sixteen grandchildren. They protected their home two times, once from bushwhackers and once from a Union Army patrol until the war ended. The altercation with the bushwhackers resulted in in two bushwhacker fatalities. The Union Army Officer decided the war was as good as over and he would not loose anymore men in a meaningless fight. They were never rich in anything but their home and family. He and Tilly were buried on their beloved farm the name on the stone is Mordecai and Tilly Fitzhugh.