

Author's note: *War is horror; there is no getting around that fact, and few wars have been more horrible than the organized campaign of arson, looting, rape, and murder carried out by the Union armies in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. Yes, war is horrible, but sometimes less so than what it spawns.*

NIGHT MARCH

By Greg Kay

The Shenandoah Valley; October, 1864

Jim Wright woke up on his back, drowning in blood. Flailing his arms in a panic, he rolled to his side as his convulsing windpipe heaved out a scarlet flood from between his dry, tattered lips. Alternately hacking and wheezing, his body tried to simultaneously expel the fluid blocking his airway and take in the air it was literally dying for.

Suddenly a strong hand seized his shoulder and forcibly turned him face down in the wet grass while its partner thumped him soundly between the shoulder blades.

"It'll be alright, boy! Jes' cough it out. It'll be alright."

With one hand still securing his shoulder and the heel of the other pounding his back, Jim had little choice in the matter, and within a few seconds the flood slowed to a trickle and his breathing, though still ragged, was no longer desperate. He coughed fitfully as the hands rolled him back over.

"Damn, boy! You' a mess."

He felt like a mess. Every part of his body hurt as though he had been beaten with a club and a

nauseating pain was devouring the right side of his head from his ear and along his jaw to the inside of his mouth, where he could still taste the rich salt of his own blood. As he tried to gaze up at his rescuer, his heart skipped a beat for fear that he had been blinded as well, but after a moment he realized that he could see, at least out of his left eye; the right one was crusted shut. What threw him off was the darkness; when he last remembered, it had been late afternoon.

He could make out most of the details of the stranger by the full moon's light, but the orb's glare lent the scene a sense of unreality. It was obvious the man was a bushwhacker – a guerrilla: tall, lean and hungry-looking. A long, tattered butternut-dyed overcoat hung over an equally ragged gray uniform whose color matched Jim's own, giving him the appearance of military scarecrow. Even in the low light, he could see that the clothes were covered with dirt, leaves, and forest debris. Little could be seen of the man's face; the lower half, under the long nose, was concealed beneath a thick beard. Dark, shoulder-length hair framed his prominent cheekbones, while a broad-brimmed hat shaded the rest. Strangely his eyes were readily visible; in fact they seemed to blaze with an unnatural glow almost like an animal's from the shadow of the brim. When he spoke, his lips hardly seemed to move, at least that Jim could see.

“Keep your voice low,” he said. “They's still Yankees about.” The man looked him over with those intense eyes. “Have ye' got a canteen?”

“Yessir. It's right here.” In fact, he could feel it digging into his kidneys where he had rolled over on it. As he shifted around to reach for it the stranger beat him to it, deftly freed it from its strap

and produced a stained handkerchief from within his coat pocket.

“Lay real still, son. This is likely to hurt.”

As the capable, business-like hands began swabbing at his face with the disreputable scrap of rag soaked in the canteen’s water, it did hurt, but Jim managed to bear up under it, and soon the man had cleaned the wound and freed his right eye from it’s crust of blood and mucous. The stranger rocked back on his heels and silently studied his handiwork.

“Well, how is it?” Jim finally asked with some trepidation as his curiosity got the better of him.

“I reckon you’ll live,” he replied curtly, “but you’ gonna’ have one hell of a nasty scar. You’ got a cut that runs from the back of your head to right near the corner of your mouth; took the top o’ your ear plumb off an’ cut through the inside of your cheek. I see a couple o’ teeth a’ layin’ there in that blood you first spit out. Saber?”

“I reckon, but I don’t know for sure. They caught us crossin’ this field an’ hit us with a cavalry charge. I was bayonettin’ a Yankee off his horse, last I recall. He had a saber drawed back in his hand, but that’s all I can remember.”

“You’ lucky you remember anything, boy. That damned blue-belly like to cut your head off! Can ye’ stand?”

At his nod in the affirmative, the stranger effortlessly rose to his feet and extended his hand. As Jim reached up for it, he noticed the assortment of pistols and knives jutting from his worn belt in a violent bouquet. There was no long gun in sight; evidently he liked to do his killing close-up.

The guerrilla’s palm was hard and cold as he pulled the young man to his feet, and steadied him

until he stopped swaying. As Jim raised one hand to his head, his benefactor scooped up a battered felt hat.

“This’n yours?”

Jim nodded and donned it, taking care that it didn’t touch his injured ear.

“Thank you, sir. Thank you kindly.”

“I know where there’s a Southern camp.” He didn’t seem to hear the infantryman’s expression of gratitude. “I’ll take you back there.”

“I’m with company A. Do ye’ know where they’re camped at?”

The man gave him a sad nod.

“Yeah, boy. They’ all around us.”

Until then, Jim hadn’t paid any attention to his surroundings, but now that he looked, he could make out the still, lumpish forms scattered about in the dewy grass of the hillside. The moonlight lent them even more pallor than death’s paleness, until their blank faces seemed to glow in the darkness. He recognized most of them of course, at least those that could still be recognized; boys he’d grown up with and men from around the county. Near his feet lay Junior Wilkins, his own age, who had sat beside him in the school house and the church pew: all of seventeen with a round, blue-edged hole big enough to put your thumb in right beside his nose. Off to the left was Sergeant Pethel, the town blacksmith, his huge, calloused hands still clutching at the coils of intestines that spilled from his torn stomach and stretched across the ground like a spilled string of sausages, and his dead mouth frozen in a rictus of pain. And over there...

It was too much. He sucked in his breath and smelled blood and burned powder, cooling flesh and

shit from torn intestines, then turned his gaze skyward and gulped hard, fighting the nausea.

“Who all’s left?”

“Ain’t nobody left, ‘cept you. Sorry, boy.”

Jim shook his head in disbelief.

“They can’t all be dead! Didn’t nobody git away or surrender?”

The older man spat on the ground. “Them Yankees wasn’t takin’ no surrenders today. The ones that stood their ground are a’ layin’ right here, an’ there’s a trail of them as tried to run leadin’ all the way over to them woods yonder.” He gestured toward a deeper patch of blackness downhill toward the east. “They caught the last one not a stone’s throw from the trees. One of them cavalrymen musta’ sharpened his saber, ‘cause he took his head clean off.” He spat again. “Sons o’ bitches!”

Jim closed his eyes tightly as he fought back the tears. “Oh Lord...”

“I don’t reckon the Lord had a whole lot to do with this day’s work. Come on, boy, ye can grieve later. We need to git gone afore any o’ them Yankees take it into their head to come back an’ go souvenir huntin’.” He picked up the boy’s rifle lying nearby and eyed the bayonet critically before handing it to Jim. “Ye got him, alright; she’s bloody clear to the socket. Good work.

“Load ‘er and let’s go. Ain’t nothin’ more we kin do here.”

Numbly the younger man obeyed. No sooner than he returned him ramrod to its resting place, the guerrilla began walking away, motioning for him to follow. After two steps Jim suddenly stopped, halted by a grunting noise and a rustling in the grass several yards off to his right. Dimly he could make

out shape and movement, as if someone were crawling on his hands and knees.

“Wait! They’s somebody still alive!” He had already started toward the noise when the stranger’s hand clamped on his arm like a vice.

“Don’t go over there. Ye don’t wanna’ see that.”

“But they’s somebody...”

The man shook his head.

“That ain’t somebody. That’s hogs, boy; ever time they’s a fight, they come down outa the woods to git their bellies full. Come on. Ain’t nothin’ we kin do. Either the Yankees’ll go round up some coloreds to bury ‘em, or else nature’ll do it. Either way, I reckon it’s all the same in the end.”

With that, he turned and headed South and, after a moment, Jim followed.

Jim was staggering in a near-delirium as the stars began to dim in the east. The night had been like the long march to Hell of a damned, agonizing soul led by a silent demon who never spoke except to order quiet when the hoof-beats of even worse demons sounded in the distance. Every step sent a throbbing spear of pain through his wounded jaw, and his ruined ear felt like it had a hot coal perched on the tip that was no longer there. First he sweated, feverish from his wound, then chilled as the autumn wind blew around him. Head hanging with exhaustion, he actually ran into his guide when the guerrilla stopped suddenly, and murmured an apology that was answered with a distant grunt.

“Looks like our boys have moved further than I thought. We need to find us a place to lay up through the day – I don’t like to travel then, and ye won’t make it much further anyway. They used to

be an ol' homestead over that way; lets go see if we kin hide there."

Reaching the place, they passed by the blackened ruins of the house. It and all of the outbuildings had been put to the torch by the Northern invaders weeks before, leaving only the chimney standing like a forlorn tombstone over the cold ashes. The faint smell of smoke still lingered, as did the smell of carrion. A possum, his fur a ghostly white in the moonlight, waddled hurriedly away from shrunken remains of a family cow, shot in her pen.

Within a few minutes the stranger found what he was looking for; a tiny household coal mine sank into the side of the hill. Only going back a few yards as it burrowed into the seam, it was little more than a crawl space without even enough room to sit straight up in, but it served their needs. Entering just as the first hints of a red sun colored the sky, they scooted back feet first to the end of it. The stranger rolled up his coat into a long roll for their pillow.

"Rest as ye kin, boy, but whatever happens, don't leave this hole. Ye don't want the Yankees findin' us."

Jim barely heard him. Exhausted, he went to sleep beside the man as soon as his head hit the makeshift pillow.

"Come on, boy, let's rise an' shine."

Blinking into wakefulness at the motion of the stranger wiggling past him, he followed groggily, a foul taste in his mouth. By the time he reached the entrance, his companion was standing there, surveying the surrounding landscape in the fading light, as the last traces of the sunset's glow painted

the dark sky with bloody streaks. Jim could see more of the man's face now, and it looked unnaturally pale and drawn, with deep lines etched around the eyes. As he straightened up and uncapped his canteen, the thought occurred to him that he didn't even know his savior's name.

"I'm Private Jim Wright." He offered the canteen before drinking himself, but it was waved away.

"Pleased to meet you," the man muttered through lips that barely parted. Despite the hint, he never offered his own name. Although his attitude was almost rudely quiet, he seemed full of nervous energy and eager to get moving. As Jim watched, the man not only looked and listened, but his nostrils widened as he sniffed the air like a hound dog.

Raising his hand, he pointed a long, dirt-encrusted fingernail toward the woods east of them.

"That way."

Turning his back on the remnant of the dying day, he stepped off without another word, leaving Jim to follow as best he could.

The march was nearly a duplicate of the one the night before, only Jim, with the resilience of youth, had regained much of his strength and was aware of his surroundings as they tramped along, his heavy rifle slung over his shoulder. Their path was only reasonably straight when they were in the deep forest, at least as straight as the meandering deer trails and hog paths would allow. Whenever they came to a field, the stranger would make wide detours around it, sticking to the concealing shadows of bordering trees and fencerows and avoiding the open moonlight. Still, the bearded

Rebel set a strong pace, and they covered a lot of ground.

A breeze came up, and the falling leaves swirled on its wings like bats, flying for a while before gently rustling to the ground. That, and their feet crunching through them made the only sound.

It was nearly midnight when Jim's guide stopped abruptly as they neared the edge where the woods bordered on yet another pasture field, and turned and laid his fingers across the younger soldier's lips before he could speak. He raised his right hand, and Jim followed the direction of his pointing finger. After several seconds, he could barely pick out a figure standing on a small rise of ground under a big hickory where the woods gave way to grass nearly a hundred feet away. It looked vaguely like a man, but he couldn't tell for sure.

His companion, however, had no doubt.

"That's a Yankee picket," the man breathed in his ear, as soft as a night breeze. "I'll take care of him so's we can pass through the lines." Where the other's body touched him as he leaned close to whisper, Jim could feel a trembling that somehow seemed more like anticipation than fear. "Wait here."

Before the soldier could respond, the guerrilla stepped away, a cloud passed across the moon, and he vanished in the darkness. Try as he might, Jim could neither see him nor mark his progress by any sound. It was as if he had simply disappeared.

Since he couldn't see the stalker, he decided to watch the prey. He found that by using what his grandpa had called his "dark eye," turning so he looked beside the enemy sentry he could make the man out easily enough against the comparative lightness of the open field beyond, but when he

tried to stare right at him, the figure seemed to disappear.

With no warning, another figure was there, merging with the Yankee sentry so quickly that Jim, startled, looked directly at them, then cursed to himself when he couldn't see anything. Shifting his gaze again, he could now only make out a small hump on the ground that hadn't been there before. Through the whole process, there had been no sound.

Curiosity overcame him, and slowly and carefully, he began to ease forward.

As he quietly wound his way through the trees, the moon appeared again and the image became clearer. The hump was the two men, locked together in a stiff, quivering embrace that looked almost sexual, with the Confederate on top. There was a slurping gurgle, like sorghum poured too fast from a jug, and a soft moaning that was neither agony nor ecstasy, but a little of both. Jim felt the hair rising up on his neck as he realized that the moan was not coming from the Yankee at all, but from the stranger.

Slowly, after what seemed to be an eternity, the man rose, his back toward Jim.

"I asked ye to wait." The barely audible voice was a simple statement, not an admonishment. There was no anger in it, only a hint of sadness.

"I thought you might be hurt." Even to him, the whispered excuse for his curiosity sounded lame and hollow.

He looked down at the dead man. The corpse lay spread-eagled on its back, head thrown back, mouth gaping, and eyes bulging with horror. In the moonlight, the Yankee's face looked pale and bloodless against the collar of the dark blue wool of

his uniform. Droplets of blood winked on his torn throat, twinkling like the dew in the reflected light.

“How did you...”

“Hush. We kin talk later; right now, we need to git through these lines. That feller wasn’t out here by his self.”

They maneuvered cautiously through the shadows for another hour, pausing frequently to listen to something that Jim couldn’t hear for the life of him, before the stranger relaxed.

“Alright,” he announced with a touch of resignation in his voice and his back still toward the younger man. “We’re through. There’s a bunch of Southrons camped up a holler just about five hundred yards ahead. You better call out when you git close; you don’t want to come all this way jus’ to git shot by your own pickets.”

Jim was dumfounded.

“Ain’t you comin’?”

“Naw, I reckon not.”

“Why?”

“Well,” He mumbled, still facing away. “I reckon the best way to put it is that I jus’ don’t fit in anymore. I fight on my own now.”

Jim removed his battered hat and scratched his head.

“I can’t say you ain’t good at it. How did you kill that Yankee picket back there so quiet-like, anyway?”

“It’s a little trick I picked up at the prison camp on Johnson’s Island. I learned it the hard way, from a damned Yankee guard.” His voice, though not loud, was like an impending storm, heralded by the distant rumble of thunder. “Bastards like him thrive in a damn prison.

“He jumped me one night when nobody was around, when I stepped outside the barracks after curfew. I had the runs an’ I was slippin’ for the outhouse, when, next thing I knowed, that son of a bitch was on me. I just had time to recognize him an’ realize what was happening, a’fore I passed out.

“He took me for dead, an’ they hauled me out in a pine box an’ buried me.” His voice began to rise. “Do ye know what it’s like, boy, wakin’ up in the bottom of a grave, nothin’ but darkness all around you?” Looking at his back, Jimmy saw him shiver, even in the dim light. “God almighty!

“Lucky for me, they used rotten wood for the coffin and didn’t bury me too deep. I dug my way out of there, boy. I used my hands, I used my fingernails, I even used my teeth! I dug my way out, yes sir, and then I tracked down an’ killed that Yankee son of a bitch that put me there!”

Something in the man’s voice made Jim suspect that particular Yankee’s death was neither pleasant nor particularly fast in coming.

“Then I turned around an’ walked the hell away from there. I headed back to the South an’ to the war. After...what happened, I just couldn’t be reg’lar army no more, so I took to the bush. I do my fightin’ there now.”

“But,” Jim persisted. “You still haven’t told me how you did it. That looks like a handy skill for a soldier. Could you teach me how?”

“*No!*” he hissed. “Boy, ye’d better pray to God that’s one thing ye *never* learn how to do!”

The guerrilla finally turned to face him. Even in the dim light, Jim could see that the older man’s face looked almost bloated, his once-pale complexion was now ruddy and flushed, and clots

of drying blood caked his beard and stained his shirtfront.

“Now ye go on, boy. Your place is up there. Mine is out here, an’ the night ain’t over yet, not by a damn sight!”

“But...I don’t understand.”

In answer, the stranger threw back his head and deliberately yawned, and Jim felt his knees go weak as he staggered backward at the sight. The hair rose on the back of his neck, he couldn’t breathe and he thought he was going to faint with fear.

The guerrilla’s mouth was an unnaturally wide cavern where long ivory fangs gleamed like wolf’s teeth under the moon. The familiar stench of blood wafted from him in an overpowering wave.

Jim’s own mouth hung open at the shocked realization of exactly what his rescuer was, and he shook uncontrollably, though not from cold.

The guerrilla simply closed his mouth and nodded once. With that, he turned and walked back the way they had come, and the young man stood frozen and watched him go until he vanished in the darkness.

END

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