



A BOY'S SECRET

By Bob Cerrano

Cold water crept up Jim's boots as his horse struggled to cross Youngs Creek. The sun began to set in the west. In a few hours, darkness would make it hard to move quickly. He turned Buck south through the cold, swirling stream. Bushwhackers shouted to each other and crashed through the brush, searching for escaping Union militiamen. Desperate, he looked for a place to

hole up, hoping the water would cover his tracks. *If I keep thrashing around, they're sure to find me.*

With a sigh of relief, he spotted some dense honeysuckle forming an arch over a shallow portion of the creek. He dismounted and carefully led Buck under the woody vines. If he could keep the horse quiet, he had a chance.

It was cool, but sweat rolled down his face, nonetheless. Crouching and panting, he patted Buck's flanks to keep him calm. The hollering continued for another twenty minutes as nearby bushwhackers moved down Youngs Creek.

One of the guerrillas, looking for his prey, passed within twenty yards of his hideout but didn't see him. Old Buck did him proud and never so much as snorted. When the riders moved out of sight, he grabbed the horse's neck and squeezed. "Gonna find you some big fat carrots, old boy." He wanted to

holler out in relief but realized that wouldn't be the smartest thing to do.

His feet ached from standing in the cold water, but he stayed crouched for a time to make sure everyone had left. He didn't want to leave the safety of his cover and find himself staring down the barrel of a gun.

Jim reckoned he was about three miles southeast of Centralia and about a mile from the bushwhacker camp. He led Buck from under the honeysuckle on foot up to higher ground to dry his pants and shoes. The chilly September air didn't offer much comfort, but better than the cold water. A fire would give away his location, so he removed his boots and wrapped his bedroll around his feet to warm them. As feeling returned to his extremities, regret about some of his decisions swirled through his mind.

Jim had a strong sense of duty when he left the family farm near Wellington, Missouri, two weeks ago to join the fight. He remembered Pa out in the big garden behind their house, tending his vegetable patch. Scratching the ground with his rake, he looked up at Jim, giving him a toothy smile.

“Crops ain’t gonna last too much longer. Cold will get them soon enough. Let’s go in the house and get some of Mom’s coffee.”

The two of them walked into the kitchen. Jim grabbed the pot from the stove and filled two mugs. “We need to talk, Pa.”

“Sounds mighty serious.” His father pointed to a chair. “Here, sit down.”

“The war’s been going on over three years now, and I need to do my part. I’m thinking of heading south to sign up with the

Army of Northern Virginia. Lee's trying to knock out the Union Army. He needs all the men he can get."

His father's face darkened momentarily, and then his smile slowly returned. "You're awful young, but I guess you've been thinking a while on this." Putting a hand on Jim's back, he spoke in a low, slow tone. "You go. Do what you need to do. You always done me proud, and I don't think this'll be any different. Take Buck. He's the fastest horse we have."

Their talk now seemed so long ago. His father's last words burned his heart like a hot branding iron as he sat cold and alone. Both Union and Southern sympathizers ravaged the Missouri countryside for years. No one's property or life was safe from either side. Northern sympathizers burned Jim's neighbor's farm to the ground and shot poor old Mr. Stoval down in the middle of town. As bad as that was, what he

witnessed today was more than he could imagine, nor would he ever forget the last nine hours. He envisioned a glorious adventure when he left home. He enjoyed the exciting stories of the brave Army of Northern Virginia and the noble Robert E. Lee. Instead, Captain Bill Anderson recruited him to the cause on his way south. Anderson, commander of one the roving guerrilla bands called bushwhackers, regaled him with tales of courage in service to the Confederacy. He quickly discovered Bloody Bill had no honor, just the same savagery he had seen at home. The only difference from what happened back in Wellington, he was now participating in it.

When he rode into Centralia with Anderson's band of eighty guerrillas, Jim's day seemed to be starting out well. First, they robbed the bank and then the residents of the town. Next, a stagecoach and its passengers had the misfortune to arrive in the

middle of this melee. They, too, were relieved of their money, watches, and jewelry. The guerrillas took one man's fine boots and found a gold watch hidden inside. Anderson ordered the man shot for not turning over all his valuables. The command startled his men, and they hesitated. Furious, Anderson whipped around in his saddle and shouted, "Shoot him now, or by God, I'll shoot you where you stand." Jim winced when the pistol discharged. The man dropped to his knees and fell face down in the dusty street.

Anderson directed the bushwhackers to put on stolen Union uniform jackets and pile railroad ties on the tracks running through town. Jim wasn't sure what was happening until he saw puffing smoke in the distance. The westbound train out of St. Louis headed toward Centralia. They meant to stop and rob it. Its unsuspecting passengers would be the next victims.

The engine squealed, puffed, and halted a few feet short of the railroad ties on the track. Bushwhackers circled the engine, ordering the crew out at gunpoint. “Get out now, or I’ll drop the both of you,” one of them yelled. With looks of terror on their faces, the two men released the controls and scrambled out of the cab as fast as they could. “Get on the ground and keep your mouths shut.”

The trainmen complied and were quickly robbed of their valuables. Several guerillas shot into the cars before clambering up the steps to enter the carriages. Terrified passengers crouched between the seats but were roused off the train.

“Get your valuables out, and don’t hide nothing if you want to live,” a bearded man snapped at the cowering group. “One fool already got himself kilt.” They all silently fumbled in their pockets and purses, holding what they had in their outstretched

hands. The robbers scoffed at the sobbing women and children as they made their way down the line to collect their loot.

“Hurry up if you wanna keep breathing. We ain’t gonna wait all day.”

About twenty unarmed Union soldiers, passengers on the train, were led single file up the tracks toward the engine. They ordered them to stop and remove their uniforms down to their undergarments. Anderson rode to the line. “Boys, have you a sergeant in your ranks?” The soldiers looked at each other but remained silent. From his vantage point, Jim could hear him say in a louder tone, “Boys, have you a sergeant in your ranks? If there be one, let him step aside.” One man stepped out of line. Jim thought the man would surely be gunned down on the spot. Instead, Anderson ordered him taken away. “We can use him later, boys. I don’t want you touching one hair on his head.”

With a nod from Anderson came a roar of gunfire and rebel yells, sounds like no human should make. The line of soldiers dropped to the blood-drenched ground. Fierce grins, inhuman hoops, and yells followed as the bushwhackers finished off the dying troopers and mutilated the dead bodies. One of the soldiers managed to get hold of a gun and dispatched several guerrillas before taking refuge under the station office. The poor wretch didn't last long. They set the station ablaze, and he never made it out.

Within an hour of stopping the train, exhausted by their bloody orgy, the butchery ended. The bushwhackers formed in a column of twos and headed southeast, where they rendezvoused with other guerrillas bands, bringing their number to about four hundred.

They camped two and a half miles outside town to regroup and recover. Jim had just settled in when scouts alerted the band that a Union Militia squadron was bearing down on them from Centralia.

Scrambling for their horses, Anderson organized them to repulse the coming attack. Riding in a wide circle, they took up positions about a half mile from camp. He detached a hundred men, splitting them to his left and right flanks. They waited in the trees for the arrival of the Union troops.

Jim distanced himself from Anderson's unit, quietly moving farther south, hiding in the dense brush of Youngs Creek. He had a good view of the field. By mid-afternoon, the Union Militia entered the trap Anderson had set, and his center braced for the attack. Suddenly, the force of one hundred twenty-five men dismounted, much to Jim's surprise.

He heard the familiar rebel yell as the guerillas charged the ragged Union line. The terrified Militiamen only managed to get off one volley before being surrounded. Inadequately trained and equipped, the poor souls dropped their weapons and surrendered. Another murderous spree ensued. Bushwhackers descended on them like howling wolves, savagely killing and mutilating them. Knowing what was going to happen, Jim couldn't watch another massacre. Shaking with fear, he had headed down into Youngs Creek, lest they discover he deserted and killed him as well.

Earlier in the day, Captain Anderson pronounced a death sentence on the bootless man for hiding a watch. Jim remembered his officer's threat and blue-grey eyes, cold as steel glaring

at him. Pitiless anger like none he had ever seen before. He was used to Pa telling him what to do, but this captain, only ten years his senior, struck him with terror. Jim looked back to the pleading face of the bootless man standing before him and squeezed the trigger of his heavy Colt Dragoon revolver. It roared to life and jumped in his hand, fire spurting around the cylinder and flashing out the muzzle. The dying man looked into Jim's eyes before dropping to the ground.

I can't forget his face. I'll remember those eyes for the rest of my life.

Over a hundred and twenty miles from home, hunted by one of Missouri's most bloodthirsty bands of guerillas, he crouched on his haunches, tired and hungry. His stomach churned as he tried to eat some hardtack biscuits Mom packed in his saddlebags. Fear filled every part of his being. The only thing

Captain Anderson hated more than Yankees was a deserter.

Bushwhackers, in his command, never left the field. It meant certain death if caught. Jim vomited until there was nothing left.

With nowhere else to go, he set off toward Columbia and the road home. He met a rider traveling east to St. Louis who offered him food from the pot on his campfire. Before parting ways, the traveler advised him to steer clear of Centralia and the roads northwest of there.

“There are bushwhackers about in those parts. How old are you, boy?”

“Just turned seventeen, sir.”

“A young boy like you wouldn’t stand a chance.”

Jim gave the man a feeble smile and thanked him. He mounted Buck. Turning west toward Wellington, tears filled his eyes. He wasn’t the soldier of the South he set out to be. He had

become a cold-blooded murderer of an unarmed man for his gold watch. *No more fighting. No more killing. I just want to go home. How can I ever tell Pa what I did? He was so proud of me when I left. How can I ever forget?*