

Wilderness House Literary Review 14/1

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NEPTUNE

FOUR DAYS AFTER OUR GREAT WHIPPING OF THE YANKEES at Fredericksburg, me and Billy Hill ended up in a small cabin not far from Guinea Station, Virginia. We had secured 30 day furloughs to go home. We had been making our way south, planning to catch a train to Richmond for the first leg of our trip. Billy had been shot in the arm during the battle. He was not hit too badly, and the surgeon had told our Captain that Billy could travel home. But he needed to take it easy on the trip, not jar or bump his arm on anything. For some reason though, Billy's wound had started bleeding during the afternoon. When we came across the little cabin, we decided to stop for the night and tend to Billy's bandages—and, get out of the cold.

Surprisingly, a skinny, fair-skinned girl of about twelve or thirteen opened the cabin door. She was reluctant to let us in, but while we were standing there talking to her, a light rain began to fall. Observing Billy's condition, and with the cold rain falling on us, she finally agreed to let us stay the night. No doubt, being in Confederate uniforms, and telling her we were both married men—and, headed home to help out our families—eased her mind. That was in the early evening.

Now it was dark. The girl had taken it on herself to clean Billy's wound and put on a new bandage. Watching her, it looked to me like she'd had some experience with bandages.

Suddenly she said, "Be still, old man!"

"I am," Billy snorted. "And I ain't no old man."

"Hush. Be still."

"Oh, dammit!" Billy said as the girl tightened the bandage. "That hurt."

The girl stopped wrapping and gave Billy a stern look.

"All right. I'm sorry. Just don't wrap hit so tight." Billy glanced to me with a frown on his face. I smiled at him as I sipped my coffee. Then I told him the girl was doing a much better job than I could do. I said he ought to be glad we'd run across her.

"At's right," she said. "I got to get it tight enough so it won't come loose. At least for a few days, till maybe you happen up on a doctor somewhere."

The girl was plenty skinny, and had dirt-colored hair. Her nose was big, but in a way she was pretty. She was a girl just on the verge of being a young woman. I figured in a year or two, she'd make some man a good wife. I asked about her ma and pa.

"Dead," she told us.

And her brothers and sisters?

"Dead, too. Except for Arthur, and he's in the army. Up there somewhere where yall came from."

"And he left you here all by yourself?" Billy asked.

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"Yep," she said, straightening her shoulders. "I can look after myself. Arthur checks on me right regular, when he'n get loose from his regiment." She flung her arms out drawing a big circle. "Anyhows, I got cousins and relations all 'round, from here to Guinea Station. I reckon the war'll be over soon, don't you?" she asked us.

I nodded. But Billy said, "Hell no, I—"

"Now Mr. Soldier," the girl said, straightening up, "I don't want no cussing in my house."

Billy nodded sheepishly. Then he said, "Hit might be a spell longer. Some of them

Yanks is tough as pine knots." The girl's eyes suddenly narrowed so tight I wondered how she could see.

Her lips barely moved as she said, "I hate 'em, don't you?"

"You mean Yankees?"

"Yea. Infernal devils, they are." The girl stared hard at the fireplace. Me and Billy

sat quietly, watching her. "They all gonna burn in hell for what they've done." I could see tears running down her cheeks, and I wondered what kinda hell she'd been through. She wiped her eyes, and asked, "What part of Virginia yall from?"

"We ain't," Billy said.

"You ain't!"

"No, we—"

"Well. If'n you ain't from Virginia, where you from?"

"Geor-geee."

The girl's eyes narrowed again. For a moment, I thought she was gonna ask us to leave—to get out of her cabin. But she finally opened her eyes a little and said, "I reckon you'n stay."

Billy then told her, "We really appreciate what you're doing for us. And, we're sorry we ain't from Virginia."

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After she finished Billy's bandage, the girl told me where the wood was stored near the barn. I brought in two big arm loads and stacked the wood on the hearth. There was a little sleet in the rain now, and I told the girl how thankful we were that she took us in for the night. While I was standing in front of the fireplace, I couldn't help but admire the rock work. It was as pretty as any I'd ever seen. I was about to ask her who built the fireplace when there was a knock at the door.

The girl jerked around. "Who's there?"

A deep, low voice answered, "Nep-tune."

The girl looked to me and Billy. I walked over and opened the door. A small black man stood outside, with sleet pelting his hat and coat. I glanced behind him and could barely make out a horse and wagon.

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The man removed his hat, and shivering asked, "Would you minds if'n me and my master stay the night in yore barn?"

I turned to the girl. Her eyes were wide. The black man's voice was deep and powerful, but he was so slight. It gave me the feeling that the voice was coming from someone else, someone much larger. She looked at me, and then asked the black man, "Yore master. Where's he at?"

"He be in wagon. Dead, ma'am."

The girl let out a slight yelp and clasped her hand over her mouth.

"Yes ma'am. Gen-rel Longstreet done sent Master Henry on a secret mission up at Fredericksburg, and the Yankees done killed him dead."

"Good Lord," the girl said. "What are you...where...you going with him."

"I be takin' Master Henry home. To be buried properly."

I told the girl I thought it would be all right to let him use the barn. She agreed, and I took down a lantern from the mantle. I told her and Billy to stay inside and I'd take the black man and his master to the barn. He had wrapped the dead man up real good, and had him in a pine coffin. I figured in this winter weather, his master wouldn't start decaying for several days. I asked him how far he had to go.

"To St. Simons Island, Georgia." Then he added, "My master be Henry Love Page King. And his daddy's name be Thomas Butler King. We's got a big plantation on the island."

I whistled softly. "You have got a long way to go. Five hundred miles, I reckon."

"At's right."

"Think you can do it, before he...you know."

"I's got to get him back. Shore will. Then I's got to get back up here, to Virginia. To be with young Master Cuyler. He be Master Henry's brother and he with Gen-rel Longstreet, too."

Inside the barn, I held the lantern and watched Neptune—he said his name was of the ocean, because he was born beside it—park the wagon and unbridle his horse. In a few minutes,

he settled down in a pile of hay and was asleep almost before I turned around. I searched about in the barn and located a horse blanket. I gently covered him with the blanket. He was less than five

feet tall, and couldn't weigh over eighty pounds, I figured. For a moment, I looked into his face and watched him sleeping. I wondered what thoughts and dreams were roaming around inside his head.

Walking back to the cabin, the sleet had stopped and low-flying night clouds were moving quickly from west to east. I looked up and watched some sparks of fire slowly spew out the cabin's chimney. The journey he was undertaking was going to be hard. Then it occurred to me, despite all the killing and maiming going on, there were still little sparks of humanity among us.