

CHAPTER 19

"HEY YANKS!" the voice hollered, the drawl thick as mud. "GENERAL HILL WAS JUST BY HERE A SMIDGEN AGO. WHY DIDN'T Y'ALL TAKE A SHOT AT HIM? HE WAS SITTING RAT THERE ON A LOG!"

The silence of the ford was shattered. On the Union side, men peeked out from behind trees and boulders, their rifles leveled but their curiosity piqued.

"HELL, " a voice from the 20th howled back, "HE WAS JUST AS UGLY AS THE REST OF Y'ALL! WE THOUGHT HE WAS JUST ONE OF YOU SHIFTLESS REBS SCRATCHIN' FOR LICE!"

A wave of laughter rippled through the woods on both sides, a genuine, human sound that felt like a violation of the rules of engagement. It was a common phenomenon in the long pauses of the war: geographical hatred yielded to the common reality of the itch, the hunger, and the heat. When men from Maine and Mississippi are both sweating through their shirts, the politics of the Capitol feel very far away.

Just after the laughter died down, something even more surreal occurred. Abraham watched through his spectacles as two Confederate soldiers emerged from the brush on the western shore. They weren't carrying rifles. They weren't carrying flags. They were stripping off their tattered gray jackets and their homespun trousers. They stood for a moment in their skivvies, thin, pale men with ribs showing, before wading into the green water with joyful whoops.

"Hey Wilkes, " Ellsten whispered, his eyes wide. "Looky over there. Two Rebs in their skivvies goin' swimmin'. They're actin' like it's a Sunday at the pond."

Abraham felt a flicker of something in his chest, a phantom of the man he used to be. He looked at the water, then at the enemy. "Shoot at them, Robert, " he said, his voice flat. "They are in the open. It is a tactical opportunity."

Ellsten looked at Abraham with a mix of pity and confusion. "Nah. They ain't doin' nuttin'. Besides... look at Owen."

To Abraham's right, Private Will Owen, a boy from the northern woods who had been suffering from a heat rash for a week, was already tossing his Springfield to the dirt. He was frantically unbuckling his belt, his face lit with a manic, desperate smile.

"What are you doin', Owen?" Ellsten asked.

"Shit, I'm goin' swimmin' wit' 'em!" Owen declared. He kicked off his boots and ran toward the shoreline, his white legs flashing in the sun.

The group of Maine men started laughing, a chorus of dares and cheers following Owen as he hit the water. Abraham stood up, his rifle still in his hand, watching as the blue-clad boy and the grey-clad men met in the center of the ford.

"Hey, Johnny Reb! How's the water?" Owen yelled, splashing a Mississippian.

"Water's great, ya blue-belly!" the Reb hollered back, splashing him in return.

Within minutes, the Rappahannock was filled with men from both sides. It was a vision of madness. Soldiers who had been trying to kill one another at Fredericksburg were now bathing together, their nakedness erasing the color of their causes. The river had become a sanctuary where the "Unknown" didn't exist.

"Wilkes, get in the water!" Ellsten urged, already half-undressed. "You're gint to turn into a raisin if you stay in that wool!"

Abraham hesitated. He looked at his hands, the hands of an automaton. He looked at the river. He felt the heat of the sun on his neck, a physical pressure that was starting to make his vision swim. He knew the signs. The heat was a trigger. If he didn't cool his blood, the "storm" would return, and he would fall on the rocks in front of the entire brigade.

He set his rifle down with mechanical precision. He removed his blue sack coat and his light-blue trousers, folding them into a neat pile. He stepped into the river.

The water felt unbelievable, a cold, liquid miracle that chased the Fredericksburg frost from his bones. He walked out to the middle of the ford, where the water reached his waist. The current was a gentle pressure, a reminder of the world's persistence.

He found himself standing three feet from a Confederate soldier. The man was older than Abraham, his face a map of deep lines and sun damage, his toothless smile wide and proud.

"Hey Yank, " the Reb yelled, his voice echoing off the water. "Ya ever felt somethin' so decent in all your days?"

"You have that right, " Abraham answered, his Maine vowels sounding sharp and clipped against the man's Yazoo drawl.

"Where ya from, Billy?" the Reb asked, scrubbing his arm with a handful of river silt.

"Maine. Freeport, Maine, " Abraham replied.

"Hell, can't say I ever heard of that. Is it near the end of the earth?"

"It is on the coast, " Abraham said. "It is a place of stone and salt."

"I'm from Yazoo, Mississippi, " the man said, standing tall. "Ya betcha. Betcha ya can't even spell Mississippi, can ya, school-boy?"

Abraham felt a ghost of a smirk touch his lips, the first sign of a smile in six months. "I think I probably can."

"Wanna know how ya spell it?"

"How do you spell it?" Abraham asked, humoring the man.

The Mississippian stood tall in the water, his arms outspread. "M – I – crooked letta' – crooked letta' – I – crooked letta' – crooked letta' – I – humpback – humpback – I!"

Abraham broke. He laughed, a genuine, soaring sound that he hadn't heard since he left Ellen in the garden. He laughed until his chest ached, the sound of his joy mixing with the laughter of the Mississippian. For a moment, the automaton was gone. He was just a man in a river.

"That is great stuff, " Abraham laughed. "What is your name, Reb?"

"I'm Myron Sultan. And I reckon you're the first Yank I ever met who didn't look like he had a cob up his tail."

"I am Abraham Wilkes, " Abraham said, reaching out his hand.

They shook hands in the center of the Rappahannock, the Professor and the Mississippian, their skin wet and cold, their war suspended by ten minutes of shared water. It was a victory that no general could have planned, a thread of light in a tapestry of blood.

The sun had begun its slow, agonizing crawl toward the horizon when Abraham finally committed his thoughts to the page. The Rappahannock was quiet again, the naked men having retreated to their respective uniforms and their respective duties. The brief miracle of the swim was over, but the heat remained, thick and unrelenting.

Abraham sat at the base of a stunted oak, his paper slightly damp from the humidity. The ink spread in tiny, feathered veins that made his "chicken scratch" even harder to decipher. His hand felt heavy, the muscles protesting the effort of formation.

June 15, 1863

My Dearest Ellen,

The heat here is a physical enemy, worse than the Rebs on some days. It robs the men of their reason and their strength. We are on picket duty at United States Ford, a mere stone's throw from the foe. The Rappahannock is a border of glass, and today, that glass broke.

I had a peculiar experience today. I swam with someone I hate. At least I believe they are to be my enemy. We were all sitting on opposite banks when a few of their men and a few of mine decided the river was more important than the war. I was amazed, Ellen. It was as if we had never been shooting at each other for the past year. We talked of trivial things, hometowns, the spelling of states, the quality of the water. I met a man named Myron Sultan from Mississippi. He had no teeth and no shoes, but he had a laugh that sounded like music. For ten minutes, we were

just Americans. We shook hands in the current, our skin wet and cold, and for a moment, the Charnel House felt very far away.

However, as soon as the water dried, the lines returned. The officers came down and hollered us back into our blue wool. The man from Mississippi waved his hat, but I did not wave back. I am well. I do not have the tremors you fear. My mind is a silent house. Tell Junior his father is standing his post. The "elephant" is out there, Ellen. I can hear him breathing in the woods. We move soon, though the officers do not say where. I expect the booming of cannon to be our next chorus.

I love you. I miss the salt air of Freeport.

Abraham

He folded the letter with a sharp, crisp snap of the paper. It was a cold, efficient letter, the letter of a man who was reporting on a scientific experiment rather than a miracle of humanity. He didn't mention that the laugh had been the first time he felt alive in months. He didn't mention that the handshake had left his hand smelling of the river instead of sulfur. He tucked it into the mail pouch, his face a mask of indifference. He watched the courier ride away, the dust from the horse's hooves lingering in the stagnant air.

He was a soldier again. He was an automaton. And the "Unknown" was calling the roll.

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Across the river and ten miles to the west, the 15th Alabama was experiencing a different kind of evening. The heat was just as brutal, but the Southern camp was louder, filled with the rhythmic *clack-clack* of men cleaning rifles and the low, musical murmur of the Alabamian drawl.

Ham Tribble sat by a small, sputtering fire, his shirt soaked with sweat. He was watching James Thatcher, who was sitting cross-legged on the dirt, a piece of scavenged paper in one hand and a stubby pencil in the other. James's tongue was poking out of the corner of his mouth, his brow furrowed in a concentration so intense it looked like he was trying to move the earth with his mind.

The boy was a different creature than he had been in Alabama. His ribs stood out like the slats of a fence, and his eyes were sunken and shadowed, but there was a new, kinetic sharpness to him. He was a survivor of the "Woods Fight" at Cross Keys, and he wore his Union boots with a pride that bordered on the religious.

"You rat there, James?" Ham asked, shifting his weight. His own back ached with a dull, thrumming heat, a reminder of the years behind the plow.

"I'm tryin', Ham. I'm tryin' real hard. But these letters... they're slippery. I think I got the 'A' rat, but the 'B' looks like a squashed bug. It's harder than diggin' a latrine, I swear."

"Take your time, boy. The mail wagon don't leave till dawn. You gotta learn to master the pen just like you mastered that Enfield."

James looked up, his face lighting up with a sudden, mischievous grin. "Ham, I wanna write a letter to Ms. Tribble. You said she'd be eager to hear from me. I wanna tell her how you're doin', and how I'm doin'. I wanna tell her that I'm keepin' an eye on ya so you don't git too pessimistic."

Ham smiled, a genuine warmth spreading through his chest. "I think she'd love that, James. But you're on your own on this one. I ain't gonna hold your hand through the whole thang. You speak from your heart, and don't worry about the polish."

"Oh come on, Ham! Ya gotta help me with the spellin'! I don't wanna sound like a yahoo who just stepped out of a swamp."

"Just write it like you say it," Ham encouraged, reaching for his own pipe. "She'll understand. Now get to it. I'm goin' for a walk."

Ham stood up and walked toward the edge of the camp, giving the boy some space. He needed the walk. The "Unknown" letter from the German boy in the woods was still in his pocket, a constant weight that reminded him of the hole he had left in the world. He looked toward the north, toward the distant, invisible line where Abraham Wilkes was likely writing his own reports. He wondered if the "Yankees" felt the same heat. He wondered if they were teaching their boys to read.

He thought of the German boy's sketch, the house with the smoking chimney. He thought of the letter he had just sent to Violet, confessing the guilt he felt over Lemne. He realized then that the letters were the only thing that wasn't rotting in this war. The wood rotted, the meat rotted, the men rotted, but the words on the page remained, a record of the people they used to be.

When Ham returned an hour later, the sun was gone, replaced by a bruised purple sky. James was waiting for him, clutching the paper with a mix of pride and anxiety.

"Well Ham, I'm done. Let me know what ya thank. I used that word 'rat' you keep tellin' me about. I think I spelled it rat, too."

Ham sat down near the fire and took the paper. As he started to read, he had to bite his lip to keep from laughing, but as he moved through the lines, the laughter yielded to a profound, aching respect.

Dear Ms. Tribble,

I am writeeng you a letter. I hope u like it. Ham is a grate man. He haz tawt me to reed and right. This iz my furst letter. I finnly got to shoot sum one. Ham is a good shot cuz I tawt him. He tawt me to write and reed so I tawt him how to shoot. He don't think so but I no I am rat.

I hop to sumday meet yu. Ham is like my daddy I nevr had so I gess that make yu my momma I nevr had. He is a grate man. I wuld like to meet Shaw and Mary sum time. Ham lovs all of yu so much. I wish I lovd like that. He carries yur charm in his pocket and talks to it when he thinks I em sleepin'.

We all finale got in to a fite. I got shot but I em good. I like shootn the blu bellees. They deserv it. I hav not been feeln well latelee. I have got the shits but I am tolerabul. The doc says it's the water but I think it's just the Yankee air.

Yu are a veree nice lady and I hope to meet from yu soon.

Yur frend, James Thornton

"So, whatya thank, Ham?" James asked, his eyes wide and searching, the firelight reflecting in his pupils.

Ham lowered the paper, his hand covering his mouth. He was humored, yes, the mention of the "shits" was pure James, an unfiltered reality that the high-tone officers would never include in a dispatch. But he was also deeply honored. To be the "daddy he never had" was a responsibility that weighed more than any rucksack. It was a reason to stay alive.

"Well James, " Ham said, his voice thick and shaky. "I think it is wonderful. It's the most honest letter I've ever read. Violet will treasure it. She likes honesty more than she likes grammar."

"Are ya serious, Ham? Really? Ya think she'll like it?"

"I know she will. But James... why did you tell her about your bowels?"

James looked genuinely confused, his brow furrowing. "Is that bad? Ya told me to write about what I've been doin' and what's been happenin' ta me. And that's what's happenin'! My gut feels like it's full of hot lead most days."

Ham snickered, clapping the boy on the shoulder. "No, you're rat. It's perfect. Don't change a word. Let's put it in the cover-thangy before you smudge it with that tobacco juice."

"Ya mean the envelope?" James asked, his steps light as he followed Ham back toward the tent.

"Yeach, " Ham mocked, "whatever that thang is."

That night, both camps fell into an uneasy, sweltering silence.

In the Union camp, Abraham Wilkes lay on his back, staring at the stars. His mind was calculating the distance to the next objective. He didn't feel the heat anymore. He didn't feel the absence of Ellen. He felt only the mechanical pull of the march. He was the "Professor's Pet" no longer; he was a bolt in the Union engine, waiting for the key to turn. He reached into his haversack and felt the blue vial of bromide. He didn't need it tonight. The war had provided its own sedative.

In the Confederate camp, Ham Tribble lay beside the sleeping James. He thought of James's letter, raw, phonetic, and filled with a desperate longing for family. He realized then the true

tragedy of the war: he was teaching a boy to read so that the boy could better understand the orders that might kill him. He was becoming a father to a wolf, and he didn't know how to stop the transformation.

Somewhere in the darkness, a drum began a low, rhythmic beat. It wasn't reveille. It was the signal to move.

The orders rippled through both armies like a tremor. General Lee was moving. The "Foot Cavalry" was headed north, toward the fat cattle and the lush fields of Pennsylvania. The 20th was being roused to block the path.

As the men rose, their joints popping and their lungs filling with the pre-dawn dust, the Rappahannock Truce officially ended. The river was no longer a bathhouse; it was a border again. And as the sun began to rise on the long road to Gettysburg, both Ham Tribble and Abraham Wilkes realized that the "Unknown" wasn't just a grave, it was the country they were about to walk through.

The march to July had begun. And the stars, patient and sure, stitched the night closed one last time, the hand steady, the thread about to snap.