

# Iverson's Pits

by Dan Simmons

## Introduction

We Americans have a knack for turning our most be-loved national shrines into something tacky and vulgar. Perhaps it's because we're too young to have a real sense of history; perhaps it's because our nation—not counting the Confederacy—has never been bombed or occupied or even invaded by a foreign power (no, I don't count the British when they burned Washington City ... few Amer-icans noticed and fewer cared), and there is little real sense of sacrifice to our shrines.

There are, of course, a few shrines that defy our efforts to tackify them. It's hard to stand in front of the Lincoln Memorial at night without beginning to feel like Mr. Smith just come to Washington. I had a Jimmy Stewart stammer for three days after my first midnight visit there.

But if you stand there long enough, you can almost hear the bureaucrats conferring with the Disney Imagineers behind the marble walls; come back six months later and Old Abe will probably stand, recite his Second Inaugural in Hal Holbrook's voice, wade the Re-flecting Pool, and tapdance down Constitution Avenue.

All in good taste, of course.

But then there are the Civil War battlefields.

You've probably visited Gettysburg. Despite the best efforts of sincere people to preserve it, the place has been littered with statues and dusted with memorials. The Park Service erected a phallic monstrosity of a tower at the highest point so that there is no escaping the intrusion of 20th Century ugliness. Computerized dioramas blink lights in the museum and you can buy souvenir t-shirts in the local shops.

It doesn't matter. It just doesn't matter.

As with a score of less famous Civil War battlefields, Gettysburg has an almost overpowering sense of *tightness* about it: an almost physical effect on the visitor and a psychic impact that must be felt to be believed. It is a haunt-ing place in every sense of the word. No castle in Scotland, no druidic circle of stones, no crypt beneath a Pharaoh's pyramid could be eerier or could channel more voices of the dead to the ears of the living.

And few places could be more moving or peaceful.

For what it's worth, this tale grew—literally—from a footnote, but every supporting detail in "Iverson's Pits" is as accurate as I could make it. The burial pits were real. One account in Glenn Tucker's classic *High Tide at Get-tysburg* records:

The unhappy spirits of the slaughtered North Carolina soldiers were reputed to abide in this section of the battlefield. Lieutenant Montgomery returned in 1898, thirty-five years after the battle, and learned from John S. Forney that a superstitious terror had long hung over the area. Farm laborers would not work there after night began to settle.

My Colonel Iverson is a fictional construct, of course. The real Colonel Alfred Iverson, Jr., *did* send his regiment to slaughter and *was* relieved after his men—his few surviving men—refused to follow him, but there is no evidence that the real Iverson was anything other than a politically appointed military incompetent. Also, a fellow named Jessup Sheads *did* build a house on the site where the 97th New York had faced the 12th North Carolina. Local historians confirm that Sheads offered wine to visitors—wine from the arbors which grew so luxuriantly above Iverson's Pits.

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As a young boy, I was not afraid of the dark. As an old man, I am wiser. But it was as a boy of ten in that distant summer of 1913 that I was forced to partake of communion with that darkness which now looms so close. I remember the taste of it. Even now, three-quarters of a century later, I am unable to turn over black soil in the garden or to stand alone in the grassy silence of my grand-son's backyard after the sun has set without a hint of cold fingers on the back of my neck.

The past is, as they say, dead and buried. But even the most buried things have their connections to the present, gnarled old roots rising to the surface, and I am one of these. Yet there is no one to connect to, no one to tell. My daughter is grown and gone, dead of cancer in 1953. My middle-aged grandson is a product of those Eisenhower years, that period of endless gestation when all the world seemed fat and confident and looking to the future. Paul has taught science at the local high school for twenty-three years and were I to tell him now about the events of that hot first day and night of July, 1913, he would think me mad. Or senile.

My great-grandchildren, a boy and a girl in an age that finds little reason to pay attention to such petty distinctions as gender, could not conceive of a past as ancient and irretrievable as my own childhood before the Great War, much less the blood-and-leather reality of the Civil War era from which I carry my dark message. My great-grandchildren are as colorful and mindless as the guppies Paul keeps in his expensive aquarium, free from the terrors and tides of the ocean of history, smug in their almost total ignorance of everything that came before themselves, Big Macs, and MTV.

So I sit alone on the patio in Paul's backyard (why was it, I try to recall, that we turned our focus away from the front porch attention to the communal streets and side-walks into the fenced isolation of our own backyards?) and I study the old photograph of a serious ten-year-old in his Boy Scout uniform.

The boy is dressed far too warmly for such a hot summer day—his small form is

almost lost under the heavy, woolen Boy Scout tunic, broad-brimmed campaign hat, baggy wool trousers, and awkward puttees laced almost to the knees. He is not smiling—a solemn, miniature dough-boy four years before the term doughboy had passed into the common vocabulary. The boy is me, of course, stand-ing in front of Mr. Everett's ice wagon on that day in June when I was about to leave on a trip much longer in time and to places much more unimaginably distant than any of us might have dreamed.

I look at the photograph knowing that ice wagons exist now only as fading memories in aging skulls, that the house in the background has long since been torn down to be replaced by an apartment building which in turn was re-placed by a shopping mall, that the wool and leather and cotton of the Boy Scout uniform have rotted away, leaving only the brass buttons and the boy himself to be lost some-where, and that—as Paul would explain—every cell in that unsmiling ten-year-old's body has been replaced several times. For the worse, I suspect. Paul would say that the DNA is the same, and then give an explanation which makes it sound as if the only continuity between me *now* and me *then* is some little parasite-architect, blindly sitting and smirking in each otherwise unrelated cell of the then-me and the now-me.

Cow manure.

I look at that thin face, those thin lips, the eyes nar-rowed and squinting in the light of a sun seventy-five years younger (and hotter, I *know*, despite the assurances of reason and the verities of Paul's high school science) and I feel the thread of sameness which unites that unsus-pecting boy of ten—so confident for one so young, so unafraid—with the old man who has learned to be afraid of the dark.

I wish I could warn him.

The past is dead and buried. But I know now that buried things have a way of rising to the surface when one least expects them to.

In the summer of 1913 the Commonwealth of Pennsyl-vania made ready for the largest invasion of military vet-erans the nation had ever seen. Invitations had been sent out from the War Department for a Great Reunion of Civil War veterans to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the three-day battle at Gettysburg.

All that spring our Philadelphia newspapers were filled with details of the anticipated event. Up to 40,000 veterans were expected. By mid-May, the figure had risen to 54,000 and the General Assembly had to vote additional monies to supplement the Army's budget. My mother's cousin Celia wrote from Atlanta to say that the Daughters of the Confederacy and other groups affiliated with the United Confederate Veterans were doing everything in their power to send their old men North for a final invasion.

My father was not a veteran. Before I was born, he had called the trouble with Spain "Mr. Hearst's War" and five years after the Gettysburg Reunion he would call the

trou-ble in Europe "Mr. Wilson's War." By then I would be in high school, with my classmates chafing to enlist and show the Hun a thing or two, but by then I shared my fa-ther's sentiments; I had seen enough of war's legacy.

But in the late spring and early summer of 1913 I would have given anything to join those veterans in Get-tysburg, to hear the speeches and see the battle flags and crouch in the Devil's Den and watch those old men reenact Pickett's Charge one last time.

And then the opportunity arrived.

Since my birthday in February I had been a Boy Scout. The Scouts were a relatively new idea then—the first groups in the United States had been formed only three years earlier—but in the spring of 1913 every boy I knew was either a Boy Scout or waiting to become one.

The Reverend Hodges had formed the first Troop in Chestnut Hill, our little town outside of Philadelphia, now a suburb. The Reverend allowed only boys of good char-acter and strong moral fiber to join: Presbyterian boys. I had sung in the Fourth Avenue Presbyterian Boys' Choir for three years and, in spite of my frailness and total in-ability to tie a knot, I was allowed to become a Boy Scout three days after my tenth birthday.

My father was not totally pleased. Our Scout uniforms might have been castoffs from the returning Roughriders' army. From hobnailed boots to puttees to campaign hats we were little troopers, drowning in yards of khaki and great draughts of military virtue. The Reverend Hodges had us on the high school football field each Tuesday and Thursday afternoon from four to six and every Saturday morning from seven until ten, practicing close-order drill and applying field dressings to one another until our Troop resembled nothing so much as a band of mummies with swatches of khaki showing through our bandages. On Wednesday evening we met in the church basement to learn Morse Code—what the Reverend called General Service Code—and to practice our semaphore signals.

My father asked me if we were training to fight the Boer War over again. I ignored his irony, sweated into my khaki woolens through those warming weeks of May, and loved every minute of it.

When the Reverend Hodges came by our house in early June to inform my parents that the Commonwealth had requested all Boy Scout Troops in Pennsylvania to send representatives to Gettysburg to help with the Great Reunion, I knew that it had been Divine Intervention which would allow me to join the Reverend, thirteen-year-old Billy Stargill (who would later die in the Argonne), and a pimply-faced overweight boy whose name I cannot recall on the five-day visit to Gettysburg.

My father was noncommittal but my mother agreed at once that it was a unique honor, so on the morning of June 30 I posed in front of Mr. Everett's ice wagon for a photograph taken by Dr. Lowell, Chestnut Hill's undertaker and official

photographer, and at a little after two p.m. on that same day I joined the Reverend and my two comrades-in-arms for the three-hour train ride to Gettysburg.

As a part of the official celebration, we paid the veterans' travel rate of one cent a mile. The train ride cost me \$1.21. I had never been to Gettysburg. I had never been away from home overnight.

We arrived late in the afternoon; I was tired, hot, thirsty, and desperately needing to relieve myself since I had been too shy to use the lavatory aboard the train. The small town of Gettysburg was a mass of crowds, confusion, noise, horses, automobiles, and old men whose heavy uniforms smelled of camphor. We stumbled after Reverend Hodges through muddy lanes between buildings draped in flags and bunting. Men outnumbered women ten to one and most of the main streets were a sea of straw boaters and khaki caps. As the Reverend checked in the lobby of the Eagle Hotel for word from his Scouting superiors, I slipped down a side hall and found a public restroom.

Half an hour later we dragged our duffel bags into the back of a small motor carriage for the ride out southwest of town to the Reunion tent city. A dozen boys and their Scoutmasters were crowded into the three benches as the vehicle labored its way through heavy traffic down Franklin Street, past a temporary Red Cross Hospital on the east side of the street and a score of Ambulance Corps wagons parked on the west side, and then right onto a road marked Long Lane and into a sea of tents which seemed to stretch on forever.

It was past seven o'clock and the rich evening light illuminated thousands of canvas pyramids covering hundreds of acres of open farmland. I craned to make out which of the distant hills was Cemetery Ridge, which heap of rocks the Little Round Top. We passed State Policemen on horseback, Army wagons pulled by Army mules, huge heaps of firewood, and clusters of portable field bakeries where the aroma of fresh-baked bread still lingered.

Reverend Hodges turned in his seat. "Afraid we missed the evening chow lines, boys," he said. "But we weren't hungry, were we?"

I shook my head despite the fact my stomach was cramping with hunger. My mother had packed me a dinner of fried chicken and biscuits for the train, but the Reverend had eaten the drumstick and the fat boy had begged the rest. I had been too excited to eat.

We turned right onto East Avenue, a broad dirt road between neat rows of tents. I looked in vain for the Great Tent I had read about—a huge bigtop with room for 13,000 chairs where President Wilson was scheduled to speak in four days, on Friday, the Fourth of July. Now the sun was low and red in the haze to the west, the air thick with dust and the scent of trampled grass and sun-warmed canvas. I was starving and I had dirt in my hair and grit between my teeth. I do not remember ever

being happier.

Our Boy Scout Station was at the west end of East Avenue, a hundred yards past a row of portable kitchens set in the middle of the Pennsylvania veterans' tent area. Reverend Hodges showed us to our tents and commanded us to hurry back to the station for our next day's assignments.

I set my duffel on a cot in a tent not far from the latrines. I was slow setting out my bedroll and belongings and when I looked up the fat boy was asleep on another cot and Billy was gone. A train roared by on the Gettysburg and Harrisburg tracks not fifty feet away. Suddenly breathless with the panic of being left behind, I ran back to the Scoutmasters' tent to receive my orders.

Reverend Hodges and Billy were nowhere to be seen but a fat man with a blond mustache, thick spectacles, and an ill-fitting Scoutmaster's uniform snapped, "You there, Scout!"

"Yessir?"

"Have you received your assignment?"

"No, sir."

The fat man grunted and pawed through a stack of yellow cardboard tags lying on a board he was using as a desk. He pulled one from the stack, glanced at it, and tied it to the brass button on my left breast pocket. I craned my neck to read it. Faint blue, typewritten letters said: MONT-GOMERY, P.O., Capt, 20th N.C. Reg., SECT. 27, SITE 3424, North Carolina Veterans.

"Well, go, boy!" snapped the Scoutmaster.

"Yessir," I said and ran toward the tent entrance. I paused. "Sir?"

"What is it?" The Scoutmaster was already tying another ticket on another Scout's blouse.

"Where am I to go, sir?"

The fat man flicked his fingers as if brushing an insect away. "To find the veteran you are assigned to, of course."

I squinted at the ticket. "Captain Montgomery?"

"Yes, yes. If that is what it says."

I took a breath. "Where do I find him, sir?"

The fat man scowled, took four angry steps toward me, and glared at the ticket through his thick glasses. "20th North Carolina ... Section 27 ... up *there*." He swept his arm in a gesture that took in the railroad tracks, a distant stream lined with trees,

the setting sun, and another tent city on a hill where hundreds of pyramid tents glowed redly in the twilight.

"Pardon me, sir, but what do I do when I find Captain Montgomery?" I asked the Scoutmaster's retreating back.

The man stopped and glowered at me over his shoulder with a thinly veiled disgust that I had never guessed an adult would show toward someone my age. "You do what-ever he *wants*, you young fool," snapped the man. "Now *go*."

I turned and ran toward the distant camp of the Con-federates.

Lanterns were being lighted as I made my way through long rows of tents. Old men by the hundreds, many in heavy gray uniforms and long whiskers, sat on campstools and cots, benches and wooden stumps, smoking and talk-ing and spitting into the early evening gloom. Twice I lost my way and twice I was given directions in slow, Southern drawls that might as well have been German for all I un-derstood them.

Finally I found the North Carolina contingent sand-wiched in between the Alabama and Missouri camps, just a short walk from the West Virginians. In the years since, I have found myself wondering why they put the Union-loyal West Virginian veterans in the midst of the rebel en-campment.

Section 27 was the last row on the east side of the North Carolina camp and Site 3424 was the last tent in the row. The tent was dark.

"Captain Montgomery?" My voice was little more than a whisper. Hearing no answer from the darkened tent, I ducked my head inside to confirm that the veteran was not home. It was not my fault, I reasoned, that the old gentle-man was not here when I called. I would find him in the morning, escort him to the breakfast tent, run the neces-sary errands for him, help him to find the latrine or his old comrades-in-arms, or whatever. *In the morning*. Right now I thought I would run all the way back to the Boy Scout Station, find Billy and Reverend Hodges, and see if any-one had any cookies in their duffel bags.

"I been waitin' for you, Boy."

I froze. The voice had come from the darkness in the depths of the tent. It was a voice from the South but sharp as cinders and brittle with age. It was a voice that I imag-ined the Dead might use to command those still beyond the grave.

"Come in here, Johnny. Step lively!"

I moved into the hot, canvas-scented interior and blinked. For a second my breath would not come.

The old man who lay on the cot was propped on his el-bows so that his shoulders looked like sharp wings in the dim light, predatory pinions rising above an otherwise

in-distinct bundle of gray cloth, gray skin, staring eyes, and faded braid. He was wearing a shapeless hat which had once boasted a brim and crown but which now served only to cast his face into deeper shadow. A beak of a nose jut-ted into the dim light above wisps of white beard, thin pur-plish lips, and a few sharp teeth gleaming in a black hole of a mouth. For the first time in my life I realized that a human mouth was really an opening into a skull. The old man's eye sockets were darker pits of shadow beneath brows still black, the cheeks hollowed and knife-edged. Huge, liver-spotted hands, misshapen with age and arthri-tis, glowed with a preternatural whiteness in the gloom and I saw that while one leg ended in the black gleam of a high boot, the other terminated abruptly below the knee. I could see the rolled trouser leg pulled above pale, scarred skin wrapped tautly around the bone of the stump.

"Goddamnit, boy, did you bring the wagon?"

"Pardon me, sir?" My voice was a cicada's frightened chirp.

"The wagon, goddamnit, Johnny. We need a wagon. You should be knowin' that, boy." The old man sat up, swung his leg and his stump over the edge of the cot, and began fumbling in his loose coat.

"I'm sorry, Captain Montgomery ... uh ... you *are* Captain Montgomery, aren't you, sir?"

The old man grunted.

"Well, Captain Montgomery, sir, my name's not Johnny, it's..."

"*Goddamnit*, boy!" bellowed the old man. "Would you quit makin' noise and go get the goddamned wagon! We need to get up there to the Pits before that bastard Iverson beats us to it."

I started to reply and then found myself with no wind with which to speak as Captain Montgomery removed a pistol from the folds of his coat. The gun was huge and gray and smelled of oil and I was certain that the crazy old man was going to kill me with it in that instant. I stood there with the wind knocked out of me as certainly as if the old Confederate had struck me in the solar plexus with the barrel of that formidable weapon.

The old man laid the revolver on the cot and reached into the shadows beneath it, pulling out an awkward ar-rangement of straps, buckles, and mahogany which I rec-ognized as a crude wooden leg. "Come on now, Johnny," he mumbled, bending over to strap the cruel thing in place, "I've waited long enough for you. Go get the wagon, that's a good lad. I'll be ready and waitin' when you get back."

"Yessir," I managed, and turned, and escaped.

I have no rational explanation for my next actions. All I had to do was the natural thing, the thing that every fiber of my frightened body urged me to do—run back to



the Boy Scout Station, find Reverend Hodges, inform him that my veteran was a raving madman armed with a pistol, and get a good night's sleep while the grownups sorted things out. But I was not a totally rational creature at this point. (How many ten-year-old boys are, I wonder?) I was tired, hungry, and already homesick after less than seven hours away from home, disoriented in space and time, and—perhaps most pertinent—not used to disobeying orders. And yet I am sure to this day that I would have run the entire way back to the Boy Scout Station and not thought twice about it if my parting glance of the old man had not been of him painfully strapping on that terrible wooden leg. The thought of him standing in the deepening twilight on that awful pegleg, trustingly awaiting a wagon which would never arrive was more than I could bear.

As fate arranged it, there was a wagon and untended team less than a hundred yards from Captain Montgomery's tent. The back of the slat-sided thing was half-filled with blankets, but the driver and deliverers were nowhere in sight. The team was a matched set of grays, aged and sway-backed but docile enough as I grabbed their bridles and clumsily turned them around and tugged them back up the hill with me.

I had never ridden a horse or driven a team. Even in 1913, I was used to riding in automobiles. Chestnut Hill still saw buggies and wagons on the street occasionally, but already they were considered quaint. Mr. Everett, our iceman, did not allow boys to ride on his wagon and his horse had the habit of biting any child who came in range.

Gingerly, trying to keep my knuckles away from the grays' teeth, I led the team up the hill. The thought that I was stealing the wagon never crossed my mind. Captain Montgomery needed a wagon. It was my job to deliver it.

"Good boy, Johnny. Well done." Outside, in the light, the old man was only slightly less formidable. The long gray coat hung in folds and wrinkles and although there was no sight of the pistol, I was sure that it was tucked somewhere close to hand. A heavy canvas bag hung from a strap over his right shoulder. For the first time I noticed a faded insignia on the front of his hat and three small medals on his coat. The ribbons were so faded that I could not make out their colors. The Captain's bare neck re-minded me of the thick tangle of ropes dangling into the dark maw of the old well behind our house.

"Come on, Boy. We have to move smartly if we're to beat that son-of-a-bitch Iverson." The old man heaved himself up to the seat with a wide swing of his wooden leg and seized the reins in fists that looked like clusters of gnarled roots. With no hesitation I ran to the left side of the wagon and jumped to the seat beside him.

Gettysburg was filled with lights and activity that last, late evening in June, but the night seemed especially dark and empty as we passed through town on our way north. The house and hotel lights felt so distant to our purpose—whatever that

purpose was—that the lights appeared pale and cold to me, the fading glow of fireflies dying in a jar.

In a few minutes we were beyond the last buildings on the north end of town and turning northwest on what I later learned was Mummasburg Road. Just before we passed behind a dark curtain of trees, I swiveled in my seat and caught a last glimpse of Gettysburg and the Great Reunion Camp beyond it. Where the lights of the city seemed pale and paltry, the flames of the hundreds of campfires and bonfires in the Tent City blazed in the night. I looked at the constellations of fires and realized that there were more old veterans huddling around them that night than there were young men in many nations' armies. I wondered if this is what Cemetery Ridge and Gulp's Hill had looked like to the arriving Confederate armies fifty years earlier.

Suddenly I had the chilling thought that fifty years ago Death had given a grand party and 140,000 revelers had arrived in their burial clothes. My father had told me that the soldiers going into battle had often pinned small scraps of paper to their uniforms so that their bodies could be identified after the killing was finished. I glanced to my right as if half-expecting to see a yellowed scrap of paper pinned to the old man's chest, his name, rank, and home town scrawled on it. Then I realized with a start that *I* was wearing the tag.

I looked back at the lights and marveled that fifty years after Death's dark festival, 50,000 of the survivors had re-turned for a second celebration.

We passed deeper into the forest and I could see no more of the fires of the Reunion Camp. The only light came from the fading glow of the summer sky through limbs above us and the sporadic winking of fireflies along the road.

"You don't remember Iverson, do you, Boy?"

"No, sir."

"Here." He thrust something into my hands. Leaning closer, squinting, I understood that it was an old tintype, cracked at the edges. I was able to make out a pale square of face, shadows which might have been mustaches. Cap-tain Montgomery grabbed it back. "He's not registered at the goddamn reunion," he muttered. "Spent the goddamn day lookin'. Never arrived. Didn't expect him to. Newspa-per in Atlanta two years ago said he died. Goddamn lie."

"Oh," I said. The horses' hooves made soft sounds in the dirt of the road. The fields we were passing were as empty as my mind.

"Goddamn lie," said the Captain. "He's goin' be back here. No doubt about it, is there, Johnny?"

"No, sir." We came over the brow of a low hill and the old man slowed the wagon. His pegleg had been making a rhythmic sound as it rattled against the wooden slat where it was braced and as we slowed the tempo changed. We had passed out of

the thickest part of the forest but dark farmfields opened out to the left and right between stands of trees and low stone walls. "Damn," he said. "Did you see Forney's house back there, boy?"

"I ... no, sir. I don't think so." I had no idea if we had passed Forney's house. I had no idea who Forney was. I had no idea what I was doing wandering around the coun-tryside at night with this strange old man. I was amazed to find myself suddenly on the verge of tears.

Captain Montgomery pulled the team to a stop under some trees set back off the right side of the road. He panted and wheezed, struggling to dismount from the driv-er's seat. "Help me down, Boy. It's time we bivouacked." I ran around to offer my hand but he used my shoulder as a brace and dropped heavily to the ground. A strange, sour scent came from him and I was reminded of an old, urine-soaked mattress in a shed near the tracks behind our school where Billy said hobos slept. It was fully dark now. I could make out the Big Dipper above a field across the road. All around us, crickets and tree toads were tuning up for their nightly symphony.

"Bring some of them blankets along, Boy." He had picked up a fallen limb to use as a walking stick as he moved clumsily into the trees. I grabbed some Army blan-kets from the back of the wagon and followed him.

We crossed a wheat field, passed a thin line of trees, and climbed through a meadow before stopping under a tree where broad leaves stirred to the night breeze. The Captain directed me to lay the blankets out into rough bed-rolls and then he lowered himself until he was lying with his back propped against the tree and his wooden leg rest-ing on his remaining ankle. "You hungry, Boy?"

I nodded in the dark. The old man rummaged in the canvas bag and handed me several strips of something I thought was meat but which tasted like heavily salted leather. I chewed on the first piece for almost five minutes before it was soft enough to swallow. Just as my lips and tongue were beginning to throb with thirst, Captain Mont-gomery handed me a wineskin of water and showed me how to squirt it into my open mouth.

"Good jerky, ain't it, Boy?" he asked.

"Delicious," I answered honestly and worked to bite off another chunk.

"That Iverson was a useless son-of-a-bitch," the Cap-tain said around his own jawful of jerky. It was as if he were picking up the sentence he had begun half an hour earlier back at the wagon. "He would've been a harmless son-of-a-bitch if those dumb bastards in my own 20th North Carolina hadn't elected him camp commander back before the war begun. That made Iverson a colonel sort of automatic like, and by the time we'd fought our way up North, the stupid little bastard was in charge of one of Rodes's whole damn brigades."

The old man paused to work at the jerky with his few remaining teeth and I reflected

on the fact that the only other person I had ever heard curse anything like the Cap-tain was Mr. Bolton, the old fire chief who used to sit out in front of the firehouse on Third Street and tell stories to the new recruits, apparently oblivious to the uninvited presence of us younger members of the audience. Perhaps, I thought, it has something to do with wearing a uniform.

"His first name was Alfred," said the Captain. The old man's voice was soft, preoccupied, and his southern accent was so thick that the meaning of each word reached me some seconds after the sound of it. It was a bit like lying in bed, already dreaming, and hearing the soft voices of my mother and father coming upstairs through a curtain of sleep. Or like magically understanding a foreign language. I closed my eyes to hear better. "Alfred," said the Captain, "just like his daddy. His daddy'd been a Senator from Georgia, good friend of the President." I could feel the old man's gaze on me. "President Davis. It was Davis, back when he was a senator too, who give young Iverson his first commission. That was back durin' the trouble with Mexico. Then when the real war come up, Iverson and his daddy got 'em up a regiment. Them days, when a rich goddamn family like the Iversons wanted to play soldiers, they just bought themselves a regiment. Bought the god-damn uniforms and horses and such. Then they got to be officers. Goddamn grown men playin' at toy soldiers, Boy. Only once't the real war begun, *we* was the toy soldiers, Johnny."

I opened my eyes. I could not recall ever having seen so many stars. Above the slope of the meadow, constella-tions came all the way down to the horizon; others were visible between the dark masses of trees. The Milky Way crossed the sky like a bridge. Or like the pale tracks of an army long since passed by.

"Just goddamned bad luck we got Iverson," said the Captain, "because the brigade was good 'un and the 20th North Carolina was the best goddamn regiment in Ewell's corps." The old man shifted to look at me again. "You wasn't with us yet at Sharpsburg, was you, Johnny?"

I shook my head, feeling a chill go up my back as he again called me by some other boy's name. I wondered where that boy was now.

"No, of course not," said Captain Montgomery. "That was in '62. You was still in school. The regiment was still at Fredericksburg after the campaign. Somebody'd ordered up a dress parade and Nate's band played 'Dixie.' All of the sudden, from acrost the Rappahannock, the Yankee band starts playin' Dixie back at us. Goddamnest thing, Boy. You could hear that music so clear acrost the water it was like two parts of the same band playin'. So our band—all boys from the 20th—they commence to playin' 'Yankee Doodle.' All of us standin' there at parade rest in that cold sunlight, feelin' mighty queer by then, I don't mind tellin' you. Then, when our boys is done with 'Yan-kee Doodle,' just like they all rehearsed it together, both bands commence playin' 'Home Sweet Home.' Without even thinkin' about it, Perry and ol' Thomas and Jeffrey an' me and the whole line starts singin' along. So did Lieutenant Williams—young Mr. Oliver hisself—and be-fore long the whole brigade's singin'—the damn Yankees too—their voices comin' acrost the

Rappahannock and joinin' ours like we'd been one big choir that'd gotten busted up by mistake or accident or somethin'. I tell you, Boy, it was sorta like singin' with ghosts. And sorta like we was ghosts our own selves."

I closed my eyes to hear the deep voices singing that sad, sweet song, and I realized suddenly that even grownups—soldiers even—could feel as lonely and home-sick as I had felt earlier that evening. Realizing that, I found that all of my own homesickness had fled. I felt that I was where I should be, part of the Captain's army, part of all armies, camping far from home and uncertain what the next day would bring but content to be with my friends. My comrades. The voices were as real and as sad as the souging of wind through the mid-summer leaves.

The Captain cleared his throat and spat. "And then that bastard Iverson kilt us," he said. I heard the sound of buckles as the old man unstrapped his false leg.

I opened my eyes as he pulled his blanket over his shoulders and turned his face away. "Get some sleep, Boy," came his muffled voice. "We step off at first light come mornin'."

I pulled my own blanket up to my neck and laid my cheek against the dark soil. I listened for the singing but the voices were gone. I went to sleep to the sound of the wind in the leaves sounding like angry whispers in the night.

I awoke once before sunrise when there was just enough false light to allow me to see Captain Montgom-ery's face a few inches from my own. The old man's hat had slipped off in the night and the top of his head was a relief map of reddened scalp scarred by liver spots, sores, and a few forlorn wisps of white hair. His brow was fur-rowed as if in fierce concentration, eyebrows two dark eruptions of hair, eyelids lowered but showing a line of white at the bottom. Soft snores whistled out of his broken gourd of a mouth and a thin line of drool moistened his whiskers. His breath was as dry and dead as a draft of air from a cave unsealed after centuries of being forgotten.

I stared at the time-scoured flesh of the old face inches from mine, at the swollen and distorted fingers clutching, childlike, at his blanket, and I realized, with a precise and prescient glimpse at the terrible fate of my own longevity, that age was a curse, a disease, and that all of us unlucky to survive our childhoods were doomed to suffer and per-ish from it. Perhaps, I thought, it is why young men go willingly to die in wars.

I pulled the blanket across my face.

When I awoke again, just after sunrise, the old man was standing ten paces from the tree and staring toward Gettysburg. Only a white cupola was visible above the trees, its dome and sides painted in gold from the sun. I disentangled myself from the blankets and rose to my feet, marveling at how stiff and clammy and strange I felt. I had never slept out of doors before. Reverend Hodges had promised us a camp-out

but the Troop had been too busy learning close order drill and semaphore. I decided that I might skip the camp-out part of the agenda. Staggering up-right on legs still half asleep, I wondered how Captain Montgomery had strapped on his wooden leg without awakening me.

"Mornin', Boy," he called as I returned from the edge of the woods where I had relieved myself. His gaze never left the cupola visible to the southeast.

We had breakfast while standing there under the tree—more beef jerky and water. I wondered what Billy, the Reverend, and the other Scouts were having down in the tents near the field kitchens. Pancakes, probably. Perhaps with bacon. Certainly with tall glasses of cold milk.

"I was there with Mr. Oliver when muster was called on the mornin' of the first," rasped the old man. "1,470 present for duty. 114 was officers. I wasn't among 'em. Still had my sergeant stripes then. Wasn't 'til the second Wilderness that they gave me the bar. Anyway, word had come the night before from A.P. Hill that the Federals was massin' to the south. Probably figurin' to cut us off. Our brigade was the first to turn south to Hill's call.

"We heard firin' as we come down the Heidlersburg Pike, so General Rodes took us through the woods 'til we got to Oak Hill." He turned east, smoothly pivoting on his wooden leg, shielding his eyes from the sun. "Bout there, I reckon, Johnny. Come on." The old man spun around and I rolled the blankets and scurried to follow him back down the hill toward the southeast. Toward the distant cu-pola.

"We come right down the west side of this ridge then, too, didn't we, Boy? Not so many trees then. Been marchin' since before sunup. Got here sometime after what should've been dinner time. One o'clock, maybe one-thirty. Had hardtack on the hoof. Seems to me that we stopped a while up the hill there so's Rodes could set out some guns. Perry an' me was glad to sit. He wanted to start another letter to our Ma, but I told him there wasn't goin' to be time. There wasn't, either, but I wish to hell I'd let him write the damned thing.

"From where we was, you could see the Yanks comin' up the road from Gettysburg and we knew there'd be a fight that day. Goddamnit, Boy, you can put them blankets down. We ain't goin' to need 'em today."

Startled, I dropped the blankets in the weeds. We had reached the lower end of the meadow and only a low, split rail fence separated us from what I guessed to be the road we had come up the night before. The Captain swung his pegleg over the fence and after we crossed we both paused a minute. I felt the growing heat of the day as a thickness in the air and a slight pounding in my temples. Suddenly there came the sound of band music and cheering from the south, dwindled by distance.

The Captain removed a stained red kerchief from his pocket and mopped at his neck and forehead. "Goddamn idiots," he said. "Celebratin' like it's a county fair. Damned nonsense."

"Yessir," I said automatically, but at that moment I was thrilled with the idea of the Reunion and with the reality of being with a veteran—*my* veteran—walking on the ac-tual ground he had fought on. I realized that someone see-ing us from a distance might have mistaken us for *two* soldiers. At that moment I would have traded my Boy Scout khaki for butternut brown or Confederate gray and would have joined the Captain in any cause. At that mo-ment I would have marched against the Eskimoes if it meant being part of an army, setting off at sunrise with one's comrades, preparing for battle, and generally feeling as *alive* as I felt at that instant.

The Captain had heard my "yessir" but he must have noticed something else in my eyes because he leaned for-ward, rested his weight on the fence, and brought his face close to mine. "Goddamnit, Johnny, don't you fall for such nonsense twice. You think these dumb sons-of-bitches would've come back all this way if they was honest enough to admit they was celebratin' a slaughterhouse?"

I blinked.

The old man grabbed my tunic with his swollen fist. "That's all it is, Boy, don't you see? A goddamn *abattoir* that was built here to grind up *men* and now they're reminiscin' about it and tellin' funny stories about it and weepin' old man tears about what good times we had when we was fed to it." With his free hand he stabbed a finger in the direction of the cupola. "Can't you see it, Boy? The holdin' pens and the delivery chutes and the killin' rooms—only not everybody was so lucky as to have their skull busted open on the first pop, some of us got part of us fed to the grinder and got to lay around and watch the others swell up and bloat in the heat. Goddamn slaughterhouse, Boy, where they kill you and gut you down the middle ... dump your insides out on the god-damn floor and kick 'em aside to get at the next fool ... hack the meat off your bones, grind up the bones for fer-tilizer, then grind up everythin' else you got that ain't prime meat and wrap it in your own guts to sell it to the goddamn public as sausage. Parades. War stories. Re-unions. *Sausage*, Boy." Panting slightly, he released me, spat, wiped his whiskers and stared a long minute at the sky. "And we was led into that slaughterhouse by a Judas goat named Iverson, Johnny," he said at last, his voice empty of all emotion. "Never forget that."

The hill continued to slope gently downward as we crossed the empty road and entered a field just to the east of an abandoned farmhouse. Fire had gutted the upper sto-ries years ago and the windows on the first floor were boarded up, but irises still grew tall around the foundation and along the overgrown lane leading to sagging outbuild-ings. "John Forney's old place," said Captain Montgom-ery. "He was still here when I come back in '98. Told me then that none of his farmhands'd stay around here after night begun to settle. Because of the Pits."

"Because of what, sir?" I was blinking in the early heat and glare of a day in which the temperatures certainly would reach the mid-nineties. Grasshoppers hopped mind-lessly in the dusty grass.

The old man did not seem to hear my question. The cupola was no longer visible because we were too close to the trees, but the Captain's attention was centered on the field which ran downhill less than a quarter of a mile to a thicker line of trees to the southeast. He withdrew the pistol from his coat and my heart pounded as he drew back the hammer until it clicked. "This is a double-action, Boy," he said. "Don't forget that."

We forced our way through a short hedge and began crossing the field at a slow walk. The old man's wooden leg made soft sounds in the soil. Grass and thistles brushed at our legs. "That son-of-a-bitch Iverson never got this far," said the Captain. "Ollie Williams said he heard him give the order up the hill there near where Rodes put his guns out. 'Give 'em hell,' Iverson says, then goes back up to his tree there to sit in the shade an' eat his lunch. Had him some wine too. Had wine every meal when the rest of us was drinkin' water out of the ditch. Nope, Iverson never come down here 'til it was all over and then it was just to say we'd tried to surrender and order a bunch of dead men to stand up and salute the general. Come on, Boy."

We moved slowly across the field. I could make out a stone fence near the treeline now, half-hidden in the dap-ple of leaf shadow. There seemed to be a jumble of tall grass or vines just this side of the wall.

"They put Daniels' brigade on our right." The Cap-tain's pistol gestured toward the south, the barrel just miss-ing the brim of my hat. "But they didn't come down 'til we was shot all to pieces. Then Daniels' boys run right into the fire of Stone's 149th Pennsylvania ... them damn sharpshooters what were called the Bogus Bucktails for some damn reason I don't recall now. But we was all alone when we come down this way before Daniels and Ramseur and O'Neil and the rest come along. Iverson sent us off too soon. Ramseur wasn't ready for another half hour and O'Neal's brigade turned back even before they got to the Mummasburg Road back there."

We were half way across the field by then. A thin screen of trees to our left blocked most of the road from sight. The stone wall was less than three hundred yards ahead. I glanced nervously at the cocked pistol. The Cap-tain seemed to have forgotten he was carrying it.

"We come down like this at an angle," he said. "Bri-gade stretched about halfway across the field, sorta slantin' northeast to southwest. The 5th North Carolina was on our left. The 20th was right about here, couple of hundred of us in the first line, and the 23rd and 12th was off to our right there and sorta trailin' back, the right flank of the 12th about halfway to that damned railroad cut down there."

I looked toward the south but could see no railroad tracks. There was only the hot, wide expanse of field which may have once borne crops but which had now gone back to brambles and sawgrass.

The Captain stopped, panting slightly, and rested his weight on his good leg. "What we didn't know, Johnny, was that the Yanks was all set behind that wall there."



Thousands of them. Not showin' a goddamn cap or battle flag or rifle barrel. Just hunkerin' down there and waitin'. Waitin' for the animals to come in the door so the slaugh-ter could begin. And Colonel Iverson never even ordered skirmishers out in front of us. I never even *seen* an ad-vance without skirmishers, and there we was walkin' across this field while Iverson sat up on Oak Hill eatin' lunch and havin' another glass of wine."

The Captain raised his pistol and pointed at the treeline. I stepped back, expecting him to fire, but the only noise was the rasp of his voice. "Remember? We got to that point ... 'bout there where them damn vines is grow-ing ... and the Yanks rise up along that whole quarter mile of wall there and fire right into us. Like they're comin' up out of the ground. No noise at all except the swish of our feet 'n legs in the wheat and grass and then they let loose a volley like to sound like the end of the world. Whole goddamn world disappears in smoke and fire. Even a Yank couldn't miss at that range. More of 'em come out of the trees back up there..." The Captain ges-tured toward our left where the wall angled northwest to meet the road. "That puts us in an enfilade fire that just sweeps through the 5th North Carolina. Like a scythe, Boy. There was wheat in these fields then. But it was just stubble. No place to go. No place to hide. We could've run back the way we come but us North Carolina boys wasn't goin' to start learning ourselves how to run this late in the day. So the scythe just come sweepin' into us. Couldn't move forward. That goddamn wall was just a wall of smoke with fire comin' through it there fifty yards away. I seen Lieutenant Colonel Davis of the 5th—Old Bill his boys called him—get his regiment down into that low area there to the south. See about where that line of scrub brush is? Not nearly so big as a ditch, but it give 'em some cover, not much. But us in the 20th and Cap'n Turner's boys in the 23rd didn't have no choice but to lie down here in the open and take it."

The old man advanced slowly for a dozen yards and stopped where the grass grew thicker and greener, joining with tangles of what I realized were grapevines to create a low, green thicket between us and the wall. Suddenly he sat down heavily, thrusting his wooden leg out in front of him and cradling the pistol in his lap. I dropped to my knees in the grass near him, removed my hat, and unbut-toned my tunic. The yellow tag hung loosely from my breast pocket button. It was very hot.

"The Yank's kept pourin' the fire into us," he said. His voice was a hoarse whisper. Sweat ran down his cheeks and neck. "More Federals come out of the woods down there ... by the railroad gradin' ... and started enfiladin' Old Bill's boys and our right flank. We couldn't fire back worth horseshit. Lift your head outta the dirt to aim and you caught a Minie ball in the brain. My brother Perry was layin' next to me and I heard the ball that took him in the left eye. Made a sound like someone hammerin' a side of beef with a four-pound hammer. He sort of rose up and flopped back next to me. I was yellin' and cryin', my face all covered with snot and dirt and tears, when all of a sudden I feel Perry tryin' to rise up again. Sort of jer-kin', like somebody was pullin' him up with strings. Then again. And again. I'd got a glimpse of the hole in his face where his eye'd been and his brains and bits of the back of his head was still

smear'd on my right leg, but I could *feel* him jerkin' and pullin', like he was tuggin' at me to go with him somewhere. Later, I seen why. More bullets had been hittin' him in the head and each time it'd snap him back some. When we come back to bury him later, his head looked like a mushmelon someone'd kicked apart. It wasn't unusual, neither. Lot of the boys layin' on the field that day got just torn apart by that Yankee fire. Like a scythe, Boy. Or a meatgrinder."

I sat back in the grass and breathed through my mouth. The vines and black soil gave off a thick, sweet smell that made me feel lightheaded and a little ill. The heat pressed down like thick, wet blankets.

"Some of the boys stood up to run then," said Captain Montgomery, his voice still a hoarse monotone, his eyes focused on nothing. He was holding the cocked pistol in both hands with the barrel pointed in my direction, but I was sure that he had forgotten I was there. "Everybody who stood up got hit. The sound was ... you could hear the balls hittin' home even over the firin'. The wind was blowin' the smoke back into the woods so there wasn't even any cover you usually got once't the smoke got heavy. I seen Lieutenant Ollie Williams stand up to yell at the boys of the 20th to stay low and he was hit twice while I watched.

"The rest of us was tryin' to form a firin' line in the grass and wheat, but we hadn't got off a full volley before the Yanks come runnin' out, some still firin', some usin' their bayonets. And that's when I seen you and the other two little drummers get kilt, Johnny. When they used them bayonets..." The old man paused and looked at me for the first time in several minutes. A cloud of confusion seemed to pass over him. He slowly lowered the pistol, gently released the cocked hammer, and raised a shaking hand to his brow.

Still feeling dizzy and a little sick myself, I asked, "Is that when you lost your ... uh ... when you hurt your leg, sir?"

The Captain removed his hat. His few white hairs were stringy with sweat. "What? My leg?" He stared at the wooden peg below his knee as if he had never noticed it before. "My leg. No, Boy, that was later. The Battle of the Crater. The Yankees tunneled under us and blowed us up while we was sleepin'. When I didn't die right away, they shipped me home to Raleigh and made me an honorary Cap'n three days before the war ended. No, that day ... *here* ... I got hit at least three times but nothin' serious. A ball took the heel of my right boot off. Another'n knocked my rifle stock all to hell and gave me some splin-ters in my cheek. A third'n took off a chunk of my left ear, but hell, I could still hear all right. It wasn't 'til I sat down to try to go to sleep that night that I come to find out that another ball'd hit me in the back of the leg, right below the ass, but it'd been goin' so slow it just give me a big bruise there."

We sat there for several minutes in silence. I could hear insects rustling in the grass. Finally the Captain said, "And that son-of-a-bitch Iverson never even come down here until Ramseur's boys finally got around to clearin' the Yankees out. That was

later. I was layin' right around here somewhere, squeezed in between Perry and Nate's corpses, covered with so much of their blood an' brains that the goddamn Yanks just stepped over all three of us when they ran out to stick bayonets in our people or drive 'em back to their line as prisoners. I opened my eyes long enough to see ol' Cade Tarleton bein' clubbed along by a bunch of laughin' Yankees. They had our regimental flag, too, goddamnit. There was no one left alive around it to put up a fight.

"Ramseur, him who the Richmond papers was always callin' the Chevalier Bayard, whatever the hell that meant, was comin' down the hill into the same ambush when Lieutenant Crowder and Lieutenant Dugger run up and warned him. Ramseur was an officer but he wasn't no-body's fool. He crossed the road further east and turned the Yankee's right flank, just swept down the backside of that wall, drivin' 'em back toward the seminary.

"Meanwhile, while the few of us who'd stayed alive was busy crawlin' back towards Forney's house or layin' there bleedin' from our wounds, that son-of-a-bitch Iverson was tellin' General Rodes that he'd seen our reg-iment put up a white flag and go over to the Yanks. God-damn lie, Boy. Them who got captured was mostly wounded who got drove off at the point of a bayonet. There wasn't any white flags to be seen that day. Least-ways not here. Just bits of white skull and other stuff layin' around.

"Later, while I was still on the field lookin' for a rifle that'd work, Rodes brings Iverson down here to show him where the men had surrendered, and while their horses is pickin' their way over the corpses that used to be the 20th North Carolina, that bastard Iverson..." Here the old man's voice broke. He paused a long minute, hawked, spat, and continued. "That *bastard* Iverson sees our rows of dead up here, 700 men from the finest brigade the South ever fielded, layin' shot dead in lines as straight as a dress parade, and Iverson thinks they're still duckin' from fire even though Ramseur had driven the Yanks off, and he stands up in his stirrups, his goddamn sorrel horse almost steppin' on Perry, and he screams, 'Stand up and salute when the general passes, you men! Stand up this in-stant!' It was Rodes who realized that they was lookin' at dead men."

Captain Montgomery was panting, barely able to get the words out between wracking gasps for breath. I was having trouble breathing myself. The sickeningly sweet stench from the weeds and vines and dark soil seemed to use up all of the air. I found myself staring at a cluster of grapes on a nearby vine; the swollen fruit looked like bruised flesh streaked with ruptured veins.

"If I'd had my rifle," said the Captain, "I would have shot the bastard right then." He let out a ragged breath. "Him and Rodes went back up the hill together and I never seen Iverson again. Captain Halsey took command of what was left of the regiment. When the brigade reas-sembled the next mornin', 362 men stood muster where 1,470 had answered the call the day before. They called Iverson back to Georgia and put him in charge of a home guard unit or somethin'. Word was, President Davis saved

him from bein' court-martialed or reprimanded. It was clear none of us would've served under the miserable son-of-a-bitch again. You know how the last page of our 20th North Carolina regimental record reads, Boy?"

"No, sir," I said softly.

The old man closed his eyes. "Initiated at Seven Pines, sacrificed at Gettysburg, and surrendered at Appomattox. Help me get to my feet, Boy. We got to find a place to hide."

"To hide, sir?"

"Goddamn right," said the Captain as I acted as a crutch for him. "We've got to be ready when Iverson comes here today." He raised the heavy pistol as if it explained everything. "We've got to be ready when he comes."

It was mid-morning before we found an adequate place to hide. I trailed along behind the limping old man and while part of my mind was desperate with panic to find a way out of such an insane situation, another part—a larger part—had no trouble accepting the logic of everything. Colonel Alfred Iverson, Jr., would have to return to his field of dishonor this day and we had to hide in order to kill him.

"See where the ground's lower here, Boy? Right about where these damn vines is growin'?"

"Yessir."

"Them's Iverson's Pits. That's what the locals call 'em according to John Forney when I come to visit in '98. You know what they are?"

"No, sir," I lied. Part of me knew very well what they were.

"Night after the battle ... battle, hell, *slaughter* ... the few of us left from the regiment and some of Lee's Pio-neers come up and dug big shallow pits and just rolled our boys in where they lay. Laid 'em in together, still in their battle lines. Nate 'n Perry's shoulders was touchin'. Right where I'd been layin'. You can see where the Pits start here. The ground's lower an' the grass is higher, ain't it?"

"Yessir."

"Forney said the grass was always higher here, crops too, when they growed them. Forney didn't farm this field much. Said the hands didn't like to work here. He told his niggers that there weren't nothing to worry about, that the U.C.V.'d come up and dug up everythin' after the war to take our boys back to Richmond, but that ain't really true."

"Why not, sir?" We were wading slowly through the tangle of undergrowth. Vines wrapped around my ankle and I had to tug to free myself.

"They didn't do much diggin' here," said the Captain. "Bones was so thick and scattered that they jes' took a few of 'em and called it quits. Didn't like diggin' here any more than Forney's niggers liked workin' here. Even in the daytime. Place that's got this much shame and anger in it ... well, people *feel* it, don't they, Boy?"

"Yessir," I said automatically, although all I felt at that moment was sick and sleepy.

The Captain stopped. "Goddamnit, that house wasn't here before."

Through a break in the stone wall I could see a small house—more of a large shack, actually—made of wood so dark as to be almost black and set back in the shade of the trees. No driveway or wagon lane led to it, but I could see a faint trampling in Forney's field and the forest grass where horses might have passed through the break in the wall to gain access. The old man seemed deeply offended that someone had built a home so close to the field where his beloved 20th North Carolina had fallen. But the house was dark and silent and we moved away from that section of the wall.

The closer we came to the stone fence, the harder it was to walk. The grass grew twice as high as in the fields beyond and the wild grapevines marked a tangled area about the size of the football field where our Troop prac-ticed its close order drill.

In addition to the tangled grass and thick vines there to hamper our progress, there were the holes. Dozens of them, scores of them, pockmarking the field and lying in wait under the matted foliage.

"Goddamn gophers," said Captain Montgomery, but the holes were twice as wide across the opening as any burrow I had seen made by mole or gopher or ground squirrel. There were no heaps of dirt at the opening. Twice the old man stepped into them, the second time ramming his wooden leg in so deeply that we both had to work to dislodge it. Tugging hard at his wool-covered leg, I sud-denly had the nightmarish sense that someone or some-thing was pulling at the other end, refusing to let go, trying to suck the old man underground.

The incident must have disconcerted Captain Mont-gomery as well, because as soon as his leg popped free of the hole he staggered back a few steps and sat down heav-ily with his back against the stone wall. "This is good enough, Boy," he panted. "We'll wait here."

It was a good place for an ambush. The vines and grass grew waist high there, allowing us glimpses of the field beyond but concealing us as effectively as a duck blind. The wall sheltered our backs.

Captain Montgomery removed his topcoat and canvas bag and commenced to unload, clean, and reload his pis-tol. I lay on the grass nearby, at first thinking about what was going on back at the Reunion, then wondering about how to get the Captain back there, then wondering what Iverson had looked like, then thinking about home, and fi-nally thinking about nothing at all as I moved in and out of a

strange, dream-filled doze.

Not three feet from where I lay was another of the ubiquitous holes, and as I fell into a light slumber I re-mained faintly aware of the odor rising from that opening: the same sickening sweetness I had smelled earlier, but thicker now, heavier, almost erotic with its undertones of corruption and decay, of dead sea creatures drying in the sun. Many years later, visiting an abandoned meat process-ing plant in Chicago with a real estate agent acquaintance, I was to encounter a similar smell; it was the stench of a charnel house, disused for years but permeated with the memory of blood.

The day passed in a haze of heat, thick air, and insect noises. I dozed and awoke to watch with the Captain, dozed again. Once I seem to remember eating hard bis-cuits from his bag and washing them down with the last water from his wineskin, but even that fades into my dreams of that afternoon, for I remember others seated around us, chewing on similar fare and talking in low tones so that the words were indistinguishable but the southern dialect came through clearly. It did not sound strange to me. Once I remember awakening, even though I was sitting up and staring and had thought I was already awake, as the sound of an automobile along the Mummasburg Road shocked me into full consciousness. But the trees at the edge of the field shielded any traffic from view, the sounds faded, and I returned to the drugged doze I had known before.

Sometime late that afternoon I dreamed the one dream I remember clearly.

I was lying in the field, hurt and helpless, the left side of my face in the dirt and my right eye staring unblinkingly at a blue summer sky. An ant walked across my cheek, then another, until a stream of them crossed my cheek and eye, others moving into my nostrils and open mouth. I could not move. I did not blink. I felt them in my mouth, between my teeth, removing bits of morning bacon from between two molars, moving across the soft flesh of my palate, exploring the dark tunnel of my throat. The sensations were not unpleasant.

I was vaguely aware of other things going deeper, of slow movement in the swelling folds of my guts and belly. Small things laid their eggs in the drying corners of my eye.

I could see clearly as a raven circled overhead, spiral-ling lower, landed nearby, paced to and fro in a wing-folding strut, and hopped closer. It took my eye with a single stab of a beak made huge by proximity. In the dark-ness which followed I could still sense the light as my body expanded in the heat, a hatchery to thousands now, the loose cloth of my shirt pulled tight as my flesh ex-panded. I sensed my own internal bacteria, deprived of other foods, digesting my body's decaying fats and rancid pools of blood in a vain effort to survive a few more hours.

I felt my lips wither and dry in the heat, pulling back from my teeth, felt my jaws open wider and wider in a mirthless, silent laugh as ligaments decayed or were

chewed away by small predators. I felt lighter as the eggs hatched, the maggots began their frenzied cleansing, my body turning toward the dark soil as the process accelerated. My mouth opened wide to swallow the waiting Earth. I tasted the dark communion of dirt. Stalks of grass grew where my tongue had been. A flower found rich soil in the humid sepulcher of my skull and sent its shoot curling upward through the gap which had once held my eye.

Settling, relaxing, returning to the acid-taste of the blackness around me, I sensed the others there. Random, shifting currents of soil sent decaying bits of wool or flesh or bone in touch with bits of them, fragments intermingling with the timid eagerness of a lover's first touch. When all else was lost, mingling with the darkness and anger, my bones remained, brittle bits of memory, forgotten, sharp-edged fragments of pain resisting the inevitable relaxation into painlessness, into nothingness.

And deep in that rotting marrow, lost in the loam-black acid of forgetfulness, I remembered. And waited.

"Wake up, Boy! It's him. It's Iverson!"

The urgent whisper shocked me up out of sleep. I looked around groggily, still tasting the dirt from where I had lain with my lips against the ground.

"Goddamnit, I *knew* he'd come!" whispered the Cap-tain, pointing to our left where a man in a dark coat had come out of the woods through the gap in the stone wall.

I shook my head. My dream would not release me and I knuckled my eyes, trying to shake the dimness from them. Then I realized that the dimness was real. The day-light had faded into evening while I slept. I wondered where in God's name the day had gone. The man in the black coat moved through a twilight grayness which seemed to echo the eerie blindness of my dreams. I could make out the man's white shirt and pale face glowing slightly in the gloom as he turned in our direction and came closer, clearing a path for himself with short, sharp chops with a cane or walking stick.

"By God, it *is* him," hissed the Captain and raised his pistol with shaking hands. He thumbed the hammer back as I watched in horror.

The man was closer now, no more than twenty-five feet away, and I could see the dark mustaches, black hair, and deepset eyes. It did indeed look like the man whose visage I had glimpsed by starlight in the old tintype.

Captain Montgomery steadied his pistol on his left arm and squinted over the sights. I could hear hisses of breath from the man in the dark suit as he walked closer, whistling an almost inaudible tune. The Captain squeezed the trigger.

"No!" I cried and grabbed the revolver, jerking it down, the hammer falling cruelly on the web of flesh between my thumb and forefinger. It did not fire.

The Captain shoved me away with a violent blow of his left forearm and struggled to raise the weapon again even as I clung to his wrist. "No!" I shouted again. "He's too young! *Look*. He's too young!"

The old man paused then, his arms still straining, but squinting now at the stranger who stood less than a dozen feet away.

It was true. The man was far too young to be Colonel Iverson. The pale, surprised face belonged to a man in his early thirties at most. Captain Montgomery lowered the pistol and raised trembling fingers to his temples. "My God," he whispered. "My God."

"Who's there?" The man's voice was sharp and assured, despite his surprise. "Show yourself."

I helped the Captain up, sure that the mustached stranger had sensed our movement behind the tall grass and vines but had not witnessed our struggles nor seen the gun. The Captain squinted at the younger man even as he straightened his hat and dropped the pistol in the deep pocket of his coat. I could feel the old man trembling as I steadied him upright.

"Oh, a veteran!" called the man and stepped forward with his hand extended, batting away the grasping vines with easy flicks of his walking stick.

We walked the perimeter of the Pits in the fading light, our new guide moving slowly to accommodate the Captain's painful hobble. The man's walking stick served as a pointer while he spoke. "This was the site of a skirmish before the major battles began," he said. "Not many visitors come out here ... most of the attention is given to more famous areas south and west of here ... but those of us who live or spend summers around here are aware of some of these lesser-known spots. It's quite interesting how the field is sunken here, isn't it?"

"Yes," whispered the Captain. He watched the ground, never raising his eyes to the young man's face.

The man had introduced himself as Jessup Sheads and said that he lived in the small house we had noticed set back in the trees. The Captain had been lost in his confused reverie so I had introduced both of us to Mr. Sheads. Neither man paid notice of my name. The Captain now glanced up at Sheads as if he still could not believe that this was not the man whose name had tormented him for half a century.

Sheads cleared his throat and pointed again at the tangle of thick growth. "As a matter of fact, this area right along here was the site of a minor skirmish before the serious fighting began. The forces of the Confederacy advanced along a broad line here, were slowed briefly by Federal resistance at this wall, but quickly gained the advantage. It was a small Southern victory before the bitter stalemates of the next few days." Sheads paused and smiled at the Captain. "But perhaps you know all



this, sir. What unit did you say you have had the honor of serving with?"

The old man's mouth moved feebly before the words could come. "20th North Carolina," he managed at last.

"Of course!" cried Sheads and clapped the Captain on the shoulder. "Part of the glorious brigade whose victory this site commemorates. I would be honored, sir, if you and your young friend would join me in my home to toast the 20th North Carolina regiment before you return to the Reunion Camp. Would this be possible, sir?"

I tugged at the Captain's coat, suddenly desperate to be away from there, lightheaded from hunger and a sudden surge of unreasoning fear, but the old man straightened his back, found his voice, and said clearly, "The boy and me would be honored, sir."

The cottage had been built of tar-black wood. An expensive-looking black horse, still saddled, was tied to the railing of the small porch on the east side of the house. Behind the house, a thicket of trees and a tumble of boulders made access from that direction seem extremely difficult if not impossible.

The house was small inside and showed few signs of being lived in. A tiny entrance foyer led to a parlor where sheets covered two or three pieces of furniture or to the dining room where Sheads led us, a narrow room with a single window, a tall hoosier cluttered with bottles, cans, and a few dirty plates, and a narrow plank table on which burned an old-style kerosene lamp. Behind dusty curtains there was a second, smaller room, in which I caught a glimpse of a mattress on the floor and stacks of books. A steep staircase on the south side of the dining room led up through a hole in the ceiling to what must have been a small attic room, although all I could see when I glanced upward was a square of blackness.

Jessup Sheads propped his heavy walking stick against the table and busied himself at the hoosier, returning with a decanter and three crystal glasses. The lamp hissed and tossed our shadows high on the roughly plastered wall. I glanced toward the window but the twilight had given way to true night and only darkness pressed against the panes.

"Shall we include the boy in our toast?" asked Sheads, pausing, the decanter hovering above the third wine glass. I had never been allowed to taste wine or any other spirits.

"Yes," said the Captain, staring fixedly at Sheads. The lamplight shone upward into the Captain's face, emphasizing his sharp cheekbones and turning his bushy, old-man's eyebrows into two great wings of hair above his falcon's beak of a nose. His shadow on the wall was a silhouette from another era.

Sheads finished pouring and we raised our glasses. I stared dubiously at the wine;

the red fluid was dull and thick, streaked through with tendrils of black which may or may not have been a trick of the flickering lamp.

"To the 20th North Carolina Regiment," said Sheads and raised his glass. The gesture reminded me of Reverend Hodges lifting the communion cup. The Captain and I raised our glasses and drank.

The taste was a mixture of fruit and copper. It re-minded me of the days, months earlier, when a friend of Billy Stargill had split my lip during a schoolyard fight. The inside of my lip had bled for hours. The taste was not dissimilar.

Captain Montgomery lowered his glass and scowled at it. Droplets of wine clotted his white whiskers.

"The wine is a local variety," said Sheads with a cold smile which showed red-stained teeth. "Very local. The ar-bors are those which we just visited."

I stared at the thickening liquid in my glass. Wine made from grapes grown from the rich soil of Iverson's Pits.

Sheads' loud voice startled me. "Another toast!" He raised his glass. "To the honorable and valiant gentleman who led the 20th North Carolina into battle. To Colonel Alfred Iverson."

Sheads raised the glass to his lips. I stood frozen and staring. Captain Montgomery slammed his glass on the ta-ble. The old man's face had gone as blood red as the spilled wine. "I'll be goddamned to hell if I..." he splut-tered. "I'll ... *never!*"

The man who had introduced himself as Jessup Sheads drained the last of his wine and smiled. His skin was as white as his shirt front, his hair and long mustaches as black as his coat. "Very well," he said and then raised his voice. "Uncle Alfred?"

Even as Sheads had been drinking, part of my mind had registered the soft sound of footsteps on the stairs be-hind us. I turned only my head, my hand still frozen with the glass of wine half-raised.

The small figure standing on the lowest step was a man in his mid-eighties, at least, but rather than wearing the wrinkles of age like Captain Montgomery, this old man's skin had become smoother and pinker, almost trans-lucent. I was reminded of a nest of newborn rats I had come across in a neighbor's barn the previous spring—a mass of pale-pink, writhing flesh which I had made the mistake of touching. I did not want to touch Iverson.

The Colonel wore a white beard very much like the one I had seen in portraits of Robert E. Lee, but there was no real resemblance. Where Lee's eyes had been sad and shielded under a brow weighted with sorrow, Iverson glared at us with wide, staring eyes shot through with yel-low flecks. He was almost bald and the taut, pink scalp re-inforced the effect of something almost infantile about the little man.

Captain Montgomery stared, his mouth open, his breath rasping out in short, labored gasps. He clutched at his own collar as if unable to pull in enough air.

Iverson's voice was soft, almost feminine, and edged with the whine of a petulant child. "You all come back sooner or later," he said with a hint of a slight lisp. He sighed deeply. "Is there no end to it?"

"You..." managed the Captain. He lifted a long finger to point at Iverson.

"Spare me your outrage," snapped Iverson. "Do you think you are the first to seek me out, the first to try to explain away your own cowardice by slandering me? Samuel and I have grown quite adept at handling trash like you. I only hope that you are the last."

The Captain's hand dropped, disappeared in the folds of his coat. "You goddamned, sonofabitching..."

"Silence!" commanded Iverson. The Colonel's wide-eyed gaze darted around the room, passing over me as if I weren't there. The muscles at the corners of the man's mouth twitched and twisted. Again I was reminded of the nest of newborn rats. "Samuel," he shouted, "bring your stick. Show this man the penalty for insolence." Iverson's mad stare returned to Captain Montgomery. "You will salute me before we are finished here."

"I will see you in hell first," said the Captain and pulled the revolver from his coat pocket.

Iverson's nephew moved very fast, lifting the heavy walking stick and slamming it down on the Captain's wrist before the old man could pull back the hammer. I stood frozen, my wine glass still in my hand, as the pistol thud-ded to the floor. Captain Montgomery bent and reached for it—awkward and slow with his false leg—but Iverson's nephew grabbed him by the collar and flung him backward as effortlessly as an adult would handle a child. The Captain struck the wall, gasped, and slid down it, his false leg gouging splinters from the uneven floorboards as his legs straightened. His face was as gray as his uniform coat.

Iverson's nephew crouched to recover the pistol and set it on the table. Colonel Iverson himself smiled and nodded, his mouth still quivering toward a grin. I had eyes only for the Captain.

The old man lay huddled against the wall, clutching at his own throat, his body arching with spasms as he gasped in one great breath after another, each louder and more ragged than the last. It was obvious that no air was reaching his lungs; his color had gone from red to gray to a terrible dark purple bordering on black. His tongue protruded and saliva flecked his whiskers. The Captain's eyes grew wider and rounder as he realized what was happening to him, but his horrified gaze never left Iverson's face.

I could see the immeasurable frustration in the Captain's eyes as his body betrayed him in these last few seconds of a confrontation he had waited for through half a century of single-minded obsession. The old man drew in two more ragged, wracking breaths and then quit breathing. His chin collapsed onto his sunken chest, the gnarled hands relaxed into loose fists, and his eyes lost their fixed focus on Iverson's face.

As if suddenly released from my own paralysis, I let out a cry, dropped the wine glass to the floor, and ran to crouch next to Captain Montgomery. No breath came from his grotesquely opened mouth. The staring eyes already were beginning to glaze with an invisible film. I touched the gnarled old hands—the flesh already seeming to cool and stiffen in death—and felt a terrible constriction in my own chest. It was not grief. Not exactly. I had known the old man too briefly and in too strange a context to feel deep sorrow so soon. But I found it hard to draw a breath as a great emptiness opened in me, a knowledge that sometimes there is no justice, that life was not fair. *It wasn't fair.* I gripped the old man's dead hands and found myself weeping for myself as much as for him.

"Get out of the way," Iverson's nephew thrust me aside and crouched next to the Captain. He shook the old man by his shirtfront, roughly pinched the bruise-colored cheeks, and laid an ear to the veteran's chest.

"Is he dead, Samuel?" asked Iverson. There was no real interest in his voice.

"Yes, Uncle." The nephew stood and nervously tugged at his mustache.

"Yes, yes," said Iverson in his distracted, petulant voice. "It does not matter." He flicked his small, pink hand in a dismissive gesture. "Take him out to be with the others, Samuel."

Iverson's nephew hesitated and then went into the back room to emerge a moment later with a pickaxe, a long-handled shovel, and a lantern. He jerked me to my feet and thrust the shovel and lantern into my hands.

"What about the boy, Uncle?"

Iverson's yellow gaze seemed absorbed with the shadows near the foot of the stairs. He wrung his soft hands. "Whatever you decide, Samuel," he whined. "Whatever you decide."

The nephew lighted the lantern I was holding, grasped the Captain under one arm, and dragged his body toward the door. I noticed that some of the straps holding the old man's leg had come loose; I could not look away from where the wooden peg dangled loosely from the stump of dead flesh and bone.

The nephew dragged the old man's body through the foyer, out the door, and into the night. I stood there—a statue with shovel and hissing lantern—praying that I would be forgotten. Cool, thin fingers fell on the nape of my neck. A soft, insistent

voice whispered, "Come along, young man. Do not keep Samuel and me waiting."

Iverson's nephew dug the grave not ten yards from where the Captain and I had lain in hiding all day. Even if it had been daylight, the trees along the road and the grape arbors would have shielded us from view of anyone passing along the Mummasburg Road. No one passed. The night was brutally dark; low clouds occluded the stars and the only illumination was from my lantern and the faintest hint of light from Iverson's cabin a hundred yards behind us.

The black horse tied to the porch railing watched our strange procession leave the house. Captain Montgomery's hat had fallen off near the front step and I awkwardly bent to pick it up. Iverson's soft fingers never left my neck.

The soil in the field was loose and moist and easily ex-cavated. Iverson's nephew was down three feet before twenty minutes had passed. Bits of root, rock, and other things glowed whitely in the heap of dirt illuminated by the lantern's glare.

"That is enough," ordered Iverson. "Get it over with, Samuel."

The nephew paused and looked up at the Colonel. The cold light turned the young man's face into a white mask, glistening with sweat, the whiskers and eyebrows broad strokes of charcoal, as black as the smudge of dirt on his left cheek. After a second to catch his breath, he nodded, set down his shovel, and reached out to roll Captain Mont-gomery's body into the grave. The old man landed on his back, eyes and mouth still open. His wooden leg had been dragging loosely and now remained behind on the brink of the hole. Iverson's nephew looked at me with hooded eyes, reached for the leg, and tossed it onto the Captain's chest. Without looking down, the nephew retrieved the shovel and quickly began scooping dirt onto the body. *I* watched. I watched the black soil land on my old veteran's cheek and forehead. I watched the dirt cover the staring eyes, first the left and then the right. I watched the open mouth fill with dirt and I felt the constriction in my own throat swell and break loose. Huge, silent sobs shook me.

In less than a minute, the Captain was gone, nothing more than an outline on the floor of the shallow grave.

"Samuel," lisped Iverson.

The nephew paused in his labors and looked at the Colonel.

"What is your advice about ... the other thing?" Iverson's voice was so soft that it was almost lost beneath the hissing of the lantern and the pounding of pulse in my ears.

The nephew wiped his cheek with the back of his hand, broadening the dark smear there, and nodded slowly. "I think we have to, Uncle. We just cannot afford to ... we cannot risk it. Not after the Florida thing..."

Iverson sighed. "Very well. Do what you must. I will abide by your decision."

The nephew nodded again, let out a breath, and reached for the pickaxe where it lay embedded in the heap of freshly excavated earth. Some part of my mind screamed at me to run, but I was capable only of standing there at the edge of that terrible pit, holding the lantern and breathing in the smell of Samuel's sweat and a deeper, more pervasive stench that seemed to rise out of the pit, the heap of dirt, the surrounding arbors.

"Put the light down, young man," Iverson whispered, inches from my ear. "Put it down carefully." His cool fin-gers closed more tightly on my neck. I set the lantern down, positioning it with care so that it would not tip over. Iverson's cold grip moved me forward to the very brink of the pit. His nephew stood waist-high in the hole, holding the pickaxe and fixing his dark gaze on me with a look conveying something between regret and anticipation. He shifted the pick handle in his large, white hands. I was about to say "It's all right" when his determined stare changed to wide-eyed surprise.

Samuel's body lurched, steadied, and then lurched again. It was as if he had been standing on a platform which had dropped a foot, then eighteen inches. Where the edges of the grave had come just to his waist, they now rose to his armpits.

Iverson's nephew threw aside the pickaxe and thrust his arms out onto solid ground. But the ground was no longer solid. Colonel Iverson and I stumbled backwards as the earth seemed to vibrate and then flow like a mudslide. The nephew's left hand seized my ankle, his right hand sought a firm grip on thick vines. Iverson's hand remained firm on my neck, choking me.

Suddenly there came the sound of collapsing, sliding dirt, as if the floor of the grave had given way, collapsing through the ceiling of some forgotten mine or cavern, and the nephew threw himself forward, half out of the grave, his chest pressed against the slippery edges of the pit, his fingers releasing my ankle to claw at loam and vines. He reminded me of a mountain climber on a rocky overhang, using only his fingers and the friction of his upper body to defy the pull of gravity.

"Help me." His voice was a whisper, contorted by ef-fort and disbelief.

Colonel Iverson backed away another five steps and I was pulled along.

Samuel was winning the struggle with the collapsing grave. His left hand found the pickaxe where he had buried it in the mound of dirt and he used the handle for leverage, pulling himself upward until his right knee found purchase on the edge of the pit.

The edge collapsed.

Dirt from the three-foot-high mound flowed past the handle of the pick, over the nephew's straining arm and shoulder, back into the pit. The earth had been moist but

solid where Samuel excavated it; now it flowed like frictionless mud, like water ... like black wine.

Samuel slid back into the pit, now filled with viscous dirt, with only his face and upraised fingers rising out of the pool of black, shifting soil.

Suddenly there came a sound from all around us as if many large forms had shifted position under blankets of grass and vines. Leaves stirred. Vines snapped. There was no breeze.

Iverson's nephew opened his mouth to scream and a wave of blackness flowed in between his teeth. His eyes were not human. Without warning, the ground shifted again and the nephew was pulled violently out of sight. He disappeared as quickly and totally as a swimmer pulled down by a shark three times his size.

There came the sound of teeth.

Colonel Iverson whimpered then, making the noise of a small child being made to go to his room without a light. His grip loosened on my neck.

Samuel's face appeared one last time, protruding eyes filmed with dirt. Something had taken most of the flesh from his right cheek. I realized that the sound I now heard was a man trying to scream with his larynx and esophagus half-filled with dirt.

He was pulled under again. Colonel Iverson took another three steps back and released my neck. I grabbed up the lantern and ran.

I heard a shout behind me and I looked over my shoulder just long enough to see Colonel Iverson coming through the break in the fence. He was out of the field, staggering, wheezing, but still coming on.

I ran with the speed of a terrified ten-year-old, the lantern swinging wildly from my right hand, throwing shifting patterns of light on leaves, branches, rocks. I had to have the light with me. There was a single thought in my mind: the Captain's pistol lying where Samuel had laid it on the table.

The saddled horse was pulling at its tether when I reached the house; its eyes were wild, alarmed at me, the swinging lantern, Iverson shouting far behind me, or the sudden terrible stench that drifted from the fields. I ignored the animal and slammed through the doorway, past the foyer, and into the dining room. I stopped, panting, grinning with terror and triumph.

The pistol was gone.

For seconds or minutes I stood in shock, not being able to think at all. Then, still holding the lantern, I looked under the table, in the hoosier, in the tiny back room. The pistol was not there. I started for the door, heard noises on the porch, headed up the stairs, and then paused in indecision.

"Is this ... what you are after ... young man?" Iverson stood panting at the entrance to the dining room, his left hand braced against the doorjamb, his right hand raised with the pistol leveled at me. "Slander, all slander," he said and squeezed the trigger.

The Captain had called the pistol a "double action." The hammer clicked back, locked into place, but did not fire. Iverson glanced at it and raised it toward me again. I threw the lantern at his face.

The Colonel batted it aside, breaking the glass. Flames ignited the ancient curtains and shot toward the ceiling, scorching Iverson's right side. He cursed and dropped the revolver. I vaulted over the stair railing, grabbed the kerosene lamp from the table, and threw it into the back room. Bedding and books burst into flame as the lamp oil spread. Dropping on all fours, I scrabbled toward the pistol but Iverson kicked at my head. He was old and slow and I easily rolled aside, but not before the burning curtain fell between me and the weapon. Iverson reached for it, pulled his hand back from the flames, and fled cursing out the front door.

I crouched there a second, panting. Flames shot along cracks in the floorboards, igniting pitch pine and the framework of the tinder-dry house itself. Outside the horse whinnied, either from the smell of smoke or the attempts of the Colonel to gain the saddle. I knew that nothing could stop Iverson from riding south or east, into the woods, toward the town, away from Iverson's Pits.

I reached into the circle of flame, screaming silently as part of my tunic sleeve charred away and blisters erupted on my palm, wrist, and lower arm. I dragged the pistol back, tossing the heated metal from hand to hand. Only later did I wonder why the gunpowder in the cartridges did not explode. Cradling the weapon in my burned hands, I stumbled outside.

Colonel Iverson had mounted but had only one boot in a stirrup. One rein dragged loosely while he tugged violently at the other, trying to turn the panicked horse back toward the forest. Toward the burning house. The mare had backed away from the flames and was intent on running toward the break in the wall. Toward the Pits. Iverson fought it. The result was that the mare spun in circles, the whites of its eyes showing at each revolution.

I stumbled off the porch of the burning cottage and lifted the heavy weapon just as Iverson managed to stop the horse's gyrations and leaned forward to grab the loose rein. With both reins in hand and the mare under control, he kicked hard to ride past me—or ride me down—on his way into the darkness of the trees. It took all of my strength to thumb the hammer back, blisters bursting on my thumb as I did so, and fire. I had not taken time to aim. The bullet ripped through branches ten feet above Iverson. The recoil almost made me drop the gun.

The mare spun back toward the darkness behind it.

Iverson forced it around again, urged it forward with violent kicks of his small, black shoes.



My second shot went into the dirt five feet in front of me. Flesh peeled back from my burned thumb as I forced the hammer back the third time, aiming the impossibly heavy weapon between the mare's rolling eyes. I was sob-bing so fiercely that I could not see Iverson clearly, but I could clearly hear him curse as his horse refused to ap-proach the flames and source of noise a third time. I wiped at my eyes with my scorched sleeve just as Iverson wheeled the mare away from the light and gave it its head. My third shot went high again, but Iverson's horse gal-loped into the darkness, not staying on the faint path, jumping the stone wall in a leap which cleared the rocks by two feet.

I ran after them, still sobbing, tripping twice in the darkness but keeping possession of the pistol. By the time I reached the wall, the entire house was ablaze behind me, sparks drifting overhead and curtains of red light dancing across the forest and fields. I jumped to the top of the wall and stood there weaving, gasping for breath, and watching.

Iverson's mount had made it thirty yards or so beyond the wall before being forced to a halt. It was rearing now, both reins flying free as the white-bearded man on its back clung desperately with both hands in its mane.

The arbors were moving. Tall masses of vines rose as high as the horse's head, vague shapes seeming to move under a shifting surface of leaves. The earth itself was heaving into hummocks and ridges. And holes.

I saw them clearly in the bonfire light. Mole holes. Gopher holes. But as broad across the opening as the trunk of a man. And ribbed inside, lined with ridges of blood-red cartilage. It was like looking down the maw of a snake as its insides pulsed and throbbed expectantly.

Only worse.

If you have seen a lamprey preparing to feed you might know what I mean. The holes had teeth. Rows of teeth. They were ringed with teeth. The earth had opened to show its red-rimmed guts, ringed with sharp white teeth.

The holes moved. The mare danced in panic but the holes shifted like shadows in the broad circle of bare earth which had cleared itself of vines. Around the circumfer-ence, dark shapes rose beneath the arbors.

Iverson screamed then. A second later his horse let out a similar noise as a hole closed on its right front leg. I clearly heard the bone snap and sever. The horse went down with Iverson rolling free. There were more snapping noises and the horse lifted its neck to watch with mad, white eyes as the earth closed around its four stumps of legs, shredding the ligament and muscle from bone as eas-ily as someone stripping strands of dark meat from a drumstick.

In twenty seconds there was only the thrashing trunk of the mare, rolling in the black dirt and black blood in a vain attempt to avoid the shifting lamprey teeth. Then the

holes closed on the animal's neck.

Colonel Iverson rose to his knees, then to his feet. The only sounds were the crackling of flames behind me, the rustling of vines, and the high, hysterical panting of Iverson himself. The man was giggling.

In rows five hundred yards long, in lines as straight as a dress parade and as precise as battle lines, the earth trembled and furrowed, folding on itself, vines and grass and black soil rising and falling, rippling like rats moving under a thin blanket. Or like the furling of a flag.

Iverson screamed as the holes opened under him and around him. Somehow he managed to scream a second time as the upper half of his body rolled free across the waiting earth, one hand clawing for leverage in the undulating dirt while the other hand vainly attempted to tuck in the parts of himself which trailed behind.

The holes closed again. There was no screaming now as only the small, pink oval rolled in the dirt, but I will be certain to my dying day that I saw the white beard move as the jaws opened silently, saw the flicker of white and yellow as the eyes blinked.

The holes closed a third time.

I stumbled away from the wall, but not before I had thrown the revolver as far out into the field as I could manage. The burning house had collapsed into itself but the heat was tremendous, far too hot for me to sit so close.

My eyebrows were quickly singed away and steam rose on my sweat-soaked clothes, but I stayed as close to the fire as I could for as long as I could. Close to the light.

I have no memory of the fire brigade that found me or of the men who brought me back to town sometime before dawn.

Wednesday, July 2, was Military Day at the Great Re-union. It rained hard all afternoon but speeches were given in the Great Tent. Sons and grandsons of General Longstreet and General Pickett and General Meade were present on the speakers' platform.

I remember awakening briefly in the hospital tent to the sound of rain on canvas. Someone was explaining to someone that facilities were better there than in the old hospital in town. My arms and hands were swathed in bandages. My brow burned with fever. "Rest easy, lad," said Reverend Hodges, his face heavy with worry. "I've cabled your parents. Your father will be here before night-fall." I nodded and stifled the urge to scream in the inter-minable seconds before sleep claimed me again. The beating of rain on the tent had sounded like teeth scraping bone.

Thursday, July 3, was Civic Day at the Great Reunion. Survivors of Pickett's brigade

and ex-Union troops from the Philadelphia Brigade Association formed two lines and walked fifty feet north and south to the wall on Cemetery Ridge which marked the so-called high water mark of the Confederacy. Both sides lowered battle flags until they crossed above the wall. Then a bearer symbolically lifted the Stars and Stripes above the crossed battle flags. Every-one cheered. Veterans embraced one another.

I remember fragments of the train ride home that morning. I remember my father's arm around me. I re-member my mother's face when we arrived at the station in Chestnut Hill.

Friday, July 4, was National Day at the Great Reunion. President Wilson addressed all of the veterans in the Great Tent at 11 A.M. He spoke of healing wounds, forgetting past differences, of forgetting old quarrels. He spoke of valor and courage and glory which the ages would not di-minish. When he was finished, they played the National Anthem and an honor guard fired a salute. Then all the old men went home.

I remember parts of my dreams that day. They were the same dreams I have now. Several times I awoke screaming. My mother tried to hold my hand but I wanted nothing to touch me. Nothing at all.

Seventy-five years have passed since my first trip to Gettysburg. I have been back many times. The guides and rangers and librarians there know me by name. Some flat-ter me with the title historian.

Nine veterans died during the Great Reunion of 1913—five of heart problems, two of heatstroke, and one of pneumonia. The ninth veteran's death certificate lists the cause of death as "old age." One veteran simply disap-peared sometime between his registration and the date he was expected back at a home for retired veterans in Ra-leigh, North Carolina. The name of Captain Powell D. Montgomery of Raleigh, North Carolina, veteran of the 20th North Carolina Regiment, was never added to the list of the nine veterans who died. He had no family and was not missed for some weeks after the Reunion ended.

Jessup Sheads had indeed built the small house south-east of the Forney farm, on the site where the 97th New York regiment had silently waited behind a stone wall for the advance of Colonel Alfred Iverson's men. Sheads de-signed the small house as a summer home and erected it in the spring of 1893. He never stayed in it. Sheads was described as a short, stout, redheaded man, cleanshaven, with a weakness for wine. It was he who had planted the grape arbors shortly before his death from a heart attack in that same year of 1893. His widow rented the summer house out through agents for the years until the cottage burned in the summer of 1913. No records were kept of the renters.

Colonel Alfred Iverson, Jr., ended the war as a Briga-dier General despite being

relieved of his command after undisclosed difficulties during the opening skirmishes of the Battle of Gettysburg. After the war, Iverson was engaged in unlucky business ventures in Georgia and then in Florida, leaving both areas under unclear circumstances. In Florida, Iverson was involved in the citrus business with his grand-nephew, Samuel Strahl, an outspoken member of the KKK and a rabid defender of his grand-uncle's name and reputation. It was rumored that Stahl had killed at least two men in illegal duels and he was wanted for questioning in Broward County in relation to the disappearance of a 78-year-old man named Phelps Rawlins. Rawlins had been a veteran of the 20th North Carolina Regiment. Stahl's wife reported him missing during a month-long hunting trip in the summer of 1913. She lived on in Macon, Georgia, until her death in 1948.

Alfred Iverson, Jr., is listed in different sources as dying in 1911, 1913, or 1915. Historians frequently confused Iverson with his father, the Senator, and although both are supposed to be buried in the family crypt in Atlanta, records at the Oakland Cemetery show that there is only one coffin entombed there.

Many times over the years have I dreamt the dream I remember from that hot afternoon in the grape arbors. Only my field of view in that dream changes—from blue sky and a stone wall under spreading branches to trenches and barbed wire, to rice paddies and monsoon clouds, to frozen mud along a frozen river, to thick, tropical vegetation which swallows light. Recently I have dreamed that I am lying in the ash of a city while snow falls from low clouds. But the fruit and copper taste of the soil remains the same. The silent communion among the casually sacrificed and the forgotten-buried also remains the same. Sometimes I think of the mass graves which have fertilized this century and I weep for my grandson and great-grandchildren.

I have not visited the battlefields in some years. The last time was twenty-five years ago in the quiet spring of 1963, three months before the insanity of that summer's centennial celebration of the battles. The Mummasburg Road had been paved and widened. John Forney's house had not been there for years but I did note a proliferation of iris where the foundation had once stood. The town of Gettysburg is much larger, of course, but zoning restrictions and the historical park have kept new houses from being built in the vicinity.

Many of the trees along the stone wall have died of Dutch elm disease and other blights. Only a few yards of the wall itself remain, the stones having been carried off for fireplaces and patios. The city is clearly visible across the open fields.

No sign of Iverson's Pits remains. No one I spoke to who lives in the area remembers them. The fields there are green when lying fallow and incredibly productive when tilled, but this is true of most of the surrounding Pennsylvania countryside.

Last winter a friend and fellow amateur historian wrote to tell me that a small

archaeological team from Penn State University had done a trial dig in the Oak Hill area. He wrote that the dig had yielded a veritable goldmine of relics—bullets, brass buttons, bits of mess kits, canister fragments, five almost intact bayonets, bits of bone—all of the stubborn objects which decaying flesh leaves behind like minor footnotes in time.

And teeth, wrote my friend.

Many, many teeth.

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