

UNLIKELY COMPANIONS

Short Story (Fiction)

By

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The 25th of February 1865 was an unusually warm day for that time of year in Tennessee. Although it looked like winter, the temperatures said otherwise. Wool uniforms were beginning to feel downright hot, particularly when walking. The small squad of Union soldiers was sent out for the day on a “clean up” to see if there were any rebels in the area, and hopefully get them to surrender and eventually take the oath of allegiance. Tennessee was supposed to be secure. There may be some holdouts in the mountains, but this was the flatlands, and it seemed quiet. Will Gray, who had volunteered last spring, had lied about his age. He was only seventeen, but wanted desperately to do his part. He was from Maine, and really did not like this kind of weather. It hadn’t dawned on him that most of this war, outside of Gettysburg, had been fought in the South where the summers were really hot. Even this winter, to him, was warm. There was no real cover from the sun, except when they made it into a pine forest which provided some relief. The small squad of twelve privates headed up by a sergeant and corporal, were just going through their motions and hoping to be going home before too long. Everything had been moving against the Confederacy since Gettysburg, and they had heard that Grant was catching up to Lee and hopefully when he beat the Army of Northern Virginia everything would be over. Because of this, the group of young men was in good spirits, and their banter and joking was just adding to their knowledge that they would soon be on their way home to their wives, children, sweethearts, and parents. The sergeant, who was not as young as this group, and battle experienced, turned and told them to keep the noise down. They could walk up on a pack of Rebs and not even know it. But this was hard to do, and he realized it. These were little more than boys, and they had not faced any real fighting, and hopefully at this stage would not. They crossed a field that looked like it had not been plowed in a few years, and made it up a hill to a pine forest where the tall pines gave them some respite from the sun. They found a narrow trail, what William usually called a “pig path” which was bordered on their right side by a thicket of bushes and vines and on the other by a steep bank that had been cut by the creek that flowed at the base of it.

Will looked at one of his buddies and said “This is really nice. It looks like we came into another world once we got in these woods. It is almost comfortable in here.”

The soldier nodded in agreement, and they continued on their journey. The sergeant was looking around, and seemed to be getting cautious. He stopped his group, turned and told them, “I don’t like this. It’s too quiet in

here. There are no birds singing or any varmints in sight. I've never walked through woods like this and not see a single hare or squirrel moving around. Something has been here and got them scared and they are quiet. Go ahead and load your rifles. The enemy could be in here."

That changed the whole complexion of the group. These boys weren't used to a situation like this, and it was obvious that they were getting a little scared.

"Let's keep moving" said the sergeant. "Best we get out of these woods as soon as we can. All of you, don't bunch up. Spread out in a single file, and don't stop."

Will was scared, but he trusted the sergeant, and just kept walking. He figured as long as they kept moving, they would not be an easy target. If they stopped, it could be a turkey shoot, and they would all be targets. As they walked along in their single file, they gradually became more comfortable. They began to look up through the trees and could see the blue sky and clouds. They were feeling better. But the sergeant was not better, because the lay of the land had not changed. They were still sitting ducks. As he continued on with his boys behind him he thought that he would rather sweat in the sun than be hemmed up in woods like this. There wasn't even a place to run if something happened.

"Keep moving, and get your rifles off your shoulders. Have them ready to fire", said their sergeant, who was noticeably getting very concerned. He had been in some battles, and had been bush wacked by rebels before, in situations similar to this, but not this bad. He was looking for an exit, but the only one was either go back or go forward, and who knows what could be down this path waiting on them or even following them. He was becoming consumed by these thoughts.

As he kept walking, he spoke to them as quietly as he could without turning around, "Keep your mouths shut and keep moving. If anybody hears anything, drop to the ground, and we will follow suit."

It was dead quiet. There was not a sound, only the shuffling of boots, young men walking as softly as they could. They were scared thought Will, who was near the end of the line. He could hear their heavy breathing, and he could even hear his heart pounding. But they all still had confidence in their leader. He had been here before, and they believed he would get them out of this.

The noise he heard sounded like a cannon. He could see smoke coming out of the bushes on their right. The loudness of the sound was caused by rifles all being fired at the same time. It was to be the last sound most of them ever heard. William was hit in his upper right leg, close to his hip. His only thought was that it felt like

somebody had driven a hot poker into his leg with a sledge hammer. He stumbled, his rifle flew out of his hand, and he fell over the edge of the gully and started rolling over and over down the bank. The pain seemed to stab into his leg every time he rolled and it touched the ground. He came to a stop at the bottom of the gully face down, and that is the last he recalled, because he was unconscious, which would give him some respite from the terrible pain in his leg.

At the top of the gully the rebels had come out from hiding to take a look at their damage. Everyone was dead. The rebel who appeared to be in charge told his group to take the rifles and ammunition, and anything else they might want. They did, and with a great deal of glee, because they were getting better Union rifles. These rebels were some of the leftovers from a battle near the mountains. They probably made a run for it to get away from the overwhelming number of Union army that they were fighting. In all the confusion, no Confederate officer took notice of them. If he had, they may have been shot.

Before leaving, one rebel looked down at Will in the gully and said "You reckon he's dead? I hope so, because I sure as the devil ain't going down that bank and check on him."

The others looked down, and all agreed that he was dead. He wasn't moving, and blood was all over his leg from the waist down. They felt that more than likely, he had bled to death. Then they all left, not down the road, but back into the bushes and woods, most likely to catch another group of Union soldiers.

It was dark when Will started reviving. The first thing he felt was the stabbing pain in his leg. It was unbearable. He had to think awhile to remember where he was and what had transpired. When it finally came to him, he was too scared to move, afraid that the Rebs were still up there, and would come down and finish him off if they heard him. It seemed quite up above, so with much effort, he was able to roll over onto his back, by rolling to his left and keeping the wounded leg off the ground. It hurt beyond belief, and he couldn't tell if he was still bleeding or not. He guessed if he was, he would be dead, so he was thankful for that anyway. All he could do was lay there and look up, and stare at the stars and the full moon that was out. It was the only peaceful thing he had experienced lately. He remembered sitting outside his home in Maine, and watching the full moon come up, particularly in the fall. It was so beautiful to him and so peaceful. Now that is all he had, and it was still beautiful to him. But the pain was still there. It was always there. Then he started to worry. As he listened, the night sounds were in the woods, so much more alive than the dead silence during the day. He knew that there must be bears, wildcats, and maybe wolves in these woods, and he was easy game for them. But he guessed they would go first for

his dead comrades at the top of the gully before coming for him, if they were still there. He had no idea, and he heard no human sounds.

He awoke suddenly and hadn't even realized he had been sleeping, but he was glad, because the pain wasn't there when he slept. It was morning and he was terribly thirsty and hungry. There was nothing to eat except weeds, but he could get some water, since he had landed only a foot from the creek. It was slow, but he rolled back over, and dipped water by the handful, which made him feel much better. He decided that the only thing he could do was to lay still but be able to look up if he heard someone above him on the path. If they were Union, he would yell, but if they were Rebs, he had best keep quiet. He would rather die there than be in a Rebel prison. He even wondered if his commanding officer would send some troops to look for them since they never came back to camp. Probably not, because boys like him were most likely to go "lickety split" back home and get out of this war. They probably figured the bunch was half way to Maine by now.

Will started to realize that all kind of thoughts and fears start running through your head when you are lying in the woods, in enemy territory, totally helpless. As he thought, he decided that it was even dangerous to sleep. At night, he had heard of snakes crawling up on someone's body to keep warm. It was cool here at night, and he knew there were rattlesnakes and water moccasins around. He was beside a creek, right where they lived. *Oh Lord*, he thought. *Please don't let me die by being snake bit.*

He lay there all day. He had tried to move a little by crawling, but it was too painful with his leg, and he had nothing to hold onto to pull him along with his arms. He was stuck. That is all there was to it. If a friendly face didn't come by, he would most likely die here. He stayed awake that night, waiting on a snake, which never came. The next day, he was thirsty and so hungry he could barely stand it. But he was thinking clearer. He just couldn't eat weeds, but then the memory came to him. He had a pack on his back, and there was some food in there. But getting to it was the problem. He could roll over on his good leg to get a strap off his back, but he could only imagine how painful it would be to roll over on his right side. He had to figure a way to get it off. Finally, he felt the only way was to lie on his back and reach across and pull the straps off the opposite shoulder. He tried, and it worked, easier than he thought. That was the first good thing to happen to him in two days. He did find some food, as there were some hard biscuits, but that was all. He knew he had to ration them. With what he had, he could probably last for three days, and then he would be back to no food and possible starving. He heard some noises at the top of the gully, but tried not to think about it. He had no idea what it was, but guessed that it had found the

dead bodies of his friends. He would really love to yell or try to throw a rock up there, but he dared not draw attention to himself from whatever it was. He ate the next rationed biscuit and rolled over to dip some more water from the creek. He knew that he needed to stay awake, but he was so sleepy from his restless night that he could barely keep his eyes open.

He was startled by the sound of running. It sounded like it was a ways back down the path where he and his friends had been walking a few days ago. But who or whatever it was had no concern about making noise, because the footsteps were really pounding on the dusty path. He strained to rise up on his elbows and look as far as he could down the path, when he saw him. It was someone in a worn out gray uniform running. They were not carrying a rifle, and kept turning around to look back. He thought about what to do. This was a Reb, but he wasn't armed, and was running from someone. It could be his only chance for help. He decided to try and get his attention. He waited and just as the man was right above him Will yelled for help. The runner stopped in his tracks, looked down and spoke down to him, "Who are you?"

Will spoke back to him, "I'm Will. Who are you?"

"I go by Josh," came the reply from the runner.

Will asked him, "Can you help me Josh? I have been down here going on three days, and have a bullet in my leg and can't walk. I'm not going to make it if you don't help me."

"But you're a Yankee, ain't you".

"I am. And you're a Rebel. But neither one of us is armed. And you don't appear to be marchin' with no army."

"You're sure right" said Josh. "But how in the world can I get you out of there and up here?"

"Please try, or I will truly not make it"

Josh decided to help him, and stepped over the edge of the gully and promptly rolled to the bottom. He ended up a few feet below Will and sat up and laughed, "Well I made it down."

"Let me think," said Josh. "It looks like I'm goin' to have to drag you. I've done it a many a time when I shoot a deer back home. I sure can't carry him, so I drag him on something I put together."

Josh went to work. He found three saplings and cut them down with his knife. It seemed to last forever doing it, but he knew what he was doing. Then he came back and sat down beside Will and started to put it all together. Before he did, he took off his old gray coat and run the shorter sapling through the arms. Cut the straps

off Will's back pack, cut two holes through the shoulders of the coat and then ran each sapling through each hole tying them to the sapling that ran through the arms. Finally he buttoned it up, and told Will, "It ain't going to be the best way to travel and it is going to hurt, but I do believe we can do it. You ain't much heavier than a deer, and I can drag them for miles. But Will, there ain't no way I can drag you up that hill, but this gully levels out once we drop down some coming to that old cornfield back yonder. We're going to go back and go through that way, and I hope to God those soldiers don't chase me down, or we are both goners."

"Josh, I am sure you can do it. So you were running too?"

Josh looked down at him, "Yeah. I had no stomach for this war. I just got in the army two weeks ago. Now let's get movin'."

The dragging was painful, but not quite as bad as Will had anticipated. They got to the field, and started heading north, by the sun. Josh was very cautious and got down any time he heard a noise. It was usually a deer, but he took no chances. He took a break in some tall grass, and asked Will if he had a plan if they got caught?

Will thought for a little bit and told Josh, "I think if we find a Union camp, we will both be fine. I will tell them I was shot by Rebs, but you came along and rescued me. The worst they will do is make you a prisoner. I'm not sure what will happen if the Rebs catch us. What do you think Josh, being a Reb?"

"They'll shoot us both" said Josh.

"Well if that's the case, I say let's look for Union soldiers, and lay low if Rebs come by," replied Will.

So they started back. It was late afternoon, and they decided to stop for the night. Will still held on to his pack and they both ate a biscuit. Josh found a stream, filled his hat with water and they drank that. They talked for awhile. Will telling about where he came from, and Josh doing the same. Then they fell asleep without even realizing they were sleepy, exhausted from the day's travel.

Josh woke up first. The sun was just before rising, and he woke Will up. "Let's get to moving before the sun get's too high. It is starting to get a little cloudy, getting colder, and we can have snow here in Tennessee in March. I don't want to end up freezing to death."

It was late in the afternoon, the clouds had gone away, but it was still getting colder. Will was lying on the carrier that Josh had made looked over his shoulder at the sun getting low in the western sky. He was worrying about spending a night outside in the cold. They couldn't build a fire. It would draw attention like a moth to a flame.

“Look” Josh said with excitement, “That looks like smoke, maybe a half mile up ahead.”

Will couldn't see, but advised him to keep going. If it was a Union camp, they would be able to see a flag, and could go on in. So they kept going, hopefully get there before dark, and be able to see if it was safe to make themselves known. As they moved into a small grove of pines, they saw that the camp was across a field on the other side of the trees, and Josh turned to Will and said, “We're in luck. I see the Union flag blowing in the breeze over there. We can go on. Let's keep talking so they will notice us and not think we are slipping up on 'em.”

Will wondered why anybody traveling like they were, an unarmed Rebel, and a Yankee with a shot up leg would try to slip up on a Union army. But he kept quiet on that, and just continued talking to Josh.

As soon as they got out of the grove, they were spotted.

“Halt”. Identify who you are”, said a guard, pointing his rifle in their direction.

A sergeant walked up to him and they and another guard proceeded to walk across the field with both guards at the ready with their rifles. As they got nearer to Will and Josh, they relaxed a little once they saw the situation. They were asked to identify themselves, and where they came from. Once it was determined that Josh was a Confederate, the sergeant told the guard to take him as prisoner. The sergeant and the other guard pulled Will back to camp. This situation drew a good bit of attention from all the soldiers, including the commander, Captain Alderman. He had come out of his tent when he heard the ruckus among the troops while the prisoner and Will were brought into camp.

“We have a Reb prisoner, Captain. I will make arrangements for him to be taken to the nearest holding area for a prison camp”, said the sergeant.

“I want to talk with them both first” said the Captain.

He walked over to Will and received the entire story of what had happened to him and how Josh had rescued him. He thanked Will and then turned his attention to Josh.

“Soldier, how old are you?” asked the Captain.

“Sixteen, Sir,” replied Josh.

“And how did you end up in the Confederate army?”

Josh replied to this sadly, “I live in those mountains over yonder, Sir, with my Ma and Pa, and two younger sisters. We live in a cabin, have a few cows, chickens, and pigs, and a garden. A few weeks ago a group of men rode up and told me that I was coming with them to volunteer in the army. Captain, my Pa is sick, and I am taking

care of most of the heavy work at home. I am worried about them, because Ma is not that strong, and my little sisters can't do much. Sir, I didn't volunteer. They threatened to kill our livestock if I didn't go."

Captain Alderman just stood and looked at him. He walked away and turned to the sergeant, "Sergeant, I would like to have a word with you. You are my right arm, and have been in this army for fifteen years. I am by trade, a school teacher, but the Union army decided to make me an officer. I am your commanding officer, and this is what we will do. I am not sending a sixteen year old boy to a prison camp. If he is to be a prisoner, he will be one that stays right here, and we will get him back to his home. We both know this war is about over. I received a message yesterday, that General Grant has Lee hemmed up in Virginia. It is only a matter of time. This is what we will do. We will treat the injured soldier as best we can, and when we break camp at the end of the week, we will head east and turn north at the foothills of the mountains. I will accept Josh's Oath of Allegiance, and when we reach the foothills, I am turning him loose and telling him to go home. We will then proceed with our injured soldier to a hospital. I also want you to send an armed detail out tomorrow and bury those soldiers. Talk to the boys and get directions as best you can.

"Thank you, Sir" said the sergeant, "Somehow I knew that is what you would say. I think it is best for all of us. Captain, I guarantee that this young man will never speak badly of the Union, and it is because you treated him this way.

They left at the end of the week, and Josh rode with Will in a wagon. As it neared time for him to get off and head home, Will told him that when he got married, he would like for Josh to come to Maine and stand up with him. Josh grinned and assured him he would, even if he has to sell a pig to get a train ticket.

Captain Alderman rode up, and cautioned Josh to be careful as there were still no accounts riding around. He gave him his release papers and oath of allegiance to keep with him, and rode back off again.

It was time for him go. There were tears in both young men's eyes as they shook hands. Will thanked him again for all he did for him.

As Josh was turning to get off the wagon, Will told him, "Josh we sure were unlikely companions on this journey together, weren't we?"

Josh didn't turn around. He just nodded in agreement. As he jumped off the wagon, Will watched him take off and start running "lickety split" towards the mountains and home.

