

HURRAH FOR CAPTAIN EARLY!

by Elmore Leonard, 1925-2013

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THE SECOND BANNER said *hero of san juan hill*. Both were tied to the upstairs balcony of the Congress Hotel and looked down on La Salle Street in Sweetmary, a town named for a coppermine. The banners read across the building as a single statement. This day that Captain Early was expected home from the war in Cuba, over now these two months, was October 10, 1898.

The manager of the hotel and one of his desk clerks were the first to observe the colored man who entered the lobby and dropped his bedroll on the red velvet settee where it seemed he was about to sit down. Bold as brass. A tall, well-built colored man wearing a suit of clothes that looked new and appeared to fit him as though it might possibly be his own and not one handed down to him. He wore the suit, a stiff collar, and a necktie. With the manager nearby but not yet aware of the intruder, the young desk clerk spoke up, raised his voice to tell the person, „You can't sit down there.”

The colored man turned his attention to the desk, taking a moment before he said, „Why is that?”

His quiet tone caused the desk clerk to hesitate and look over at the manager, who stood holding the day's mail, letters that had arrived on the El

Paso & Southwestern morning run along with several guests now registered at the hotel and, apparently, this colored person. It was hard to tell his age, other than to say he was no longer a young man. He did seem clean and his bedroll was done up in bleached canvas.

„A hotel lobby,” the desk clerk said, „is not a public place anyone can make theirself at home in. What is it you want here?” At least he was uncovered, standing there now hat in hand. But then he said, „I’m waiting on Bren Early.”

„Bren is it,” the desk clerk said. „Captain Early's an acquaintance of yours?”

„We go way back a ways.”

„You worked for him?”

„Some.”

At this point the manager said, „We’re all waiting for Captain Early. Why don’t you go out front and watch for him?” Ending the conversation.

The desk clerk—his name was Monty—followed the colored man to the front entrance and stepped out on the porch to watch him, bedroll over his shoulder, walking south on La Salle the two short blocks to Fourth Street. Monty returned to the desk, where he said to the manager, „He walked right in the Gold Dollar.”

The manager didn’t look up from his mail.

TWO RIDERS FROM the Circle-Eye, a spread on the San Pedro that delivered beef to the mine company, were at a table with their glasses of beer: a rider named Macon and a rider named Wayman, young men who wore sweat-stained hats down on their eyes as they stared at the Negro. Right there, the bartender speaking to him as he poured a whiskey, still speaking as the colored man drank it and the bartender poured him another one. Macon asked Wayman if he had ever seen a nigger wearing a suit of clothes and a necktie. Wayman said he couldn’t recall.

When they finished drinking their beer and walked up to the bar, the colored man gone now, Macon asked the bartender who in the hell that smoke thought he was coming in here. „You would think,” Macon said, „he’d go to one of the places where the miners drink.”

The bartender appeared to smile, for some reason finding humor in Macon’s remark. He said, „Boys, that was Bo Catlett. I imagine Bo drinks just about wherever he feels like drinking.”

„Why?” Macon asked it, surprised. „He suppose to be somebody?”

„Bo lives up at White Tanks,” the bartender told him, „at the Indin agency. Went to war and now he’s home.”

Macon squinted beneath the hat brim funneled low on his eyes. He said, „Nobody told me they was niggers in the war.” Sounding as though it was the bartender’s fault he hadn’t been informed. When the bartender didn’t add anything to help him out, Macon said, „Wayman’s brother Wyatt was in the war, with Teddy Roosevelt’s Rough Riders. Only, Wyatt didn’t come home like the nigger.”

Wayman, about eighteen years old, was nodding his head now.

Because nothing about this made sense to Macon, it was becoming an irritation. Again he said to Wayman, „You ever see a smoke wearing a suit of clothes like that?” He said, „Je-sus Christ.”

BO CATLETT WALKED up La Salle Street favoring his left leg some, though the limp, caused by a Mauser bullet or by the regiment surgeon who cut it out of his hip, was barely noticeable. He stared at the sight of the mine works against the sky, ugly, but something monumental about it: straight ahead up the grade, the main shaft scaffolding and company buildings, the crushing mill lower down, ore tailings that humped this way in ridges on down the slope to run out at the edge of town. A sorry place, dark and forlorn; men walked up the grade from boardinghouses on Mill Street to spend half their life underneath the ground, buried before they were dead. Three whiskeys in him, Catlett returned to the hotel on the corner of Second Street, looked up at the sign that said *hurrah for captain early!*, and had to grin. *the hero of san juan hill* my ass.

Catlett mounted the steps to the porch, where he dropped his bedroll and took one of the rocking chairs all in a row, the porch empty, close on noon but nobody sitting out here, no drummers calling on La Salle Mining of New Jersey, the company still digging and scraping but running low on payload copper, operating only the day shift now. The rocking chairs, all dark green, needed painting. Man, but made of cane and comfortable with that nice squeak back and forth, back and forth... Bo Catlett watched two riders coming this way up the street, couple of cowboys... Catlett wondering how many times he had sat down in a real chair since April twenty-fifth when war was declared and he left Arizona to go looking for his old regiment, trailed them to Fort Assiniboine in the Department of the Dakotas, then clear across the country to Camp Chickamauga in Georgia and on down to Tampa where he caught up with them and Lt. John Pershing looked at his twenty-four years of service and put him up for squadron sergeant major. It didn't seem like any twenty-four years... Going back to when he joined the First Kansas Colored Volunteers in '63, age fifteen. Wounded at Honey Springs the same year. Guarded Rebel prisoners at Rock Island, took part in the occupation of Galveston.

Then after the war got sent out here to join the all-Negro Tenth Cavalry on frontier station, Arizona Territory, and deal with hostile Apaches.

In '87 went to Mexico with Lieutenant Brendan Early out of Fort Huachuca—Bren and a contract guide named Dana Moon, now the agent at the White Tanks reservation—brought back a one-eyed Mimbreno named Loco, brought back a white woman the renegade Apache had run off with—and Dana Moon later married—and they all got their pictures in some newspapers. Mustered out that same year, '87... Drove a wagon for Capt. Early Hunting Expeditions Incorporated before going to work for Dana at White Tanks. He'd be sitting on Dana's porch this evening with a glass of mescal and Dana would say, „Well, now you've seen the elephant I don't imagine you'll want to stay around here.” He'd tell Dana he saw the elephant a long time ago and wasn't too impressed.

Just then another voice, not Dana's, said out loud to him: „So you was in the war, huh?”

It was one of the cowboys. He sat his mount, a little claybank quarter horse, close to the porch rail, sat leaning on the pommel to show he was at ease, his hat low on his eyes, staring directly at Catlett in his rocking chair. The other one sat his mount, a bay, more out in the street, maybe holding back. This boy was not at ease but fidgety. Catlett remembered them in the Gold Dollar.

Now the one close said, „What was it you did over there in Cuba?”

Meaning a colored man. What did a colored man do. Like most people the boy not knowing anything about Negro soldiers in the war.

This one squinting at him had size and maybe got his way enough he believed he could say whatever he pleased, or use a tone of voice that would irritate the person addressed. As he did just now.

„What did I do over there?” Catlett said. „What everybody did, I was in the war.“

„You wrangle stock for the Rough Riders?”

„Where’d you get that idea?”

„I asked you a question. Is that what you did, tend their stock?”

Once Catlett decided to remain civil and maybe this boy would go away, he said, „There wasn’t no stock. The Rough Riders, even the Rough Riders, were afoot. The only people had horses were artillery, pulling caissons with their Hotchkiss guns and the coffee grinders, what they called the Gatling guns. Lemme see,” Catlett said, „they had some mules, too, but I didn’t tend anybody’s stock.”

„His brother was a Rough Rider,” Macon said, raising one hand to hook his thumb at Wayman. „Served with Colonel Teddy Roosevelt and got killed in an ambush—the only way greasers know how to fight. I like to hear what you people were doing while his brother Wyatt was getting killed.“

You people. Look at him trying to start a fight.

„You believe it was my fault he got killed?”

„I asked you what you were doing.“

It wasn’t even this kid’s business. Catlett thinking, Well, see if you can educate him, and said, „Las Guasimas. You ever hear of it?”

The kid stared with his eyes half shut. Suspicious, or letting you know he’s serious, Catlett thought. Keen eyed and mean; you’re not gonna put anything past him.

„What’s it, a place over there?”

„That’s right, Las Guasimas, the place where it happened. On the way to Santiago de Cooba. Sixteen men killed that day, mostly by rifle fire, and something like fifty wounded. Except it wasn’t what you said, the dons pulling an ambush. It was more the Rough Riders walking along not looking where they was going.“

The cowboy, Macon, said, „Je-sus Christ, you saying the Rough Riders didn’t know what they were do-ing?” Like this was something impossible to believe.

„They mighta had an idea what they was doing,” Catlett said, „only thing it wasn’t what they shoulda been doing.” He said, „You understand the difference?” And thought, What’re you explaining it to him for? The boy giving him that mean look again, ready to defend the Rough Riders. All right, he was so proud of Teddy’s people, why hadn’t he been over there with them?

„Look,” Catlett said, using a quiet tone now, „the way it was, the dons had sharpshooters in these trees, a thicket of mangoes and palm trees growing wild you couldn’t see into. You understand? Had men hidden in there were expert with the rifle, these Mausers they used with smokeless powder. Teddy’s people come along a ridge was all covered with these trees and run into the dons, see, the dons letting some of the Rough Riders pass and then closing on ’em. So, yeah, it was an ambush in a way.” Catlett paused. „We was down on the road, once we caught up, moving in the same direction.” He paused again, remembering something the cowboy said that bothered him. „There’s nothing wrong with an ambush—like say you think it ain’t fair? If you can set it up and keep your people behind cover, do it. There was a captain with the Rough

Riders said he believed an officer should never take cover, should stand out there and be an example to his men. The captain said, *There ain't a Spanish bullet made that can kill me.* Stepped out in the open and got shot in the head."

A couple of cowboys looking like the two who were mounted had come out of the Chinaman's picking their teeth and now stood by to see what was going on. Some people who had come out of the hotel were standing along the steps.

Catlett took all this in as he paused again, getting the words straight in his mind to tell how they left the road, some companies of the Tenth and the First, all regular Army, went up the slope laying down fire and run off the dons before the Rough Riders got cut to pieces, the Rough Riders volunteers and not experienced in all kind of situations—the reason they didn't know shit about advancing through hostile country or, get right down to it, what they were doing in Cuba, these people that come looking for glory and got served sharpshooters with Mausers and mosquitoes carrying yellow fever. Tell these cowboys the true story.

General Wheeler, „Fightin' Joe" from the Confederate side in the Civil War now thirty-three years later an old man with a white beard; sees the Spanish pulling back at Las Guasimas and says, „Boys, we got the Yankees on the run." Man like that directing a battle...

Tell the whole story if you gonna tell it, go back to sitting in the hold of the ship in Port Tampa a month, not allowed to go ashore for fear of causing incidents with white people who didn't want the men of the Tenth coming in their stores and cafes, running off their customers. Tell them—so we land in Cuba at a place called Daiquiri... saying in his mind then, Listen to me now. Was the Tenth at Daiquiri, the Ninth at Siboney. Experienced cavalry regiments that come off frontier station after thirty years dealing with hostile renegades, cutthroat horse thieves, reservation jumpers, land in Cuba and they put us to work unloading the ships while Teddy's people march off to meet the enemy and win some medals, yeah, and would've been wiped out at El Caney and on San Juan Hill if the colored boys hadn't come along and saved Colonel Teddy's ass and all his Rough Rider asses, showed them how to go up a hill and take a blockhouse. Saved them so the Rough Riders could become America's heroes.

All this in Bo Catlett's head and the banners welcoming Capt. Early hanging over him.

One of the cowboys from the Chinaman's must've asked what was going on, because now the smart-aleck one brought his claybank around and began talking to them, glancing back at the porch now and again with his mean look. The two from the Chinaman's stood with their thumbs in their belts, while the mounted cowboy had his hooked around his suspenders now. None of them wore a gun belt or appeared to be armed. Now the two riders stepped down from their mounts and followed the other two along the street to a place called the Belle Alliance, a miners' saloon, and went inside.

Bo Catlett was used to mean dirty looks and looks of indifference, a man staring at him as though he wasn't even there. Now, the thing with white people, they had a hard time believing colored men fought in the war. You never saw a colored man on a U. S. Army recruiting poster or a picture of colored soldiers in newspapers. White people believed colored people could not be relied on in war. But why? There were some colored people that went out and killed wild animals, even lions, with a spear. No gun, a spear. And made hats out of the manes. See a colored man standing there in front of a lion coming at him

fast as a train running down grade, stands there with his spear, doesn't move, and they say colored men can't be relied on? There was a story in newspapers how when Teddy Roosevelt was at the Hill, strutting around in the open, he saw colored troopers going back to the rear and he drew his revolver and threatened to shoot them—till he found out they were going after ammunition. His own Rough Riders were pinned down in the guinea grass, the Spanish sharpshooters picking at them from up in the blockhouses. So the Tenth showed the white boys how to go up the hill angry, firing and yelling, making noise, set on driving the garlics clean from the hill...

Found Bren Early and his company lying in the weeds, the scrub—that's all it was up that hill, scrub and sand, hard to get a footing in places; nobody ran all the way up, it was get up a ways and stop to fire, covering each other. Found Bren Early with a whistle in his mouth. He got up and started blowing it and waving his sword—come on, boys, to glory—and a Mauser bullet smacked him in the butt, on account of the way he was turned to his people, and Bren Early grunted, dropped his sword, and went down in the scrub to lay there cursing his luck, no doubt mortified to look like he got shot going the wrong way. Bo Catlett didn't believe Bren saw him pick up the sword. Picked it up, waved it at the Rough Riders and his Tenth Cav troopers, and they all went up that hill together, his troopers yelling, some of them singing, actually singing „*They'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight.*”

Singing and shooting, honest to God, scaring the dons right out of their blockhouse. It was up on the crest Catlett got shot in his right hip and was taken to the Third Cav dressing station. It was set up on the Aguadores River at a place called „bloody ford”, being it was under fire till the Hill was captured. Catlett remembered holding on to the sword, tight, while the regimental surgeon dug the bullet out of him and he tried hard not to scream, biting his mouth till it bled. After, he was sent home and spent a month at Camp Wikoff, near Montauk out on Long Island, with a touch of yellow fever. Saw President McKinley when he came by September third and made a speech, the President saying what they did over there in Cuba „commanded the unstinted praise of all your countrymen.” Till he walked away from Montauk and came back into the world, Sergeant Major Catlett actually did believe he and the other members of the Tenth would be recognized as war heroes.

He wished Bren would hurry up and get here. He'd ask the hero of San Juan Hill how his heinie was and if he was getting much unstinted praise. If Bren didn't come pretty soon, Catlett decided he'd see him another time. Get a horse out of the livery and ride it up to White Tanks.

THE FOUR CIRCLE-EYE riders sat at a front table in the Belle Alliance with a bottle of Green River whiskey, Macon staring out the window.

The hotel was across the street and up the block a ways, but Macon could see it, the colored man in the suit of clothes still sitting on the porch, if he tilted his chair back and held on to the windowsill. He said, „No, sir, nobody told me they was niggers in the war.“

Wayman said to the other two Circle-Eye riders, „Macon can't get over it.”

Macon's gaze came away from the window. „It was your brother got killed.“

Wayman said, „I know he did.“

Macon said, „You don't care?”

The Circle-Eye riders watched him let his chair come down to hit the floor hard. They watched him get up without another word and walk out.

„I never thought much of coloreds,” one of the Circle-Eye riders said, „but you never hear me take on about ’em like Macon. What’s his trouble?“

„I guess he wants to shoot somebody,” Wayman said. „The time he shot that chili picker in Nogales? Macon worked hisself up to it the same way.“

CATLETT WATCHED the one that was looking for a fight come through the doors and go to the claybank, the reins looped once around the tie rail. He didn’t touch the reins, though. What he did was reach into a saddlebag and bring out what Catlett judged to be a Colt .44 pistol.

Right then he heard:

„Only guests of the hotel are allowed to sit out here.” Catlett watched the cowboy checking his loads now, turning the cylinder of his six-shooter, the metal catching a glint of light from the sun, though the look of the pistol was dull and it appeared to be an old model.

Monty the desk clerk, standing there looking at Catlett without getting too close, said, „You’ll have to leave... right now.”

The cowboy was looking this way.

Making up his mind, Catlett believed. All right, now, yeah, he’s made it up.

“Did you hear what I said?”

Catlett took time to look at Monty and then pointed off down the street. He said, „You see that young fella coming this way with the pistol? He think he like to shoot me. Say you don’t allow people to sit here aren’t staying at the ho-tel. How about, you allow them to get shot if they not a guest?“

He watched the desk clerk, who didn’t seem to know whether to shit or go blind, eyes wide open, turn and run back in the lobby.

The cowboy, Macon, stood in the middle of the street now holding the six-shooter against his leg.

CATLETT, STILL seated in the rocker, said, „You a mean rascal, ain’t you? Don’t take no sass, huh?“

The cowboy said something agreeing that Catlett didn’t catch, the cowboy looking over to see his friends coming up the street now from the barroom. When he looked at the hotel porch again, Catlett was standing at the railing, his bedroll upright next to him leaning against it.

„I can be a mean rascal too,” Catlett said, unbuttoning his suit coat.

“I want you to know that before you take this too far. You understand?“

„You insulted Colonel Roosevelt and his Rough Riders,” the cowboy said, „and you insulted Wayman’s brother, killed in action over there in Cuba.”

„How come,” Catlett said, „you weren’t there?“

„I was ready, don’t worry, when the war ended. But we’re talking about you. I say you’re a dirty lying nigger and have no respect for people better’n you are. I want you to apologize to the colonel and his men and to Wayman’s dead brother...”

„Or what?” Catlett said.

„Answer to me,” the cowboy said. „Are you armed? You aren’t, you better get yourself a pistol.”

„You want to shoot me,” Catlett said, „’cause I went to Cuba and you didn’t.”

The cowboy was shaking his head. „’Cause you lied. Have you got a pistol or not?“

Catlett said, „You calling me out, huh? You want us to fight a duel?“

„Less you apologize. Else get a pistol.“

„But if I’m the one being called out, I have my choice of weapons, don’t I? That’s how I seen it work, twenty-four years in the U.S. Army in two wars. You hear what I’m saying?“

The cowboy was frowning now beneath his hat brim, squinting up at Bo Catlett. He said, „Pistols, it’s what you use.“

Catlett nodded. „If I say so.“

„Well, what else is there?“

Confused and getting a mean look.

Catlett slipped his hand into the upright end of his bedroll and began to tug at something inside—the cowboy watching, the Circle-Eye riders in the street watching, the desk clerk and manager in the doorway and several hotel guests near them who had come out to the porch, all watching as Catlett drew a sword from the bedroll, a cavalry saber, the curved blade flashing as it caught the sunlight. He came past the people watching and down off the porch toward the cowboy in his hat and boots fixed with spurs that chinged as he turned to face Catlett, shorter than Catlett, appearing confused again holding the six-shooter at his side.

„If I choose to use sabers,” Catlett said, „is that agreeable with you?“

„I don’t have no saber.“

Meanness showing now in his eyes.

„Well, you best get one.“

„I never even had a sword in my hand.“

Irritated. Drunk, too, his eyes not focusing as they should. Now he was looking over his shoulder at the Circle-Eye riders, maybe wanting them to tell him what to do. One of them, not Wayman but one of the others, called out, „You got your .44 in your hand, ain’t you? What’re you waiting on?“

Catlett raised the saber to lay the tip against Macon’s breastbone, saying to him, „You use your pistol and I use steel? All right, if that’s how you want it. See if you can shoot me ’fore this blade is sticking out your back. You game? ... Speak up, boy.“

IN THE HOTEL dining room having a cup of coffee, Catlett heard the noise outside, the cheering that meant Capt. Early had arrived. Catlett waited. He wished one of the waitresses would refill his cup, but they weren’t around now, nobody was. A half hour passed before Capt. Early entered the dining room and came over to the table, leaving the people he was with. Catlett rose and they embraced, the hotel people and guests watching. It was while they stood this way that Bren saw, over Catlett’s shoulder, the saber lying on the table, the curved steel on white linen. Catlett sat down. Bren looked closely at the saber’s hilt. He picked it up and there was applause from the people watching. The captain bowed to them and sat down with the sergeant major.

„You went up the hill with this?“

„Somebody had to.“

„I’m being recommended for a medal. *For courage and pluck in continuing to advance under fire on the Spanish fortified position at the battle of Las Guasimas, Cuba, June twenty-fourth, 1898.*“

Catlett nodded. After a moment he said, „Will you tell me something? What was that war about?“

„You mean why'd we fight the dons?“

„Yeah, tell me.“

„To free the oppressed Cuban people. Relieve them of Spanish domination.“

„That's what I thought.“

„You didn't know why you went to war?“

„I guess I knew,“ Catlett said. „I just wasn't sure.“

