

The Last Shot

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FROM THE SHADE of the pines, looking across the draw, he watched the single file of cavalymen come out of the timber onto the open bench.

The first rider raised his arm and they moved at a slower pace down the slope, through the green-tinged brush. The sun made small flashes on the visors of their kepis and a clinking sound drifted faintly across the draw.

He had come down the same way a few minutes before and now he was certain that they would stay on his trail. Watching them, he sat his sorrel mare unmoving, his young face sun-darkened and clean-lined and glistening with perspiration, though the air was cool. A Sharps lay across his lap and he gripped it hard, then looked about quickly as if searching for a place to hide it. Instead he swung the stock against the sorrel's rump and guided her away from the rim, breaking into a run as they crossed a meadow of bear grass toward the

darkness of a pine stand. And as he drew near, a rider, watching him closely, came out of the pines.

Lou Walker, the young man, swung his mount close to the other rider and pushed the rifle toward him.

„Give me your carbine, Risdon!“

„What happened?“ the man said. Ed Risdon was close to fifty. He sat heavily in his saddle and his round, leathery face studied Walker calmly.

„I missed him.“

„How could you miss? All you had to do was aim at his beard.“

„His horse spooked as I fired. It reared up and I hit it in the withers.“

„They see you?“

„I was up in the rocks and when I missed they took out after me. Give me the carbine. If I get caught they'll see it hasn't been fired.“

„What if I get caught?“ Risdon said.

„You won't if you scat.“

Risdon drew the short rifle from its saddle scabbard and handed it to Lou Walker, exchanging it for Walker's Sharps. „Maybe,“ he said, „I'd better stay with you.“

„Get home and tell Beckwith what happened—and get that gun out of here.“

Risdon hesitated. „What'll I tell Barbara?“

Walker stared at him. „I don't like it any more than you do.“

„I think maybe it's getting senseless,“ Risdon answered.

„Think what you want—just get the hell out of here.“

Walker nudged the mare with his knee and rode away from Risdon, back toward the rim. As he neared it he looked around, across the meadow, to make certain Risdon was gone. He could hear the cavalymen below him now, the clinking sound of their approach sharp in the crisp air, and waited until they could see him up through the trees before he started off, following the rim. There was a shout, then another, and when the carbine shot rang behind him he knew they had reached the crest. He swung from the high ground then, zigzagging down through the scattered pinons, guiding the reins loosely.

A quarter of the way from the bottom the dwarf pines gave up to brush and hard rock. Walker spurred toward the open slope, glancing over his shoulder, seeing the flashes of blue uniforms up through the trees. He heard the carbine report and the whine as the bullet glanced off rock. Then another. A third kicked up sand a few yards in front of the mare and she swerved suddenly on the slope. He tried to hold her in, but the mare was already side-slipping on the loose shale. Suddenly she was falling and Walker went out of the saddle. He tried to twist his body in the air—then he struck the slope and rolled...

THERE WAS A stable smell of leather and damp horsehide. Again his body slammed against the ground and the shock of it brought open his eyes. They had carried him draped across a saddle and when they reached the others, a trooper threw his legs over the horse and he landed on his back.

He heard a voice say, „Sergeant!“ close over him. He looked up and the trooper spat to the side. „He's awake.“

Now there were other faces that looked down at him and they were all the same—shapeless kepis, tired, curious eyes, dirt in crease lines, and two-or three-day beards. Though there were some faces without the stubble, they were boys with the expressions of men. The blue uniforms were covered with fine

dust and the jackets seemed ill-fitting, with buttons missing, and from the shoulders hung the oblong, leathercovered, wooden cases that hold seven cartridge tubes for a Spencer carbine.

And then another uniform was standing over him. Alkali dust made the Union blue seem faded, but the jacket held firmly to chest and shoulders and a full, red beard reached to the second button. The red beard moved.

„Mister, we owe you an apology, though I don't imagine it makes your head feel any better.“

Walker relaxed slowly, sitting up, then came to his feet and stood in front of the red beard which was even with his own chin. But his leg buckled under him and he sat down again, feeling the stabbing in his right knee. He winced, but kept his eyes on the officer. He had imagined McGrail to be a much taller man and now he was surprised. Stories make a man taller than he is... Then he felt better because Major McGrail was not unusually tall. Still, he was uneasy. Perhaps because he had tried to kill him not a half hour before.

„Your knee?“ McGrail said.

Walker nodded, then said, „Where's my horse?“

„It was past saving.“

„You didn't have a right to fire on me.“

McGrail smiled faintly. „I'm told you had a damn uncommon guilty way of running when ordered to halt.“

„I didn't hear anything.“

„Perhaps you weren't listening.“

„I don't wear a uniform.“

„Did you ever?“

„Are you holding a trial?“

„Someone shooting at me arouses a fair amount of curiosity.“

„So your men chased out and spotted me and thought I was the one.“

McGrail said nothing. He extended his left hand to the side and the sergeant stepped quickly, placing in it the carbine he'd been holding.

McGrail handed the carbine to Walker. „We took the liberty of examining it,“ he said. „You see, the bullet struck my mount. From something with a large bore—a Sharps perhaps.“

„And mine's a carbine that hasn't been fired.“

„A Perry that hasn't been fired,“ McGrail corrected. „A Confederate make, isn't it?“

„As far as I know, this gun doesn't know north from south.“

„I suppose not.“ McGrail smiled. „Which way are you going?“ he said then.

„Valverde.“

„Well, I can repay some inconvenience by offering you a remount home.“

„I didn't say it was my home.“

„In fact—“ McGrail smiled „—you haven't said anything.“

THE UNION CAVALRY Station, Valverde, New Mexico, was a mile north of the pueblo. McGrail swung his troop in that direction as they approached Valverde and Lou Walker sat his mount for some time watching the dust rise behind the line of cavalry. Then he went on—though the image of McGrail, red beard and tired eyes, remained in his mind.

Before reaching the plaza, he turned into a side street and tied the borrowed mount in front of a one-story adobe and went through the doorway that said eat above it in large faded letters.

The man behind the bar looked up and nodded as he entered and the waiter, who was Mexican and wore a stained apron, also nodded.

There were no patrons in the room, but Walker passed through it to a back room which was smaller and had only three tables. And as he sat down, the Mexican appeared in the doorway.

„You're limping.“

„My horse threw me.“

„That's a bad thing.“ The waiter considered this and then said, „What pleases you?“

„Brandy and coffee.“

His knee was becoming stiff and was sensitive when he touched it.

He rubbed it idly, becoming used to it, until the waiter returned and placed his tray on the table. The waiter poured coffee from a small porcelain pot, then raised the brandy bottle.

„In the coffee?“

He shook his head and watched as the waiter poured brandy into a glass. He looked up as a man came through the doorway.

Walker nodded and said, „Beckwith.“

The man, in his mid-forties, was thin and he wore a heavy mustache that made his drawn face seem even narrower.

He said, „What's that?“

„Brandy.“

„You better watch it.“ Sitting down, Beckwith's hand flicked against the waiter's arm. „We'll see you,“ he said and waited until the scuffing sound of the waiter's sandals had faded out of the room while he watched Walker closely.

„I saw McGrail ten minutes ago.“

„I missed him.“

„That's like telling me I've got eyes. All you had to do was aim at his beard.“

„That's what Risdon said.“

„Where is he?“

„He went back to del Norte.“

„He was supposed to stay with you,“ Beckwith said.

„He went back to tell you what happened. I didn't know you were here.“

„You don't seem too concerned about this.“

„I'm tired,“ Walker said.

Beckwith stared at him without expression, coldly. „Listen,“ he said after a moment. „Every day that man stays alive, the Yankees get more to fight with. Not just beef and remounts, but recruits he sweet-talks into joining Sam Grant—“ Beckwith paused. „You've heard of a place called Five Forks—in Virginia?“

„Go on.“

„A week ago Pickett got his pants beat off there. Fitz Lee's Cavalry was cut to pieces.“

„Then it's nearly over,“ Walker said quietly.

„Hell no it ain't! Kirby Smith's still holding out in Mississippi. We got more land than just Virginia.“

„And how many more lives?“ Walker said.

„Quitting?“

„All of a sudden I'm tired.“ Beneath the table his hand rubbed the knee.

„Or is it scared?“ Beckwith said.

„Leave me alone for a while.“

„I asked you a question.“

Walker's face hardened. „Where've you been for four years, Beckwith—del Norte? Or did you get over to Tascosa once. Tell me what you do to keep from getting scared?“

After a moment he said, „My knee's turning stiff.“

„That's too bad,“ Beckwith said.

„Everything's too bad.“

„You haven't answered me,“ Beckwith said. „What are you going to do?“

Walker drank off the brandy and dropped his arm heavily. „Kill him,“ he said finally.

HE TOOK A ROOM at the hotel and stretched out on the bed without removing his clothes, just his coat and boots. He hung his shoulder holster on the foot of the bed, but took out the handgun and placed it next to his leg; and he was asleep before he could think of the war or of Beckwith, the Confederate agent who'd never seen a skirmish, or McGrail, who had to be killed because he was a valuable Yankee officer. He did think of Barbara, Risdon's daughter, but it was only for a few minutes.

It was early morning when he awoke and before he opened his eyes he felt the stiffness in his knee. Without moving his leg he knew it was swollen: then, when he raised it, it began to throb.

It was the same leg a year ago. No, he thought now. Yellow Tavern was eleven months ago. He had been with a Texas Volunteer company assigned to Stuart's Cavalry. The defense of Richmond.

They could have stayed in the redoubts and waited, but that wasn't Stuart. He came out and threw his sabers in Sheridan's face at Yellow Tavern—straight on into the Whitworths the Yankees had captured and turned on them—and it wasn't enough. Sheridan wasn't McClellan.

Walker remembered Stuart going down, shot through the lungs, and then his own mount was down and he was conscious only of the scalding pain in his right leg.

It was during his stay in the Richmond hospital that the civilian had come and asked him strange questions about how he thought about things, and finally began talking about soldiers without uniforms. „Spying?“ he'd asked. Call it what you want, the civilian said. There's more than one way to fight a war.

They had picked him because he was a Texan, could speak some Spanish, and his war record was good. Three months later he was in Paso del Norte, with Beckwith's organization, buying guns for the Cause. Ed Risdon guided for them. Risdon had traded goods down through Chihuahua and Sonora for over fifteen years. He knew the country and he brought them through each time. About one trip a month.

His daughter, Barbara, waited in del Norte, watching for Lou Walker. Between trips they were together most of the time.

Then one day, that was two weeks ago, Beckwith told him what had to be done about McGrail. For only two troops of blue-bellies his command was doing

a mountain of harm, getting men and supplies headed east safely. That would have to be stopped.

Beckwith is a strange man, he thought. He can become fanatical about the Cause, though he's never been east of the Panhandle. That's it, he thought now. That makes the difference. He didn't see the Wilderness, or Cold Harbor, or Yellow Tavern. The morning wore on and he began to feel hungry, but his body ached and he remained on the bed, smoking cigarettes when it would occur to him, not moving his leg. He wasn't worried about the knee.

He was dozing again when the light knocks sounded on the door and he sat upright with the suddenness of it and winced, feeling the muscles pull in his knee.

„Who is it?“ His palm covered the bone handle of the pistol next to him.

A girl's voice answered him.

HE WAS OFF the bed, went to the door, opened it, and the girl was in his arms. Close to her cheek he said, „Barbara—“ but her mouth brushed against his and that was all he said. For a moment they clung together, then he drew her inside and closed the door.

„How'd you find me?“

„Beckwith told us.“

„Your father's with you?“

She nodded. Her dark hair was pulled back tightly into a chignon and it made her face seem delicately small. „I told him I wanted to be with you.“

„That must have touched him,“ Walker said. He led her to the bed and sat down next to her. There was no chair in the room and he felt suddenly embarrassed at being alone with her, and at the same time he was conscious of his uncombed hair and the two-day beard, even though he knew it would not matter to her.

„Lou, you hurt your leg!“

Her gaze remained on his knee, but she said, „You're going to try again, aren't you?“

„You're not supposed to know about that.“

Her eyes lifted to his, frowning. „What good will it do?“

„If I knew all the whys, I'd be wearing yellow epaulettes with fringe.“

„One more dead man isn't going to help anything.“

„You didn't talk to Beckwith very long.“

For a moment the girl was silent. „We're leaving,“ she said then.

„For where?“

„I don't know—toward California.“

„Your dad's idea?“

„Partly. But maybe I'm more worn out than he is.“ She looked at him longingly. „Lou—come with us.“

„You know better than that.“

„Why?“

„I'd be a deserter.“

Her eyes begged him again, but she said nothing and finally her head lowered and she stared at her hands in her lap. Walker made a cigarette and smoked it in the silence, trying to rationalize going with them: but he could not.

The girl was rising when they heard the footsteps outside the door.

Then the three knocks.

„Walker?“ Beckwith’s voice came from the hall.

Walker looked at the girl, then went to the door and opened it. Risdon stood in the doorway. Behind him, Beckwith said, „Go on,“ and Risdon moved into the room. Beckwith followed a step behind, with the barrel of his pistol pressed into the man’s back.

Beckwith looked at the girl and then to Walker. „Lou,“ he said.

„You’re about the most resourceful man I know, even when you’re sick.“

The girl had gone to her father and now she looked at him with frightened surprise. „You told him!“

„I had to. I don’t want him saying we’re running away.“

„What do you call it?“ Beckwith said.

„I’m getting too old to play soldierboy,“ Risdon said.

„You think you can just walk away?“

„He’s not in the army,“ Walker said now. „He can leave any time he feels like it!“

„With all he knows about us?“ Beckwith asked.

„God, if you can’t trust him, who can you!“

„Lou, I wonder about that more and more every day.“

„Cut out the foolishness!“

„Were you going, too?“

„No.“

„Just take your word for it?“ Beckwith’s thin face was expressionless. „Lou,“ he said, „I’m not play-actin’. You know what they do to deserters.“

„What’s he deserting from?“

„Me,“ Beckwith said quietly. He added, then, „Lou, I’ll have to take your word about you not going—but get over on the bed out of the way.“ Walker hesitated and Beckwith turned the pistol on him threateningly. „I can include you as easily as not.“

Walker backed against the bed and eased down, keeping his right leg stiffly in front of him. As he sank to the bed, something hard dug against his thigh. His hand moved to the side of his leg, then stopped.

It was his pistol.

Risdon was watching his daughter and now he was about to speak: it was on his face.

„Keep it to yourself,“ Beckwith said to him. „I don’t want to hear any more.“

„What are you going to do?“ Walker asked him quietly. His hand was on the pistol butt now, close under his leg.

„What I have to,“ Beckwith said. „We can’t take chances on either of them.“

„Here?“

„Out somewhere.“

Walker’s fingers closed around the pistol grip. He hesitated, because he wanted to do this the right way, and he wasn’t sure what that was. He heard Risdon say, „Beckwith—“ and saw the agent’s head turn toward Risdon. At that moment, Walker raised the pistol and cocked it.

Beckwith heard the click and his head swung back. He looked at Walker as if what he saw could not be possible.

Walker held the pistol dead on the agent’s chest. „I’m not going to try to convince you of anything,“ he said. „Just let go of the gun.“

The surprise passed and Beckwith’s drawn face scowled. „You’re making the biggest mistake of your life.“

„If you don't think I'd shoot, hold on to that gun for three more seconds.“
Beckwith's pistol was pointed midway between Risdon and Walker.

His eyes held on Walker's face, trying to read something there. Then, slowly, his arm lowered and when his hand reached his side, the fingers opened and the pistol dropped to the floor.

Risdon stooped, picked it up and glanced at Beckwith as he rose.

„You just lost yourself a job.“

„You've got to take him with you,“ Walker said now. „Drop him at maybe Cuchillo—by the time he finds help you'll have all the distance you'd need.“

Risdon frowned. „You're coming now, aren't you?“

Walker shook his head.

The girl looked at him in disbelief. „Lou, why would you stay now?“

„The same reason as before.“

„But it's different now!“

„Why is it? I'm still a soldier. I haven't been serving under a private flag of Beckwith's.“

The girl continued to look at him with the plea in her eyes, but now there was nothing she could say.

Risdon shrugged. „Well, you can't fight that.“

Walker pulled on his boots, then lifted the shoulder holster from the bedpost and slipped his arm through it and inserted the handgun.

He picked up his coat and moved to the girl.

„If you don't understand,“ he said quietly, „then I don't know what I can say.“

She looked up into his face, but without smiling, and then she kissed him.

Risdon said, „She's tryin'.“ His eyes followed Walker moving to the door. „Lou,“ he said. „We thought we'd follow the Rio Grande to Cuchillo then bear west toward Santa Rita.“

Unexpectedly, Walker smiled, but he said nothing going out the door.

AT YELLOW TAVERN he had killed a Union soldier. Perhaps he had killed others, but the one at Yellow Tavern was the only one he was sure of. It had been at close range, firing down into the soldier's face as the Yankee's bayonet thrust caught in his horse's mane. He fired and the blue uniform disappeared. That simple. What he was about to do no longer seemed a part of war, because the man had a name and was not just a blue uniform. He rode out from Valverde to the cavalry station at a walk, moving the borrowed mount unhurriedly, his right leg hanging out of the stirrup. Nearing the adobes a trooper rode by and shouted, but the sound of his running mount covered the words.

The sunlight on the gray adobe was cold, because there was no one about and there were no sounds. Over the row of bare houses, far to the north, reaching into the clouds, was the whiteness of Sangre de Cristo. This, too, caused the cavalry station to seem drab. Walker knew a patrol was out. Perhaps McGrail had taken it. For a moment he felt relief, but knew that would solve nothing.

He went through a doorway above which a wooden shingle read: *headquarters—valverde station—cos, d & e—9th us cavalry.*

At the desk a sergeant looked up and momentarily there was recognition on his face. But he said nothing, he only listened to the name that was given him, then stepped into the next room and closed the door behind him.

He reappeared almost immediately. „The major will see you,“ and stepped aside to let Walker pass.

McGrail's back was turned. He stood at the window behind his desk, looking out at the sand and glare.

He did not turn, but when the door closed, he said, „I've been expecting you.“

Walker hesitated. „Why?“

McGrail turned then. He was holding a revolving pistol in his right hand, and with the other he was wiping a cloth along the barrel.

„To return the horse you borrowed,“ he said. „Why else?“

Walker was silent. The surprise was on his face for a brief moment.

It passed, and still he did not say anything.

„How's the leg?“

„Stiff.“

„I suppose it would be.“

McGrail moved the cloth slowly, steadily along the pistol barrel.

Abruptly he said, „You wouldn't know the whereabouts of a man named Beckwith, would you?“

Walker was startled. „Should I?“

„You're not one for answering questions, are you?“

Walker unbuttoned his coat and drew tobacco from his shirt. He made a cigarette and replaced the tobacco, leaving his coat open.

„I could never wear a shoulder holster,“ McGrail said. „Would always feel bound.“

Walker exhaled cigarette smoke. „You get used to anything.“

„I thought you might have heard of this Beckwith,“ McGrail said. „I'm rather anxious to meet him, myself—you see, he's a Confederate agent.“

„Why are you telling me that?“

McGrail shrugged. „Just conversation. Thought you might be interested. You see, this Beckwith thinks he's been putting something over on us, but there are as many people in Valverde giving information to me as there are to him.“ McGrail was relaxed. His eyes were not tired now, and his full red beard had been combed and trimmed.

„People like waiters and bartenders?“ Walker said.

„All kinds of people, doing their bit.“ McGrail smiled.

Walker dropped his cigarette to the plank flooring and stepped on it and saw the major frown. „If you have something to say, say it.“

McGrail hesitated, watching Walker closely. He had been leaning against the front of his desk. Now he moved around it and, next to the window, unrolled a wall map by pulling a short cord. He beckoned to Walker with the handgun.

He moved forward hesitantly and watched McGrail point with his left hand to a dot on the map, but he could not read the name because of McGrail's hand. But east and north of the dot there were other names that could be read. Five Forks, Malvern Hill, Seven Pines. And suddenly he felt the skin prickle on the nape of his neck and between his shoulders.

„We heard less than an hour ago,“ McGrail said quietly. „On the morning of April ninth, here at Appomattox, Lee surrendered to General Grant. Mr. Walker, the war is over.“

The room was silent. Walker's eyes remained on the map, unmoving. The war's over, he said in his mind, and repeated the words. The war's over. He felt relief. He waited for something else, but that was all.

He felt only relief. How are you supposed to feel when you lose a war? he thought. He looked at McGrail now and watched the cavalryman step to his desk and lay his pistol there. He felt his own pistol, heavy beneath his left arm, and now his hand dropped slowly from his coat front. „I just now sent a man to Valverde,“ McGrail said. „You must have passed him. News travels slowly out here, doesn't it?“ he said now. „You know April the ninth was two days ago—the day before we found you in that draw.“

The cavalryman began arranging papers that were scattered over the polished surface of his desk. He looked up at Walker who was staring at him strangely.

„Mr. Walker, if you'll excuse me, I've a mountain of reports to wade through that have to be done today. That was all you wanted, wasn't it? To return the horse?“

Walker hesitated. „As a matter of fact, there was something else.“

McGrail looked up again. „Yes?“

„I wondered if you might have a rig I could buy,“ Walker said. A grin was forming through the beard stubble. „It's hard going astride, with one leg dragging. You see, I've got a long way to go—down the Rio Grande to Cuchillo, then west toward Santa Rita—“

