

in this lazy city

At that moment things seemed clear and sharp.

The fact is

that was an undercurrent of a woman

laid as close as a rabbit a mass of fine dark hair
eyes that have pointed the way to death for hun-
dreds of men

I allers shot well

from one side to the other of the room and into the
corners breathless with intense interest

the sharp angle of the eye

I would like to see you shoot

drawing his revolver and approaching the window

Have you ever been afraid?

Do you know what the sensation is?

I am sure you will not misunderstand the question
a cloud over the speaker's face whenever I think
of it

A man must defend his honor I hardly know
where to begin

a tremulous softness in his voice and a strange
moisture in his averted eyes

the minute she saw me it seemed as if my heart
was on fire felt a sting run all over me the room
was full of smoke

My rifle-ball went through his heart

I had got into deep water, and had slipped off my
horse

put the revolver on the bed *come in here,*
and fight me

as quiet and cool as if I was a-goin to church



couldn't move and when I did go back

I never thought I should leave that room alive

Desperadoes, horse-thieves, murderers, regular cut-
throats I knew them all in the mountains

ought, perhaps, to have satisfied my curiosity; but I
was especially desirous

a dead silence put down the rifle

always sort of nervous when

caressed his long hair come in here, you cowardly
dog

in a state of great excitement a few seconds of
that awful stillness

come at my whistle and follow me about

came rushing in at both doors red, drunken faces
and inflamed eyes

got in close to me clutched me and crowded me
onto the bed fingers round my throat struck
across the breast

felt the blood rushing out of my nose and mouth

I got ugly it was all cloudy like, and I was wild it
was the first time

I struck savage blows knocked down with my fist
got hold of a knife

I was bleeding everywhere cut in thirteen places

I carry some of them now

rushed out to the well and drank from the bucket

slashed to with a knife the poor thing

everybody was suspected

it was one or t'other of us, and at sich times you
don't stop to think

sometimes I dream about it, and wake up in a cold
sweat

a certain solemnity in his grave face

bad enough to have let out the life of a man

I don't know why it was I never tried that thing
over again

revenge for the past, which isn't bigger than a
man's heart

I don't talk about sich things ter the people round
here

let the world wag idly on

the death-hug's a-comin all roads lead to it

a quiet, civil man

haven't been a good son

They say Bill's wild

enemies all about

At that time I and the drowsing city were roused
hence by the clatter and crash of the hoofs of a
horse which dashed furiously across the square and
down the street.

That mare will do any thing, said the Captain

ter." Captain Honesty nodded in agreement, pouring himself another glass of whiskey. "But the shoot-out with Dave Tutt is hardly the most amazing of his adventures, Colonel."

He gestured gravely with the glass, that I should join him in a drink, but I again protested, leading my interlocutor to inquire if it was the Lord I feared. "In this case, Captain," I replied, "it is my land-lady, Mrs. Dobbson at the Forks & Knives! She is a teetotaller when it comes to a Union man and especially cannot abide a drunk in an officer!"

We both laughed at this, Capt. Honesty nodding, "A woman of discernment... But she is not the only religious in Missouri, Colonel. Our own scout Bill has been accused of such convictions."

"Bill?"

He nodded and looked up. "There was a time when I was not sure he had religion in him, being imminently practicable. But one time another army scout related to me the story of his acquisition of his horse, Black Nell. The story is set somewhere far to the sou'-and-west, in a Territory Bill visited after the War in order to try his fortune away from other 'civil' folks, such as he had seen commit those unfortunate offenses that wars will oblige in us.

"It was after some time on the chaparral, alone and thirsty all too often, eating jerkeyed fox-meat, the sun-cured wings of hawks, and tarantulas candied in cactus syrup, that Bill was set upon by an ungallant coterie of coyotes, of the type that will pervasively inquire as to the deliciousness of any reasonable animal, human, infant, Christian, or otherwise. Now, Bill was not given to tolerating the thuggery of animals lightly, but he also had the need to preserve his precious shot. So he began a campaign of attrition consisting in part of ingeniousness, in part of manliness, and wholly of improvisations..."

The Captain continued on in this manner for some time, his tongue loosened by whiskey. I elide some of the more tiresome antics employed by Bill against the coyotes, such as leveraging rocks to rain down upon them from the top of a particularly large cactus in such a fashion as to scatter them equidistantly from Bill and also from one another, allowing him to pick off half the pack with the last of his rounds.

In any event, the Captain soon revealed that Bill, utterly worn out and bereft of shot, was forced to retire to the apex of a very large, soberly gray pillar of rock there in the middle of the dry Sou'west heath. This pillar's existence could scarcely be explained, but it must be admitted. Bill found climbing it tired him out to the last, and his heels just escaped the jumping nips of the desert dogs. Finally atop the spine-like thing, he had no recourse available save prayer.

"He prayed, such as he had been taught to," said the Captain, "to all manner of folks

including, in all probability, our familiar Lord. He prayed from dusk to midnight, midnight to dawn, and dawn to dusk again, and so forth, for a week, subsisting on dew in the morning and insects that flew into his eyelids at vespers.

"Atop the pillar, Bill had all manner of visions. Some were of comely ladies bearing jars of cool water. Most, oddly, were disinclined to clothe themselves."

At this, I raised an eyebrow, and the Captain seemed to recall his rank.

"In any event—in no time short, it was dawn again, and he saw below him the coyotes kneeling like supplicants—and also, in the distance, a thunderhead approaching, low to the chaparral, amidst a cacophony of crazed curses.

"At some point, the curses broke off, and the thunderhead resolved into a black, snorting beast of a horse, which scattered the coyotes!"

"Black Nell?" I ventured.

"The one and only, Colonel. It happened that the horse had thrown its rider and owner, whom Bill encountered broke-legged in a ditch some hundred yards off after climbing down from the pillar and taming Nell—which is entirely another series of adventures."

"And who was that owner?"

"A sprightly old Cajun fellow with skin as red in the sun as a desert flower's petals. He asked Bill how he had come to possess so fine and untamed a horse, and Bill replied that she was in fact quite tame, and that in answer to the first, he had merely prayed that he should be saved from savage beasts, and Nell had appeared.

"Ah see. And you've all-ready named her, Ah'll suppose?" Bill replied he had, and asked if Nell was not a Christian name. The Cajun fellow, who according to Bill seemed to be dying and unwilling to move from his spot, said the question was not as to the Christianity of the name, but of its Catholicism, a point he pressed between long wheezes. Bill had stooped to comfort him, supporting his head, and the man was now squarely gazing at his mangled leg. 'So,' Bill said, by means of distracting this poor soul, 'you are a Catholic and I a lapsed Shaker.' The man nodded. 'And Ah'ld have to shoot you, too, sar—if th' Holy Father ordered it...' Bill laughed and replied, 'It is my luck that the Holy Father hasn't yet had the insight to order you so!' This made the man laugh himself literally to death, and so Nell passed fairly, in the midst of no-place, into our Bill's possession.

"And it is a good thing, too! I recall an incident on the Eel River when, Bill was scouting with a group of Rebels. They had somehow caught onto his being a spy, and so they send out their two best rifleists to end him. Bill rode out at once with Nell, but she was troubled by the soggy terrain, and the Rebs caught up to him as he was only minutes from a Union camp. His pursuers shooting wildly, Bill saw that he was coming up upon a great ditch, but Black Nell had no choice now,

ter," I said. No sooner had I spoken than Captain Honesty said, "**The awful truth is...**" loosing a gallows laugh, which another interlocutor might have described as "drunken." He was **breathless** for a spell. "...the shoot-out with Tutt was '*bad conduct*' on both men's parts. **Coming home** on the prarer one night, not even worried about going **down by law**, just looking forward to a bowl of **duck soup** and a biscuit, Bill occasioned upon, not a jealous rival, but **the Exterminating Angel Himself**—or so Bill reckoned. Yessir, the thing had the horns of a buffalo, the painted face of a ghost, and a horse *as a rider*, and Bill was **face to face** with it! Yes, Bill was **far from heaven**. But then that chimera up and yelped to *Bill* for salvation, from the horse trampling down on him. '**Force of evil!**' he called the **giant** black horse, bellowing like **the gunfighter** he had become, and she played the part, snorting and thrashing her long unkempt **hair** as if to cut Bill apart. He aimed a ball at her eye and would have put his **high art** toward the mare's low death (and *that* is life, **high and low**, at once!), but his hand was shaking something fierce with fear. '**I remember mama,**' said he to himself, '**made one of her uncanny predictions, that one day, if I became a killer of men in cold blood, I'd find myself carried down into the mouth of the Adversary, twixt his very stinking jaws, by a black horse, and that therein the Adversary 'ld kill me, would kill Bill for bein' one of the killers hisself, and all my deadeyeing would be just a knife in the water—pointless.**' But just then, before he said **the long goodbye**, some primal **lust for life** gripped old Bill bout the biscuits-and-gravy, and he decided that he'd *tame* that **midnight** horse, and call her 'Nell' after his mama's favorite hound."

Here the Captain paused to sip.

"Now, this horse, **nobody's fool**, was not to be scared off by a round of gun-shot. **Notorious** Bill remembered **the nun's story**: She was so scared of the Devil's shadow, she never opened her eyes and fell down a well! So Bill yanked out the lost Dahecotah hunter, the **odd man out**, from under the horse and lifted him up into the air. It was as if they could see clear to **Oklahoma!** Though **only angels have wings**, together, Bill and the hunter could **paint your wagon** iff in it was fifteen-foot high. The horse hadn't been afeard neither of hunter nor scout on their lonesomes, but like **the piano**—played better by four hands than two—she was harmonizing a frightened whinny now. **The quiet man** atop Bill's shoulders cursed her in his language, and Bill harrumphed like a **raging bull**. **The stars look down**, they say, sometimes, and this time they winked down at old Bill, for the horse—already christened 'Black Nell' in his head—kneeled down and set, just like a quarter-horse at the track afore a practice race."

I interrupted the Captain's **storytelling** to remind him of **the Ten Commandments** of the Union Army ("Thou shalt not admit to gambling on quarter-horses to thy superior" being high on that hallowed list), and he apologized, saying he must have been **trainspotting** earlier, which is

what the Missourians call looking for stray cattle that have wandered onto the track, and allowed a mite too much of that **twelve o'clock high** sun to warp his Christianly thinking. I owned he was **unforgiven** until he sped up his story to its conclusion: Bill had saved a man and earned a fierce horse. **The usual suspects** of his legend were present—manliness, equine equipoise, &c. Captain Honesty nodded, his usual loud rasp becoming **the voice of the turtle**.

"That is well, Colonel, for the wages of hesitation are **the wages of fear**. Bill knew this, so he not only rode the Dahecotah back to his home, but, saying to hisself, '**You only live once,**' accepted the man's invitation to dine. Bill was unfamiliar with the delicious fare, but like **young Frankenstein** in his laboratory, he sought to learn its vital secrets. And finally, like a **young Mr. Lincoln**, he was diplomatic enough to get from the Dahecotah that he was merely eating bread made from '**Z**,' his short-hand for Zebediah's Wheat Biscuit-Flour, with a cold duck soup—*just what Bill had coincidentally set out to feast upon* before finding Black Nell, whom the hunter had unsuccessfully sought to capture. Bill whooped, and the horse thought herself called and so poked her head into the Dahecotah's lodgings, lapping up soup from Bill's bowl. That earned her, in his phrase, a '**zero for conduct.**' I was thinking of this just now, you see, when I said that both Dave and Bill acted with the **affliction** of bad conduct in the shoot-out."

I nodded, and he went on, again in a booming voice.

"In fact, Black Nell was not only hungry then but in another moment of note—one far graver in consequence."

"Was it during the War?"

"Exactly then. Bill was scouting with a group of Rebels whilst our boys were stationed nearby. This one dawn, Bill had been out hunting with Black Nell. (**All the king's men** could not have kept him from hunting!) When he returned, two Rebs asked him, 'Let us help you there with bringing your game to the Captain. It will endear you to him.' They seemed less than genuine, but Bill could not be sure. He filled **the angry silence** by packing his pipe, fixing to say, 'If you think it 'ld be wise,' even though every word 'ld burn his proud throat like a **ball of fire**. But before he could speak, Black Nell gnawed at one of the Reb's bags. The other Reb laughed, but Bill saw in the first man's bag not only provisions, but also a **black narcissus** flower, which was that camp's symbol meaning 'kill the traitor.' Bill looked up into **the big sky**, dreaming of firing at the men to give them **blazing saddles**, but seeing only **the birds**, then spurred on Black Nell suddenly, heading directly towards our camp. Behind him, the Rebels were shooting wildly. Bill saw that he was coming up upon a great ditch—he was far from the **Camelot** of his youth in the mountains, and it was that fateful hour, **high noon**—so Black Nell, with one **look back** in **anger** at the **lost horizon**, had no choice now,

ter artist I have ever seen. Just fix your eyes on that there cocktail napkin he was doodling upon. Why, he's captured your likeness, Captain, in a most startling and peculiar fashion."

"Yessir; Kernel, that's Bill for yer," replied the Captain. "Always fidgetin' with his pencils. Ye can hardly can have a conversation or play a round of cards with the man without him scratchin' out some pitchures, on nappins, barstools, hankerchiefs, what have yer. A feller's got to mind his possessions, hell, even his person, when he's in Bill's company if he don't want to end up sportin' one of them funny faces."

"You mean he draws on people?"

"I do indeed, sir." Captain Honesty then leaned in close, puffing away at me with his whiskey-scented breath, and told me how a few months ago, before the showdown with Dave Tutt, Bill had drawn on Tutt's cousin Edna as she lay passed out on the saloon bar.

Suddenly Mr. Tutt's grudge against Wild Bill made more sense.

I held the damp drawing up to marvel at its masterly craftsmanship. Wild Bill had not once glanced at his hand the entire time he was conjuring the Captain's portrait, which he had so casually dashed off and left to posterity in a puddle of beer. The Captain accepted his exaggerated likeness with a resigned humor. And a good thing, for many a lesser man might have failed to appreciate the artistic liberties Bill had taken in his depiction.

"Tell me, Captain, does he always draw his figures with such prodigious genitals?" I asked.

"Sure as a Rebel bleeds red," he replied. "Bill slaps a pecker on anything with a face. Men, women, Injuns, politicians, horses, chickens, you name it. Hell, the whole damn town's all marked up with Bill's lead. And I don't mean bullets, Kernel."

It was true. When I departed the Captain's company later that evening, I noticed in the red light of dusk how all the facades of Springfield bore the unmistakable mark of Wild Bill's draughtsmanship.

"But why does he do it?" I asked.

"I asked him about it once," Captain Honesty responded. I says to him, 'Say, Bill, why come you always add a big ole peeder to every one of them pencil drawrins of yours? He told me he done it on account of a nervous affliction.'

"What?" I gasped. "An affliction of the nerves in that immaculate specimen? Impossible!" I asked the Captain just what sort of nervous affliction a man of such upright and masculine bearing and such a nobly sloped forehead as Wild Bill Hickock could have possessed.

"He says it was a habit he had acquired in his schoolin' days and t'weren't a thing he could do about it even he had a mind not to."

"You mean to tell me, Captain," I shouted, "that Wild Bill is an artist not by his own volition and is slave to uncontrollable and perverse urges?"

"Please sir, keep your voice down!" the Captain begged me. "It's not that Bill's a madman, sir. Why, he's as sober as a judge. But Bill wasn't always a pistol man, you know. 'Fore he came to the border, he grewed up rich back in Baltimore, where his mother schooled him in the fine arts. Even taught him to play the viola. Well, Bill, as you now rightly know, had a fearsome talent for makin' pitchures. He spent his days out in the gardens of the estate drawin' naked marble statues or holed up in his daddy's librurly copyin' ole pitchures out of dusty ole books. Soon enough, he'd done drawn everything in the whole mansion, so his parents had no choice but to ship him off to Phillerdelphia for proper art schoolin'."



"That's, as Bill told me, where the trouble begun. 'When I showed up in Phillerdelphia,' he said, 'I fell drop-dead in love with the first girl I seen. A gal prettier than all them Roman goddesses I'd tickled with my pencil back in Baltimore. But there was one problem. She was the Mayor of Phillerdelphia's daughter.' Course, the mayor's daughter fell harder n' rocks for Bill, too. But the mayor would have none of it. Said he would sooner sell his daughter off to white slavers in Arabia 'fore he'd give his daughter to a degenerate artist from Baltimore."

"Course, Bill swallowed the mayor's venom real calm-like. He just looked him square in the melon till the man shouted hisself hoarse. But then, sure enough, the next day, flyin' atop city hall, draped over William Penn's statue was a huge brightly-colored canvas depictin' the mayor of City Hall necked as a jaybird, abusin' hisself with the Liberty Bell. 'Twas the only man who ever insulted Wild Bill and didn't wind up with a bullet put through his heart. But ever since that day, Bill told me, he's suffered from his nervous affliction."

"And you can reckon what happened from there," said Captain Honesty. "Bill had to skedaddle right quick, for there warn't no brotherly love left for him in Phillerdelphia. But just to spite the mayor further, he had his daughter meet him one last time for a farewell tryst out in the woods and had her come with the mayor's prize hoss, Black Nell. Bill kissed his gal goodbye and rode off on Black Nell. Now, you can be sure the mayor nearly burst his necktie when heard his best hoss was stolen. He sent his meanest henchmen after Bill. But Bill rode like black lightnin' across them Alleghenies and by the time they caught up with him, Bill had swapped his paintbrushes for shootin' irons and was clear over in Kentucky—where I was stationed at Fort Knox. In fact, that were the first time I laid eyes on Wild Bill. I was out on detail in the woods outside Louisville when I see Bill shoot through the clearing on Black Nell just ahead of the mayor's boys and headed straight for a stone wall. But Bill didn't slow one bit. Instead he just whispered in Black Nell's ear, tellin' her

ature of himself I ever did lay eyes on." The Captain's third whiskey had turned him a tad surly. He continued, "All that self-depricatin's a load of horse manure more potent than 12 mares in a pig sty! He's a narcissist, that one!"

Now the indolent yet slightly civilized people of southern Missouri are given to a certain level of colour in their language, but Narcissist was a word I had not heard outside of my limited forays into Greek Mythology and Botany. "Do you mean to say the great Wild Bill is a flower?"

The Captain gave me a long stare, "There's a lot you don't know about Springfield Colonel, I been listenin' to yer thoughts ever since you set foot here and yer half right about Ol' Bill havin in him some woman-nature. And yer right about this burgh bein' a point d apui, but not just fer military goings-on."

The most remarkable aspect of the Captain's commentary was his flawless pronunciation of French alongside the otherwise roughly-hewn syllables. "Well, I'm flattered you think so!" he said, as if he had been residing in my very thoughts, "I have been brushin' up on the Froggy parlay."

At this point I decided to drink up, as the Captain just may have been right about my not understanding these nether regions without the aid of social lubricant. His last sentence was completely incomprehensible to my learned ears, and I could only expect that more dense prose would follow.

"I brought ye here to the office fer a reason Kernel, I mean for ye to know that the aforementioned undercurrent of Bill's duel was not exactly a woman, but a special feller fer whom we in these parts have other words. And this feller, well let's just say he is possessed of some special powers havin to do with the bifurcation of time and space."

No sooner had I set down my empty whiskey vessel than the entire office began to swim in dusty blue light. Some may suspect the ruminations and visions that follow are nothing more than the ravings of a drunken soldier unaccustomed to the mind-butchressing capabilities of an uncommon drink, but I am clear about what I saw.

I turned to witness a group of clean-shaven youngsters congregating at tiny circular tables. Each specimen sat transfixed in front of illuminated objects of various sizes that bore moving pictures on their facades. The whole east end of the small office had grown into a veranda of considerable size. A strong aroma of cowboy brew filled the air, a fragrance with which I had become familiar during my long journeys between towns. Yet this smell only vaguely resembled the blackish liquid that men on sojourn prepare around campfires – a liquid so strong it is known to keep horseshoes and six guns afloat.

I then found my own body suspended on a whirling stool that swung me back round to meet the captain, who was now clad in a green apron and surrounded by metal vats that presumably held this strange aromatic concoction. The lobes of his ears held black stones and a small bar of glistening silver hailed from his nostrils: "Here in Springfield Star-

bucks we're brewin up the future, Kernel!"

The Captain then handed me the strangest hot cup I had ever beholden. I would not believe the apparatus myself had I not kept as a souvenir the strange skin that encased it. That cowboy brew was contained in a vessel constructed entirely of stiff paper! At first I could not manage to gain entrance to this cup's steaming contents, but the captain pointed out a small hole at the top – an opening no bigger than a fly was cut perfectly into a wobbly white material with which I had likewise never made acquaintance.

No sooner had I drained that cup, then a new wish of blue light found me face to face with a squat young Chinaman in the most peculiar assembly of garments! His bespectacled eyes looked straight into mine and announced, "Colonel, I am Hiro Nakamura. Your services are needed to save the Future. There is little time, you must come with me to Hollywood and write for television."

I had never heard of Hollywood or television, but I sensed the promise of a fortune in this offer and was in no position to turn it down. An honest Chinaman can be worth his weight in gold, so I took v Nakamura's outstretched hand and found myself swimming through that powder blue light for what seemed like a century. The Chinaman and I then found ourselves in a room with a bed the size of 8 washtubs and one of those illuminated objects on one of those circular tables.

"The Union is engaged in a big struggle," announced my companion, "and you are going to save a very important show called Heroes with your literary skills." When I inquired Mr. Nakamura as to our present location, he informed me, "You are in 2007 and this is the Standard." The standard to what I never did find out, for the Chinaman soon abandoned me in that room, where I was kept for several months, fed victuals from small, sealed packets, and instructed to write a series of tales about a group of future folk with an array of amazing powers that issued from their bodies.

When my stay was finished, I was given \$500 for my work and sent back to Springfield. I was thanked very nicely for my toil, and told that I had aided Hollywood during The Great Writers Strike, a time of rampant lawlessness during which the now Unionized states suffered great economic losses. If you want to read some insights into the televised future from the perspective of a time-trapped former union soldier, you can find them on page 45 of the upcoming August 2011 issue of Harper's magazine. For now, I am legally obliged to keep that confidential. As for my account of the Great Wild Bill, I will finish all of that soon enough.

It took me some trouble to get my bearings back when I was re-deposited into the Captain's office. The band of clean-shaven youngsters had disappeared and a lieutenant who had apparently joined the conversation during my time travels was engaged in a war story about Wild Bill the horseman and his brave mare. I never found out if my companions knew of the war I had been fighting in the future union. I just joined back in right here, "...

..." He hesitated in the middle of his narration and looked over his shoulder to check whether anybody was listening to us talk. The other men had lost interest in our conversation, had already tied their horses to a wooden post plugged into the dusty ground of the roadside and absconded into some bar.

He looked eager to tell me something and when he seemed sure no one could hear him, he proceeded. Still in a low voice, as if the horses watering contently at our sides might tell their owners what they'd picked up on.

"You're a writer and you can't tell nobody if I tell you something confidential, right?"

He must have had me confused with a lawyer or a doctor although I was quite sure, that in this part of the country, where people still shoot one another over honor, doctor's or lawyer's confidentiality can't be taken too serious. I, on the other hand, tried to look as serious as I could, when I nodded, lying "that's what the law says anyways."

He seemed relieved, "well, then this is as you say, off the record". I nodded once again, too curious about what he might say, to feel guilty for lying to the poor guy. He obviously wasn't that bright, telling a reporter what he feared the horses might eavesdrop on.

"We call him Duck Bill, you know that? Because of his fairly big nose and his protruding upper lip. He looks like one, don't you think? Anyway, that's what they've always called him, Duck Bill. His name of course is something like Hitchcock or something, nobody really knows. He himself started "Wild Bill." Everyone made fun of him behind his back. Let's be honest, who calls himself wild?"

He did though and if you don't he goes crazy. "Don't you know what they call me, don't you know why they call me wild?" His face gets all red and he stamps his feet like a little girl. When he's done screaming and he has nearly suffocated from the dust he's raised, he usually challenges one to a duel. Most of the men are wise enough to apologize. He may scream like a foghorn and glow like lantern but he shoots like a light beam."

Up until this moment under the Springfield sun, I had never heard anything like this about James Butler Hickok, that is what it says on the birth certificate. I needed to hear more, get this guy who was constantly and frantically looking over his shoulder to tell me his stories before he'd back out. He was evidently horrified by the thought of being challenged to a duel by Duck Bill. A protruding upper lip doesn't seem too laughable anymore, until you look into the gun barrel of the man it belongs to.

But his loquaciousness seemed equally big, if not bigger than his fear and so he kept on talking. "You know, how he's always wearing those Indian clothes with leather fringes at the sides, moccasins and furs? Well, folks think this is one of the reasons they call him wild, makes him seem tough and somehow beastly. The truth

is, he's the most vain person I've ever seen. It takes him hours to get those furs arranged and he hates wearing the same one twice. A guy once spat chewing tobacco on one of his new boots. Bill got all red and agitated, screaming at the poor guy, threatening that his next pair of boots would be made out of his butt cheeks. I swear no one present doubted that he'd skin him right there and have one of his indians make him a shiny pair of men-skinned shoes." He grimaced at the thought of it and continued, "He's quite neurotic, too- you know. Even more, he is obsessive compulsive. Every time he mounts his mare in the morning, he gets up on her back on one side, dismounts on the other, walks around the whole beast two times, all the while going over Black Nell's, that's the horse, instep with his finger before mounting her again. His men are always so embarrassed by the sight of it, they pretend to check their saddlebags or look for a pebble in their boots."

He giggled at the thought of great Wild Bill's men trying to occupy themselves, so they wouldn't have to watch their leader making a fool of himself every morning. The gentleman didn't seem to notice, he was just as ridiculous backbiting the man he was so afraid of.

"I know" he said, obviously noticing now, he is one of the cowards surrounding Wild Bill. "I know", he said again "but he is a hell of a scout and I told you, he shouts like hell, too".

He sighed "I heard of him before I had my first gun and I wanted to be just like him ever since. When the war broke out, I convinced my father to let me volunteer and set forth to join Wild Bill's men. Who could have known!?" When we met for the first time, they couldn't get one straight sentence out of me. I stared at this impressive figure, always thinking of how many skulls he must have crushed, how many hearts he must have perforated, how many wives he must have turned into widows. I was about sixteen by that time and father used to tell me hundreds of stories of how my grandfather had fought in the french revolution and how I had his fighting gene in me. I nearly wet my pants standing in front of Wild Bill, that doesn't sound much like a fighting gene, does it?

But then, pretty soon indeed, Bill lost his flair of danger and braveness, at least to me" he ended, shrugging his shoulders.

I wasn't ready to let him off the hook, yet. I had come to Springfield to find out more about the Wild Bill myth and if this meant cursing it, so it be. "How did it end? What opened your eyes" I asked carefully, not wanting to push him to hard. "When did Wild Bill turn into Duck Bill?"

He was just about to open up another box of compromising details, when he froze. One of Wild Bill's men was approaching, waving a glass in his hand, shouting nonsense from the distance while staggering towards us. The gentleman looked pale and forced himself to an excited mien, when he said, "And that was when she knew,

ter that I have encountered since my time up along the St. Marie." The Captain remarked as the trail of dirt settled from Nell's hasty departure. I had to concur with the Gentleman's remark, as the Wild man had brought with him as many tales as his reputation had promised, and he was inclined to confide the details of his exploits with minimal coercion.

We met the Scout at the appointed time that same afternoon in the hotel, where he looked even more out of place with his long hair matted along the sides of his head al-

most as though it had been purposefully plaited there. The Captain had already helped himself to a glass as Bill strode in, prairie thistles clinging to his sides.

"Give us another account of your time in the west," said I, waving him to the sofa, but the Captain raised his hand to interject.

"I believe," he began, "that the Colonel may have a keen interest in hearing of your flight aided most singularly by Black Nell and your fierce instinct in controlling her. Chased by two rebs, Bill had reached the ditch on the other side of which our reinforcements awaited. Approached with such swiftness, any other steed would have bucked at the sight of the steep ravine, but Nell knew that

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ter," the Captain said.

Turning away from the street, the Captain invited me to tour the public square. He pointed out Young's Livery Stable, Worrell's Saloon and the courthouse arch where Tutt died.

I asked the Captain to elaborate on what Springfield was like in those post-war days.

In '65, he said, Springfield was still the center of commerce in the region, but it was not the beehive of activity it was during and just after the war. Springfield had been district headquarters and home to the general hospital for the Army of the Frontier, not to mention a significant military supply depot.

"But if you want the details on what happened in '65," he said, "Here's someone who can tell you more about it than I."

A man had emerged from a nearby store that bore a signboard with the name "Hursh" painted on it. He appeared to be a local shopkeeper, and he presented an amiable countenance, clean-shaven with dark eyes and a broad smile.

The Captain introduced him as Mr. John Hursh. "Mr. Hursh is not only a prominent citizen," the Captain said, "but also was foreman of the Coroner's Jury in the Tutt shooting."

I hastened to ask Mr. Hursh if he would recall for me the events of July 1865, and he invited me into his shop.

The Captain excused himself to attend to some business at the livery stable, promising to return to conduct me to the hotel. Mr. Hursh led me into his store, a well-stocked and apparently well-run establishment of its kind, piled high with a variety of goods in bales, barrels and boxes. Hursh nodded to the young man waiting on customers at the counter, and we entered a small office at the rear of the store redolent of cigar smoke.

"What can you tell me about the shooting on the square?" I asked.

"The summer of '65," Hursh said, "was when the last of the Union troops were mustering out, heading back to their homes or setting out for the plains to fight Indians."

The last soldiers - members of the 2nd Ohio Cavalry - left Springfield by September of that year, Hursh said.

Bill Hickok was a scout earning 5 dollars a day when he mustered out in June. At loose ends, he made his living however he could, often at the card table. It was there, Hursh said, that Bill and Dave struck up a friendship.

"Tutt had been a reb soldier, but by '65 he was living in Springfield as a professional gambler. Dave staked Bill numerous times at cards, and Bill never failed to repay the debt." Then came that fateful night at the Lyon House, Tutt's taking of Hickok's watch, and the violence that followed.

"How many witnessed the actual shooting?" I asked.

"There were only a handful who testified at the coroner's inquest," Hursh said, "And of them, not one actually saw both men shoot."

"That's not quite what the Captain said," I replied, surprised.

"Well, the Captain wasn't there when it happened," Hursh said. "I daresay he's heard Bill's version, and while Bill's an honest man..." he smiled, "his tales tend to grow with the telling."

"The day of the shooting", Hursh said, "Bill's and Dave's friends, even some of Dave's kin, tried to make peace between the two, but neither would give any ground. Late in the day, Bill posted himself on a corner of the square, opposite the courthouse and Worrell's Saloon, watching Tutt. He told anyone who approached that 'Dave better not carry that watch up the street.'"

"James Orr was one of the witnesses. He'd seen the argument at the Lyon House, and he stopped on the square to speak to Hickok. Bill accused Orr of being a friend of Tutt's and ordered him off."

"The street belongs to me as much as anyone else," Orr retorted.

"Seeing a situation developing, a passerby, Mr. F.H. Scholter, stepped in, hoping to pacify the men. Hickok told Scholter about Tutt's taking his watch and repeated his warning about Tutt's crossing the square with it."

"Word spread quickly around the square that violence was brewing, but within minutes, it was all over," Hursh said.

"Tutt left his spot by the courthouse, walking toward Bill, and Bill advanced on Tutt," Hursh said. "Bill called out, warning him to stop. Then, Tutt reached for his pistol."

"Both men must have fired at the same time," Hursh said, "for all heard but a single shot. Ms. Laura Lee, who testified to the Coroner's Jury, said she heard the shot and looked up to see smoke from both men's pistols floating in the air."

"Tutt ran to the center arch of the courthouse, as if to take shelter. Then he pitched forward."

"That was rather hard," Scholter said to Hickok, seeing that Tutt was dead.

"Well, it's too late now," Bill said. "And I'm not sorry."

"At the inquest, Doc Ebert said Tutt died of a pistol wound to the chest," Hursh said. "But if you ask me, I think it was pride that killed Davis Tutt."

He shook his head sadly. "I've since learned that the day before Hickok and Tutt fell out, Tutt was jailed for not paying an old court fine of \$100. One of his mates bailed him out. Bill would've loaned Tutt that money in a second, but I think Tutt couldn't stomach that. You see, Bill usually came to him for money, not the other way around."

Hursh paused, looking past me to the doorway, where the Captain had appeared, inviting me to complete our tour of the square. We took our leave of Mr. Hursh, and the Captain proceeded to regale me with tales of Hickok's days as a Union spy.

"Well, we were in Arkansas," the Captain said, "and Bill had been ridin with the rebs for weeks. The rebs took position on the far side of a fenced pasture opposite our troops, when Bill and his mate suddenly broke away from the reb line and come ridin straight fer us. There was a stone fence, bout 5 foot high, and Black Nell, his little mare, didn't bat an eye. If a barrier presented itself,

ter," I declared, swatting at a fly that hovered lazily over the captain's already half-empty glass.

"That he is, and a man of honor too. You see it plain as day, don't yer, Colonel?"

I shrugged ambivalently as he raised his glass and summarily emptied the contents.

Sun beating down, I thought myself likely to succumb to slumber when another drumming of hooves roused us. This rider sat erect too, though not so perfectly as Wild Bill; his steed, though majestic, was not the equal of Wild Bill's mare. He dismounted with ease, though by no means the sprightliness of Bill, and when he landed I took him at once for a shorter man.

"This yere is Lieutenant Philips," said the captain, pointing in the vague direction of the new arrival. Frustrated at his inability to keep his finger steady, he took solace in another glass of whisky, which he poured with true dexterity.

"Will you join us, Lieutenant?"

The lieutenant tethered his mare to a post and took a seat, eyes lingering on the half-empty bottle that was our only other companion.

"Tell the Colonel of your experiences at Sandy River, Lieutenant," the captain said. Then, before the man could begin, he added confidentially, "He war in General Curtis' army, and saw the thing firsthand. Moreover, he's a man of honor, the lieutenant is. Don't yer see, Colonel?"

I had a mind to say that I didn't see, and in fact had not the slightest idea what the man was talking about anymore, but instead waited for the lieutenant to begin, which he was evidently eager to do.

"We were hunkered beside the southern bank of the Sandy River," said the lieutenant, busy hands imparting to the story energy that his voice was ill equipped to provide. "It war a d---d place, a land of pestilence, not far from here. We were there a bad long time when we saw rebs approaching. They set up camp across the river, close enough to cuss us out.

"One day, while picketing, I offered to exchange coffee for tobacco. Lord knows, one of them rebs took me up on it. That war a dry summer, the river water so low there war an island in the middle, with little but ditches on either side. Both rebs and Union men waded onto the island and met there.

"Well, who should I see in that party but Will Bill hisself, and with his mare Black Nell. Bill war spying on them rebs, and getting us valuable information. He must have sensed my surprise, for he blurted: 'Now Yanks, let's see yer coffee. We know the real article if we is Texans.'

"If we is Texans," repeated the captain mirthfully. "Do yer not understand? Will Bill is no more a Texan than I am a reb." He slapped the table with his left palm; his right hand engaged in the far more important task of raising glass to mouth. Mission accomplished, he liberated another dose of amber liquid from the bottle. "To your good health, gentlemen."

"Where was I?" asked the lieutenant.

"Sandy River," I replied hastily, sensing in his

comportment the look of a man on the verge of declaring a duel.

"Right. Before he returned to the rebs, Bill whispered to me that he warn't sure how to cross the river; it being wide in places. I told him to cross at that very island, where the ditches were narrow, and easy for Black Nell to jump. He wouldn't accept it though; told me it war no challenge, see.

"On picket that afternoon, we took shots at each other, just for appearances. He about shredded my cap, so many holes did he put in it, without touching one hair of my head."

Roused once more, the captain held his glass aloft as though it were a Colt revolver, and stabbed the air several times to illustrate the lieutenant's point. To his chagrin, the contents sloshed over the sides, but the situation was remedied by a swift refill from the almost empty bottle.

"Later that same day," continued the lieutenant, "Bill led a posse onto the island to 'take shots at the Yanks,' as he told it. At first, the only man fool enough to join him was his mate, a Union soldier and fellow scout. They could have crossed right then, but Bill warn't satisfied, and challenged more rebs to join 'em; which they did, lest they be accused of being cowards. When he had six men—"

"I thought it war ten," said the captain.

"No, six."

"Are you sure it warn't nine?"

"Six."

"What about eight? A nice even number."

"Six is an even number," said the lieutenant patiently.

"Seven, then," conceded the captain, like a gambler settling his debts. He sought solace from the bottle; finding it empty, he contented himself with holding it upside-down and licking the rim.

"The rebs must have thought Bill mad, for there were a hundred men lining the river on the Union side. All the while, we're pouring metal balls in their direction, but without aiming, out of fear of hurting Wild Bill and his mate."

"Can't hurt Wild Bill," insisted the captain, eyes closed, head lolling from side to side. "Can't be done."

The lieutenant wiped sweat from his brow. "Bill is readying Black Nell to jump the final ditch to the Union shore when he yells out, 'Long live the Union!' Then he pulled that harness.

"Wouldn't you know it: Black Nell was having nothing of that ditch, which stank something horrid. When she neighed it war as clear as if she were saying no sir, I won't be doing that today. She warn't alone, either. The other scout's horse was already trotting back to the rebs. It war mighty unfortunate, because now the rebs had their revolvers aimed at Bill and the scout."

"Can't hurt Bild Will." The captain leaned over and emptied the contents of his stomach onto the dusty road. "Can't be done."

The lieutenant moved his chair away from the captain. "Bill hollered up a storm. He gave Black Nell some extra motivation too, through the medium of his spurs, and swore

ter," the Captain said. "Back during the war, when he was riding with the rebs and spying for the Union, he..." the Captain broke off at the approach of a small group of men who were arguing loudly. Apparently, two of his veterans were contending over the price of a mule lodged at a nearby stable, and the only thing both parties agreed upon was to submit the matter to the captain's judgment.

Captain Honesty apologized for the interruption, but I told him I would be happy to resume my place overlooking the square, watching the local characters, until he returned.

I had just taken my seat under the awning when a bizarre apparition rose from the dusty street. It was a scarecrow of a man, walking with the unsteady gait of a drunkard. Broad of shoulder but lean to the point of starvation, the man's lanky arms ended in the huge scarred hands of a blacksmith. His rough, patched shirt was faded to colorlessness by sun, rain and wear. His trousers were worn buckskin and his boots were in disrepair, one flapping at the heel. Long, grizzled hair and beard framed a face lined by time and strong emotion, and grimed with the dust of the street. His eyes were bright blue, seamed with red yet sharply lucid. A stench of rotgut liquor preceded the man as he stepped under the awning and tipped his shapeless hat in greeting.

"How-do," he said in a gravelly voice, swaying slightly. "Are you the writer from back East that the Cap'n's been talkin bout?"

I rose and introduced myself, reaching out to shake his large, calloused paw.

"M'name's Sam C____," he said. "And I hear yer lookin fur stories bout Bill Hickok."

"Indeed," I replied.

I invited him to sit in a rough-hewn chair on my left, which was downwind. He accepted; hitching his chair closer to my own.

"I reckon the Cap'n already told yer bout that shootout with Dave Tutt," Sam said, gesturing toward the square with a huge thumb. "But I knowed Tutt, and Hickok, from a ways back, and like most of the d---d fools in this town, that Cap'n don't know but half the story."

I asked him to elaborate.

"Well," he said, leaning toward me, "Tutt and Hickok was on differnt sides in the war, and some folks say that was the point a'contention that drove 'em to fight. It's true that Tutt was a d---d Arkansas reb and proud of it, but that didn't have nothin t'do with that shootout." Sam paused. "A'course, bein a Tutt, I figgered Dave'd find his death at the end of a gun somewhere. The Tutts took to feudin with the Everetts down at Yellville, Arkansas, when Dave was a boy. A lot of folks was killed, includin Dave's pa, his grandpa and some uncles and cousins. They'd probably still be fightin it out but his grandpa, old Hamp Tutt, made the peace from his deathbed. Hamp'd been ambushed, but as he lay dyin, he told his kin t'stay their vengeance. Otherwise Dave probably wouldn't have lived

long enough for Bill to shoot him," he laughed, showing a handful of rotting teeth.

"What about the rumors that there was a woman involved?" I asked.

"There was talk," Sam said. "But there warn't nothin to it. Bill paid court t'Dave's sister Mary for a while, and Dave didn't care for it. Bill said that Dave met him with a drawn pistol one evenin when he come a'courtin, but nothin ever come of it. And Mary up and married some fella from back East."

My narrator darted a bloodshot look to either side and hitched his chair still closer to mine, his voice dropping. "Now, the way that Cap'n tells it - and what most folks believe - is that it was all about Bill's gamblin debt and Tutt's shamin Bill by paradin across the squar with Bill's watch. But I know differnt." Sam's voice became a whisper. "It warn't the debt nor the shame, any more'n it was Dave bein a reb nor Bill courtin his sister. The fight was about the watch. Because that watch ain't just a fancy timepiece. It's somethin else. Something ... unnatural."

"Bill and I fought together at Wilson's Creek and beyond, and he's always been full o' tales bout his shootin and ridin and spyin and dodgin bullets and takin on the whole McKandlas gang by hisself. And I'm not saying he's lyin. But him survivin all them wild adventures is more'n luck, or marksmanship, or horsemanship or skill with a knife," he said. "It's that watch."

"That watch has a power," he hissed. "Remember the Book of Joshua, how God made the sun and moon stand still? Didn't Joshua best his enemies by stoppin time itself? I don't know if it's God or the Devil or some kind o' witchery," he continued excitedly, his voice rising, "but that watch is more'n it appears, and if'n I was you ..."

"D--n your eyes Sam!" the Captain suddenly bellowed from the street in front of us. "Get yer crazy drunken carcass out of my chair!"

Sam recoiled from the shout, then rose slowly with a kind of tipsy dignity. "Mark my words," he said, his eyes locked on mine as he shuffled away. "Dave Tutt's biggest mistake warn't takin that watch; it was takin it without knowin how t'use it. That's what got him killed."

"Crazy!" the Captain bawled again, raising his fist as if to strike the old drunk, who shied and shuffled quickly into an alley, causing the nearby layabouts on the street to burst into rough laughter and catcalls.

"I apologize," the Captain said. "Sam's not a bad fella, but he's not been right in the head sin the war."

He sighed. "Anyways, I'd started ter tell you about some of Bill's adventures. He'd been riding with the rebs - spying for the Union - for weeks when he and his mate suddenly broke away from the reb line and come ridin right up to ours afore the rebs knew what was what. There was a stone fence, bout 5 foot high, and Black Nell, that little mare of his, didn't bat an eye. If something needed ter be jumped,

ter," the Captain said.

There was a sudden stir at the opposite side of the town square. Among a hubbub of voices and the terrified whinnying of horses, woman shrieked in fear. The Captain stepped forward, his hand straying to his sidearm as a shout was taken up by various men on the street. "Tutt's back! Tutt's back again!"

I looked to the Captain for explanation. He had drawn his pistol and his eyes had narrowed, going cold. The combat veteran had emerged from the jovial frontiersman, and an air of deadly alertness emanated from him. "Veterans to arms," the Captain bellowed. "Tutt's back."

He barked orders at some of the idlers on the street, and several of them fell into formation behind him.

Astonished, I could only look on as the crowd among whom the cacophony had erupted scattered before a shambling figure in a rotted linen coat.

The apparition on the square had the shape of a man, but the rotting face of a corpse. The eyes rolled and the jaw, its supporting sinews corrupted, gaped as the thing lurched forward unsteadily on its dragging feet.

The thing was an abomination. The sun itself seemed to fade as it touched the walking corpse, which snarled and reached clawed hands toward any who stood near. The square cleared in seconds, bonneted matrons dragging their shrieking children off the street, and men taking up strategic positions, pistols and shotguns at the ready.

"What's happening?" I cried out. Without turning, the Captain replied, "It's Tutt. Dave Tutt."

"But Tutt's dead! You said so yourself," I said, stunned.

"Well, there's dead and then there's dead," he said slowly, his eyes, and the barrel of his pistol fixed on the lurching figure that approached at a cripple's pace.

"But how?"

"When things got bad for the rebs, some of them, from way down South, started turning to witchery; slave magic they called it; hoodoo," he said. "Raisin up the dead to fight the livin'."

This statement was so absurd I would have thought the Captain mad were I not seeing the truth of it before my very eyes.

"But how did Tutt ..."

"Well, we figger he must've been magicked back when he was fightin' with the reb army," the Captain said. "But nobody knew it until after the shootout on the squar'."

A breeze brought a stench of death and decomposition to us as the thing approached, hissing, one rotting eye fixed on the Captain, the other staring blindly upward. I felt my gorge rise at the scent of old putrescence. But the Captain and his men stood firm, their weapons in their hands.

"Private Wilson," the Captain said.

One of the erstwhile layabouts straightened. "Yes, sir."

"Get my sword."

The man ran into the Captain's office and returned with the unsheathed sword in hand.

"When he falls, you take his head," the Captain

spat. "I don't want to go through this again."

"How many times has this happened?" I whispered, appalled.

"Third time's a charm," he muttered, drawing bead on the skeletal corpse.

"Fire!"

There was a thunder of gunfire and we were engulfed in a cloud of gunsmoke. Knocked off balance by the impact of the shots but otherwise undeterred, the dead gambler toppled. Scrabbling on the ground in a manner that reminded me unpleasantly of an injured wasp, the thing tried to rise.

"Wilson!" the Captain shouted.

The stroke came whistling down like the sweep of scythe, cleanly separating the creature's head from its body. Tutt's eyes stopped their movement in the dead face, apparently deprived of vitality, but the body continued to thrash in that horrible, insectile fashion for a few moments. At last it lay still.

"Wilson, Johnson, Buckner," the Captain said. Three men, including the swordsman, stepped forward. "Take the body to the mortician and make sure he burns it this time."

The men moved rapidly to accede to this command, and soon the Captain and I stood alone in the street. For several seconds, I was speechless.

"Third time's a charm?" I finally croaked.

The Captain sighed.

"The first time was right after Tutt died. He came into town, bold as brass, and joined a card game at one of the saloons. The folks he was playing with didn't know him when he was alive, and nobody knew who or what he was till he bit the bartender. Well, someone ran and got me, and sin there was no reasoning with him, I had no choice but ter shoot him down. We were halfway back to the graveyard with his corpse, when he rose up and went after Private Wilson, who was driving the wagon. We filled Tutt so full of lead he couldn't move, buried him quick and put a huge piece of Carthage stone atop the grave. It must've taken him these last two years ter dig out."

"But what happens now?" I said. "What's to stop him from coming back again?"

"Don't you worry about that," the Captain said, slapping me on the back, his jovial mood returning.

"We've learned a thing or two about hoodoo sin then. Turns out, if yer kill the head, the body'll die." Seeing that I was still shaken, the Captain escorted me back to his office, where he poured me a large bourbon and sat calmly cleaning his sword as I drank it.

Finally, I felt up to continuing our interview. "Tell me," I said. "What did Mr. Hickok do during the war?"

"Bill fought for the Union at Wilson's Creek and served as a scout, a spy and at one point, a detective, collectin on debts to the Union. But it was his days as a spy that make the best tales," the Captain said.

"We were in Arkansas," he said, "and Bill had been ridin' with the rebs for weeks. The rebs were on the far side of a fenced pasture opposite us when Bill and his mate suddenly broke away from the reb line and come ridin' straight fer us. There was a stone fence, bout 5 foot high, and Black Nell, his little mare, didn't bat an eye. If a there was somethin' ter jump,

ter," said the Captain, the dust settling on the wooden steps. Bill was gone.

He rode out along the road that led west, out of Springfield, for several miles, until he felt confident that he had gone far enough, and broke off into the trees. The Stranger had set him at ill ease. He was used to walking in on his own legend, the way men's voices fell when he passed into a street or saloon, deprived suddenly of their own authority and gone to silence. It wearied him steadily.

But the Colonel, this stranger, he knew this would be different. The Colonel would seek him out. The way his eyes had followed him even in their brief meeting. The Colonel watching him.

"Who's Colonel," Bill spat out loud, ducking his head below a mass of vines. He was a dangerous man. He knew men had never been more dangerous, now that the war was ended. It was his burden to know it.

He checked the trail behind him as he rode deeper into the woods of Missouri, Nelly picking her way through the underbrush unconsciously. The midday burned stuck down through the massive canopy above him. The Colonel could be anybody, Bill thought. He scraped at his eyes. Had he even caught his name? It was something that burned. He could hear the sound of it, but it had no form; a name without letters. The thickness of the day surrounded him, hot and airless. It was a day that would stay hot into the night. The horse plucked its way through the woods as Bill jarred it on.

He looked behind him again. Bill thought in circles as the horse carried him, his eyes vigilant but his mind tracing strange shapes in the hot light. He saw things. He saw the windmill behind his childhood home, a contraption erected before he could remember it, the big blades twirling ceaselessly in the great plains wind. He saw himself sitting below it, shooting prairie mice with his Father's pistol, waiting for their little heads to break the surface of the earth before picking them off, the bullet spitting up an opaque cloud of dust from the dry ground. Would he do these things then, in that time? Would he do the things he'd known himself to do?

They crossed a stream and he was back in the frontier woods again. The Colonel expected kinship because they'd worn the same blue coat. Expected the bond of rank and rifle. Bill spent a full year of the war in woods just like these, on his own. Whoever wasn't looking to kill him then wasn't looking to help him either. He was cut off from his own kind, discharged. It was the best way to approach it. He'd stay camped by himself on a ridgeline for a week, watching the valleys below for the ragged packs of enemy, posing as a trapper when he had to in ragged backwoods towns.

There was the time he came across the woman and her three boys, washing clothes in a river somewhere south in the Arkansas country.

He'd never allowed himself to be surprised like that before. How he'd stumbled across them he'd never been able to figure. He'd just hadn't seen them, hadn't sensed them. He rode blind around a bend and suddenly there they were, the children in wool rags, filling their deep buckets with the river water, their mother scraping a gray cloth against a washboard. The entire forest went still when they saw him. They'd left their rifle leaning against a tree on the shore, and upon sight of Bill he could see the boys' minds fall instantly to the too-distant rifle. Then the familiar look came across their faces, going from startled to hopeless in an instant. The boys hardened in defiance, resolved never to accept the inevitable. Their mother stared up at Bill from a long way away. She knew everything of him and nothing. Bill the false trapper. Bill the Union man. Bill the righteous killer. Bill the discharged. He bore his rifle and scope plainly. He saw the expectation of death in their eyes. Maybe not their own, but certainly death, certainly. That was deep in the autumn of 1863. The time when he turned back for home.

Nelly started suddenly and reared up, and Bill was plucked from his dream as the horse buckled beneath him. He met the ground hard in a flutter of gray leaves. When he rolled over, Nelly already standing.

The woods were still and hot all around him. The sun lit up the air from no particular direction. The thought occurred to him that this was as good a place as any to disappear. To never be put upon for a fight again. To never be sought and eventually found. But it was a fate he could not extinguish.

He pulled himself to his knees and pushed at his bruised rib cage. How old was he now? Near 30? Was that long among men? He couldn't tell.

He adjusted the saddle on Nelly's deeply curved back and swung himself up on to it. She began to lead him roughly back in the direction they had come. The sun came through the trees at an angle as the two made their way back through the forest.

He'd meet the Colonel at the hotel. The Colonel who's name was nothing but a sound that escaped him. Bill could already feel himself pulled along by a foreign current. It tugged at Nelly's legs and pushed the wind at his back. The Colonel with a name like a bullet. Bill held tight to the reins. He decided he would live like a ghost within himself. The world would eventually swallow him one way or another. Better it be in Springfield. He dug his heels into the horse's side. They came galloping out of the woods onto a flat pasture. There was a small farmhouse at the far end of the field that marked the road back into town. Bill pressed the horse faster, tearing across the field toward something brutally foretold, until he saw the last fence marking the pasture from the road, and looking down at the horse charging furiously below him, he knew that

aturist," said the Captain. "He once drew a picture of President Johnson with a nose bigger than a banana."

"I'd like to see that picture," I told the Captain, but he was unaware of the whereabouts of the fabled work of art.

"He did one of Tutt's mother, too. Had her working down at Madame Wilmmett's. Tutt wasn't thrilled with that one, but it was a hit with the guys down at the saloon."

Just at that moment, a Lieutenant approached us and asked if the Captain was boring me with his Wild Bill stories. "No," I told him. "Actually I find them quite fascinating."

"Then you oughtta hear this one," said the Lieutenant. "Bill n' me used to scout together. An' one time we was out to checkin' on enemy troop movements. We was ridin' along when we meet this Chinese feller. Well, Bill jumps offa his horse an' the two o' them start carryin' on like they known each other for years. Turns turns out they do. So Wild Bill then says to me, he says, 'I wantcha ta meet my mate, Wong Fei Hung.'"

"Turns out he's here from China, where he's some kinda big hero, an' he's lookin' fer to fight some evil genius scientist."

"Are you talking about Nikola Tesla?" I asked.

"O' course not," said the Lieutenant. "Tesla's all of about eleven years old right now. He ain't even famous yet."

"Of course," I said. "How foolish of me."

"Nah, this guy went by the name o' Monopod. Professor Manfrotto Monopod. An' no sooner had Wild Bill spoke his name, then there he was. Short little skinny bastard with a lab coat, tiny round glasses an' that government-issue spikey, white hair. Prob'ly from usin' too many o' them Tesla coils."

"But you said—"

"I know what I said, dadgummit!" the Lieutenant shouted at me. "Shut up! I'm the one tellin' the story, here."

I apologized to the Lieutenant and bid him continue with his story.

"Anyhoo, this scientist guy is standin' there, an' he's got this box in his hand with all kinds of buttons an' switches on it. An' he sez, 'Wild Bill, my old nemesis, we meet again. Only this meeting will be our last.'"

"An' Wild Bill says, 'Yes it will, Monopod, because I am going to end you.'"

"That's what you said last time, Wild Bill," Monopod said. "But I bested you. And I'll do it again."

"An' Wild Bill looks at the guy an' he sez, 'cause o' yer fancy-schmancy bullet-proof force shield! That's cheatin'. You come out from behind it an' we'll see how tough you are.'"

"But Monopod, he sez, 'No, Wild Bill, my secret weapon this time isn't my force shield, but my army of killer mecha-men.'"

"An' he presses a button on his gadget an' the ground rumbles an' these five giant mechanical men rise up outta the ground! Great big, monsters, nine feet high, made outta gears an' wires an' whatnot. An' they start advancin' on Wild Bill an' Wong Fei Hung, while Monopod plays with the buttons on the weird box thing in his hand."

"So Wong Fei Hung crouches down an' holds up his arms in this crazy pose an' says, 'Crane Style,' an' starts beatin' on the mecha-men with his bare hands. An' holy heck, can he move fast. His arms an' legs just turn into a blur, an' he starts puttin' big ol' dents into the first mecha-man. Meanwhile, Wild Bill pulls out his revolver an' starts a-shootin'. But the bullets just bounce right offa the crazy contraption, an' it keeps on advancin' on Bill. But he just stands there an' stares it down. That is, until it takes itself a mighty swat at Wild Bill an' sends him up, flyin' through the air until he

slams right into another one of the godless things.

"Well, Doctor Monopod, he just starts cacklin' away, like this is the funniest thing he ever seen. An' one o' the metal monsters starts pullin' up trees an' boulders an' pilin' 'em up on top o' each other. So I ask this Monopod character what it thinks it's doin'."

"It's building a great wall," Monopod sez, "Behind which, I will trap Wild Bill forever."

"Then he laughs his cackly laugh again, an' goes back to pressin' buttons an' turnin' knobs on his little device thing."

"Well, Wild Bill keeps runnin' around, shootin' at the things. An' Wong Fei Hung manages to take one out with his bare hands. All that jumpin' around an' spinnin' an' movin' real fast an' hittin' at the thing actually worked! An' the mecha-man, he starts shootin' lightin' outta his eyes an' makin' this screechin' noise while his head spins around, then it up an' expoded! Bits o' metal went all over the place. One gear went flyin' by an' about took my head clean off, I tell ya whut. Then what's left o' the thing just up an' keeled over an' hit the dirt with a crash an' then just lay there, smoulderin' away."

"But Monopod, he just waves a hand an' says, 'Bah! It is no matter! For, as you can see, I have four more mecha-men with which to destroy my sworn enemies!' An' he presses some more buttons an' another one o' the infernal contraptions starts advancin', arms spinnin' around, lookin' for a fight."

So we got one mecha-man down, two gettin' shot at by Wild Bill, one fightin' with Wong Fei Hung, an' another buildin' a wall. Which, by this point, was nearly done, an' Monopod was standin' up on top of it, laughin' away an' turnin' knobs on that box o' his.

"Now, me, I hightail it outta there to watch from a safe distance. Bullets ain't doin' nothin' an' there's no way I'm gonna get stuck behind a wall with them. So I ride up a hill real quick so's I can look over the wall an' watch the rest o' the fight."

"Well, just at the moment that I turn back around to see what's goin' on, one of the iron beasts picks up Wong Fei Hung, squeezes him real hard, an' then throws him up, over the wall, an' out into the field. He lands an' just lies there. I can't tell if'n he's alive or dead. An' I know Wild Bill's gonna be angry now. You don't hurt a mate o' Wild Bill's without some serious repercussions."

"Now Bill ain't no dummy. He notices somethin' that I don't. He notices that, no matter what's goin' on, ol' Monopod never lets go o' his box. He just keeps fiddlin' with it. So Bill, he runs as far outta the way of the metal men as he can, takes careful aim at Monopod, an' pulls the trigger."

"I thought he missed. But he didn't. Remember, Monopod has some kinda force thing to stop bullets. But his box, it's got this metal rod stickin' out the top of it, an' Bill actually shoots that tiny metal rod smack-dab where it connected to the box, an' off it breaks with a loud twang."

"Monopod screams in anger. An' the mecha-men, they just stop movin'. See it turns out that Monopod's usin' the box thing to signal to the mecha-men. An' without it, they ain't any kinda men at all. They ain't nothin' but big chunks o' metal all stuck together."

"So Monopod, he gets all, 'This isn't the last you've heard of me, Wild Bill!' an' he jumps down off the wall an' zooms off into the sky in some kinda crazy flyin' contraption."

"So that's all well an' good but Bill is now stuck behind this wall that the mecha-man built. So Bill reaches down, pets his faithful horse, talks to her nicely an' tells her that

ter I've seen in these pa-arts for a while. He won't stand fer no feller stealin' from him, reb or no. You cross wild bill, your good as dead.

Colonel N----: He for hire? Looks like he could really clean up a place.

Captain Honesty: Don't think he spoke of havin' law man ambitions, Captain.

Did you see how he mounted his nag?

Colonel N----: More than a nag, Captain.

Captain Honesty: Fucking right. Did you see his control over that animal? Mare seems to know who's ridin' it. An' you should a' seen how he was treatin' his whisky. Not sippin' it like some yeller Sioux. Couldn't have downed it faster if he held the bottle vertical. There's a Union Scout who knows how to drink.

(Early Evening. The Colonel and Honesty have helped some women-folk erect a tent for selling their wares. Across the street, a shrill lady is calling loudly, trying to sell her own wares. It seems everyone has something to sell. Wares, mostly. Colonel N---- takes a seat next to honesty, wiping his brow. Suddenly, they hear gunfire. They give each other a look and then rush to their mounts, galloping toward the noise).

Colonel N---- (breathless, high on his mare): You think it's Bill?

Captain Honesty: We'd better hope, Colonel. Watch your hide!

(Wild Bill comes riding past, nearly knocking Captain off his horse. His head close to his steed, he pulls his mare's head around into a full turn and cuts back behind Honesty and the Colonel, bulleting behind them, toward two other men and their steeds).

Captain Honesty: That's Tutt's cocksucking cousin. I'd tell him from anywhere.

Colonel N----: You think he kin handle the two rebs? All 'n his own?

(The sit there, not moving. They stare).

Colonel N----: Rebs on the warpath.

Captain Honesty: Yep.

Colonel N----: You think he's a dead man?

Captain Honesty: Don know.

Colonel N----: They they one's doing the chasin' or the ones bein chased?"

Captain Honesty: Don know.

Colonel N----: Should we foller 'em?

Captain Honesty: Yep.

(A pause.)

Colonel N----: Ain't my horse too slow for 'at?

Captain Honesty: Give em a spike in the side. That'll wake 'im.

(They keep staring. Wild Bill waves a guns in the air.)

Colonel N----: Those '51 Navies?

Captain Honesty: Looks like it.

(Another pause.)

Colonel N----: We in Indian country?

Captain Honesty: Yep.

Colonel N----: Fuck.

Captain Honesty: Ok, they're coming back. Git ready.

Colonel N----: Ready? Fer what? You know what to do?

Captain Honesty: Only know one thing. (He removes a Smith and Wesson Schofield from his holster.) Someone's gonna die 'fore sun up.

(Tutt's cousin and his partner make another pass, this time realizing that the Colonel and Honesty are 'with' Wild Bill. They stop with a hand on their holsters.)

Captain Honesty: We don want no trouble, hear? We're just here to clean up after'n the mess.

First Rebel (Tutt's cousin): Your in the way.

Second Rebel: Yeah.

Colonel N----: Know what? Think I'm a goin' to retire right bout now. Not paid enough for this personal peril shit. Jus' not in my blood.

(Colonel N---- rides off in Wild Bill's direction, stopping next to him to inform him of the situation.)

Colonel N----: It's one of the Tutt boys. 'Spect he's mad you kilt his kin. He got a partner.

Wild Bill: That ugly fucker?

Colonel N----: Yep. But I ain't stickin' round. Where should we meet?

Wild Bill: You know how to get to the Hotel Springfield?

Colonel N----: Course. Through Deadwood. No law in Deadwood, I hear.

Wild Bill: You hear right. I'll see you in the Hotel Springfield. Save you a good whore, to git you out of those flashy Union decorations.

(Colonel N---- rides off, unsure if Wild Bill's joking. He enters a saloon named The Grand. He sits at the bar).

(Two hours later, Captain Honesty comes riding back, bloodied but alive and healthy.)

Colonel N----: Aw, what happened to you, Cap'n?

Captain Honesty: Well, you know how there was two of 'em before, gunning for Bill? Well, Bill got a big head on him. 'Stead of makin' peace, he rides right up to them, cocksure as ever. He gave Tutt a piece of his mind, made like he was itchin' for some gunplay. Think it was all bluster, cause he ran off. Bill'll do that. Never know what he's up to next.

Colonel N----: (Takes a shot) Don' sound so bad.

Captain Honesty: Well, what he din't see was the huge ditch yonder, which he jumped. An' on the other side, a whole posse of Rebs.

Colonel N----: Oh no.

Captain Honesty: And know what he said to them? Want to hazard what he said to those Rebs?

Colonel N----: Oh. No.

Captain Honesty: 'E said to them, (in his best Bill Hickock voice) 'Hope your dicks don't sag like your chins, else I'd be feeling right sorry for your wives right now.'

Colonel N----: This ain't goin' to end good.

Captain Honesty: 'actly what I was thinking. But you shoulda seen Bill ride! He controlled that mare like it was part of him, I swear as a Christian man. It was like her legs was his, know what I mean? Two of the Rebs started givin' him chase, so he took the mare 'round, and she went straight for the ditch again, so fast that the mare only realized maybe ten feet after she was 'sposed to that

ter I've ever met, and that mare is a good second," the Captain said.

"You heard how Bill got across our lines at Mizzoola?"

"At the time, the office in New York stirred about a wild man crossing lines at whim."

"By God, that horse was a big reason why. When Bill come over our side, we'd heard tell of his glory among the rebs. He'd flunked the rebs so much we figured he was due for another, and we were glad cuz we kept getting outflanked and beat bad, 5 to 1.

"When he rode in, we patted him on the back, listened to his stories, drank ale with him and played cards like Dave did. But then Bill lay low, and we got suspicions. He slept during the day, wasn't part of no drills, and fed that mare all kinds of hay: oats, wheat, barley, grain, while our horses got only the rut.

"Then some soldiers saw Bill across the camp, paying attentions to that nurse Mary. He'd sit in her tent for hours, and seeing no bandages, some of the soldiers got fried, thinking Bill was putting a number on us. One night we got together for a circle-jerk and one of them Jayhawks said maybe we should stuff him in a sack and fling him over.

"The next morning, Bill was gone. So was Black Nell. We slapped ourselves silly, knowing that courtship was a ruse, to get us thinking funny. We played mumble-peg that night and made sure that Jayhawk lost a toe. We thought nothing of the man but the strangeness of the great. And we recalled that magnificent creature's black skin prominent and shining against the sun and those shins lean and muscle-cooked, and we told the tales of Wild Bill again, of that time Black Nell swam across the river at Price's place. We got to circling the fire at night and praying for that mare.

"For a month we heard nothing, and we were still getting flanked, not knowing what way to turn. We'd dug a ditch across our lines to keep them from hitting our front, but during the night we couldn't defend every post, so we kept getting plucked, here or there, without any full attack. We'd call those damn rebs cowards, but they'd laugh and shoot out dead cats and rodents, trying to spread that smallpox.

"We ate half cans of beans and chewed on jerky, and got to wearing the moccasins we'd picked up from them Injuns we run over in Battle Hill. Then we killed and ate coons too, making sure to cool 'em right so that rabies didn't stew us. After a few days we heard Bill was settled, but the rumors came so sudden we got suspicions, thinking the rebs were spreading them to get us off guard. That's what the cretans did to weaken the lines in General Sherman's camp in Atlanta, and soon we were so hungry and a'erd that we believed any minute we'd get Bill's head among the shots and we'd be wrestled for good.

"One night, Bill Retard and the kid from

Five Points got a report from the guard on the left flank of stirrings and went to investigate. There they saw Bill mounted on Black Nell, and he told them he'd be getting something soon. He turned and rode away fast and when the rest of the camp learned of it we thought it was a ruse, for Bill Retard was known to steel penknives and the occasional moccasin and Five Points, well, he was an Irishman. We started thinking maybe ghosts was visiting us and there was even talk of chopping up the two men and making a meal of 'em.

"The next day, we were laying out front in the hot afternoon, rifles in arms and talking about the traitors when we hear a yell and see a spirit riding up. From the heat and haze we think maybe it's a reb, and we raise our guns to fire, but when we see that mustache and wild hair and then two soldiers behind him yelling and pointing their rifles, we knew it was Bill. There was a holler from the camps in back, as the men converged from the flanks too, and we put our arms up and yelled for Bill. Some men from the left flank knelt to take shots at the rebs but the General stopped them, thinking it was too risky, for only Bill had that shot. Then we saw it wasn't just Bill. That mare was riding fast and hard and taking no prisoners, and the men in back were losing force.

"It's a funny story, Colonel. It was like that mare performed magic, because he turned Bill around one-eighty and picked off the two horses, taking down the men head first. Then another round of rebs come, and Bill gunned them down too, that horse ready and able to move its feet and hold steady, and then the next second it turn around and Nelly, it flew up towards the lines.

"Then the rebs got dirty. They started flinging them carcasses of dead Negroes they'd tortured from that Negro regiment, and we got to cursing and yelling for them to cut it. But those filthy rebs kept shooting and one of them Negroes, without arms or legs or even a head hit Black Nell on the side and Bill almost flew. But God what a mare! Black Nell only stumbled a few steps and then it kept chugging, and Bill turned and fired and got two of the cannoneers, right between the eyes I heard. And Black Nell kept chugging.

"A couple of rebs took the opportunity of the carcass to ride close, and Bill had to focus up front so for a while he didn't see 'em. Our men yelled but Bill and his mare saw that ditch up ahead. Then the carcass hit the mare on the head and Bill and Nell spun three sixty but it didn't matter none, because Nell kept at it. The rebs got closer and now they were on Bill's heels and Bill and Nell were aiming for that ditch, where we'd placed wires and shards of black glass and pellets and gunpowder, so no reb could pass over. And it was a good ten yard distance, so even the best men couldn't jump and only the most practiced horse. But it was no problem for Black Nell! She saw