

Redemption

by Richard Taylor

Jarom could think of no special reason for any of them, on a bitter cold Monday morning, to be in Taylorsville, a place of no special importance except as a watering place on the way to Bloomfield and other destinations in Nelson County. Not one of them—neither Magruder, Berry, Bill Marion nor Jarom himself—had any business there until Marion manufactured some in the form of abducting four persons of color from the local jail.

Like much that begins as mischief and ends in calamity, it opened by chance and played out in the old molds of predictability, given what was given. Knocking about the town, Marion stopped a man named Froman, a carpenter, and asked him what the news was. Froman told him that four Negroes had been jailed on Sunday, two of them women. Marion asked what they'd done, and Froman told him that they'd been charged with burning and looting a house a mile or so north of town. He explained that at the time of the fire someone saw the woman near the site and that when questioned, none too gently, she'd named three others. So the constable enlisted some good men and true, men who happened at the time to be idle, and they scoured the country gathering them up, fetching each from the farms of their owners. At each place, after the circumstances had been explained, the owners reluctantly gave them up, all except the Widow Hume who had to be restrained while the men bound her young domestic to a spare horse and led her away. The others went willingly enough to the jail in Taylorsville where they sat behind bars until an enquiry could be made.

—Enquiry be damned, Marion said. They ought to be shot, and we're just the boys to do it.

Without any other prompting, he went over, as he put it, to reason with the jailer, a man named Samuel Snyder, a turnkey part-time, who made most of his living as a blacksmith. From him Marion learned that the prisoners had just consumed their breakfast when one of them, a man possessed theretofore of a good reputation, requested some cigars. Snyder obligingly went across the street to fetch him some.

When Snyder returned with a handful, Marion and Magruder confronted him outside on horseback with pistols presented. Pistol-less himself, still clasping the cigars, Snyder was in no position to resist even if he'd been inclined to. Marion demanded the prisoners, wasting few words in ordering Snyder to unlock the door and to do it quick.

Marion and Magruder then dismounted and bullied Snyder into the jail, pushing him up the stairs and down an ill-lit corridor to the cell where they were kept. Sny-

der, afraid that giving up the prisoners too easily might make him appear lax, lamely protested that he held the prisoners in his custody and that all good citizens should let justice do its work. He knew and the growing number of onlookers knew that he protested mainly for show, as he had not the faintest hope of dissuading a man so determined as Marion, a man well known to all of them.

He went on to promise Marion that justice might take some time but that it would be done and done proper. Taking the undelivered cigars from Snyder's hand and stuffing them in his jacket, Marion responded with curses, at gunpoint forcing Snyder to unlock the cell door. Leaving him with a key in his hand and an empty cell, Marion and Magruder escorted the four prisoners downstairs and onto the porch. Which was when Berry rode up, meeting Froman and some other citizens who had assembled, more out of curiosity than outrage, outside the jail.

Froman and a man named Kirk appealed to him to prevent the Negroes from being killed and to let the civil law run its course. Berry told them he would do what he could to save the Negroes' lives. He slid off his horse and joined Snyder, who was still pleading with Marion and Magruder on the porch of the jail. They talked a few minutes, then Berry came back and said there was nothing he could do, that his friends were determined to kill the Negroes. He said that he feared for his own life and that he'd been threatened for arguing on behalf of the Negroes.

—The long and short of it, he said, is that I won't run the risk of my life for any Negroes.

Froman then appealed to him not to have the Negroes killed in town.

—What difference does it make, said Berry, if the Negroes are killed here or killed out of town?

—Because, Froman said, the town already has a bad enough name. If you're determined to kill them, have the courtesy to take them out of town.

A body of twenty or so citizens had now collected outside the jail. They did not appear in any way threatening, but Marion willingly granted them this small concession.

—In town or out of town don't matter to me, he said. I estimate I can shoot them out of town just as well as in.

All of this came as news to Jarom, who had been up the street at a stable having a man check a loose shoe on Paw Paw's right forehoof. Hearing the hubbub, he rode down to the jailhouse where Marion and Magruder were prodding the Negroes into the street. Berry stood by with a hangdog look on his face. Marion and Magruder, who said not a word, mounted their horses and marched the Negroes ahead of them toward the Salt River bridge. Berry held back a minute or two, explaining for Jarom's benefit what he knew of what happened before he'd come to the jail. What Berry himself had not witnessed he pieced together from Froman and Snyder as well as from what he could gather from Marion and Magruder. Then Berry, resigned, hoisted himself onto his horse in his one-armed way and went after the others.

When the three riders with their four charges reached halfway to the bridge, Jarom, disgusted by the whole episode, went after them, catching up just as the party vanished into the dark mouth of the covered bridge, a structure that had been the town's pride for over thirty years and which Marion threatened to burn each time he crossed it, just as he threatened to burn the courthouse, a threat he later made good on. When they came out at the other end, Marion ordered each of the Negroes to hop on the back of a horse, each of the four behind a rider. And Jarom went along with Marion's instructions, as the elder of the two captive men, with some effort, climbed up behind him. Sensing that the crowd at the jail might gather pluck enough to set up a pursuit,

Marion put spurs to his big gelding, and the eight of them took off upriver as hard as they could go on double-weighted horses.

Jarom learned that his rider was named John Russell, a burly man with a wreath of white stubble around his mouth and jowls. His breath smelled of rancid bacon. Jarom, lagging behind the others, ordered John Russell to clasp him about the middle and hold on. Asking John Russell the name of his owner, he was told his marster was Cal Grigsby, a farmer from up around a section called Little Union. When he asked how Grigsby treated him, Russell had said pretty tolerable. Still worried about the shoe as Paw Paw strained under the double weight, Jarom slowed while the others steadily widened their lead.

Jarom explained to John Russell what the man already knew, that he'd got himself into serious trouble, serious. He asked Russell to tell him straight what had happened. John Russell, speaking over Jarom's shoulder into his right ear, said the first he knew of the house burning was from a cook in the neighborhood named Sallie Bell, a plumpish yellow woman in her forties, who belonged to a not-too-prosperous farmer named Eli Cooper. She told him that there'd been a fire in a vacant house and that he could take what he wanted that wasn't burned. He'd gone to the place and found most of the upper floor a blackened ruin, the downstairs damaged by smoke but mostly whole. Where the fire had burned, the roofline was broken and filled with unfamiliar light, the sticks of charred sheathing poking up to suggest the ghost angle of the structure when it had been whole. From among the clothes and belongings strewn on the floor he'd taken a few things, nothing valuable, and carried them back to Cooper's. No, he hadn't set the fire, and, no, he didn't have any notion who did.

—And that's all I know about the fire, he said, until the gang of them come for me and put me in the prison house. I've never messed with any real trouble in my life. I do my work, I mind my business. I don't do thataway.

Jarom believed him and said so, unable without turning completely around to read his expression. Though he didn't know what involvement John Russell had with taking items from the house, he felt sure the man hadn't struck the fire. If he'd scavenged some clothing from the abandoned house, no one, to his way of thinking, would be the less for it. Snatching up useful things struck him as closer to practicing good husbandry than "looting," an ugly word better described as "salvage" here.

On this side of the river the going was less sure because they followed no road. The pike to Bloomfield ran on the town side of the bridge, but Jarom knew of a passable ford a mile or two upriver and that they could double back at that point. Marion chose this side for its relative remoteness and to discourage followers. It was easy to lay an ambush along such an unformed route. But for an occasional clearing the landscape was hilly and densely wooded with great rough-barked hickories and flanks of dusky oaks whose limbs formed fingerlike canopies over their heads. They passed up and down steep, bridgeless gullies that dipped to ravines and dry creekbeds which fed into the river whenever rain fell.

—What kind of man did you say Cal Grigsby is? Jarom asked.

John Russell, the warmth of his bulk behind almost an extension of Jarom now—physically closer to him than anyone other than Mollie Thomas—did not answer at first. Jarom reckoned the man pondered how honest he could afford to be, white people sticking up for white people, black for black. Finally, he broke the silence with the answer of someone who had survived servitude a long time, a hybrid of truth and fiction.

—Oh, Cap'n, he said, he's better'n most and worse than some. He's fine when he's not been drinking.

—And how often is he drinking? Jarom asked.

—Most the time, John Russell said, most the time.

—Do you have a wife?

—I do and three children, but they live up in Shelby County at Dickson's and I am with them only a little. A son and two daughters.

—And what did you have to do with this house burning? Jarom asked. Was it you set the fire?

—On my soul, John Russell said, it wasn't. I swear to you. I only came to the house when Sallie Bell told me things were out for the taking, that they would be ruined if someone didn't take them. So I says to myself, says I, if they're here for someone, I might as well be that someone cause ain't I someone too?

They were passing under a large sweet gum, and one of the lower limbs brushed the hat off Jarom's head.

—Whoops, he said, I've lost my hat, sweeping his arm back in a vain effort to catch it.

John Russell, wonderfully limber, slid off the Paw Paw's rump and fetched it up, handing it up to Jarom, who pulled it over his snagged head and thanked him. Jarom was surprised to hear himself thanking this stranger who had done him a kindness at a time when he was designing to take the man's life—which did not accord with whatever conventions of kindness governed a place even so wild.

As they entered an overgrown pasture of sedge that grew in sallow spikes, an eroded slope choked with scrub and cedars, they heard a spatter of shots some distance ahead. Sound carried in the river bottom, and it was hard to determine how far away they were. As the tattoo of firing faded away, more shots sounded, and Jarom knew he'd better catch up to see for himself.

They made their way down through a copse of thick timber into a wide field that spread and scalloped up the steep slope of another ridge. At the far end of the field, maybe two hundred yards away, Jarom could make out two riders straining through the stubble toward the trees. The first was charging up the hill toward the trees. Just at the treeline, he saw the form of a woman, her skirts hiked to her waist, sprinting faster than he imagined anyone in skirts could move. The second rider, mounted on Marion's big gray gelding, not far behind, was chasing up the hill, his passenger, a male from the looks of him, still hugging the man in the saddle.

As he and John Russell rode down into a swale, Jarom lost sight of the riders and the running woman, but more shots placed their direction somewhere off to the right. As they rose again to higher ground, he saw that Marion had turned and was heading back toward the river. He couldn't see Magruder but guessed him somewhere in the woods, still after his own rider. Where Berry and the other woman were he didn't know. The shooting stopped, and he angled back toward the river following the direction in which he'd seen Marion moving. Marion and his burden disappeared again, a tongue of trees separating them, but he knew Marion would close the gap and likely would pop into view, sooner and closer than he might expect. Out of the blue came John Russell's question.

—Cap'n, are you going to shoot me?

This time Jarom had no ready answer, not expecting so blunt a question from someone whose death he debated even then. His every instinct told him not to tell the truth, whatever he intended to do. He knew that the easiest way to placate him would be to tell John Russell, that, no, he, John Russell, was a good man, that Jarom had no intention of shooting him, would not think of it. He could then make up his mind before joining Marion and Magruder. He did know that if he closed with them again with John Russell still alive, that he wouldn't be after meeting them.

—I don't know, he said, and he felt John Russell stiffen and sigh, sigh again, and then go silent. The breath he felt on his neck from his fellow being whose weight encumbered Paw Paw reminded him of Uncle Nether, the patient man who had shown him how to run a beeline half his life ago. It was best to come square with John Russell.

—Uncle, Jarom said, I believe they are going to kill the last damn one of you.

—Then, Cap'n, why don't you jest let me go?

—Cause if I do they might kill *me*, Jarom heard himself saying, knowing this unlikely and amounting to a lie.

Then he saw Marion pop out of some trees in the uplands, cutting a diagonal across the pasture where he and Marion and John Russell would likely converge. Marion held a pistol at the ready pointed toward heaven, with no rider at his back, no woman. And Jarom knew that she lay in some upland thicket, that Marion came back without her because he had caught and done violence to her. He was equally sure she hadn't escaped him, for Marion was not a man who would have returned until he'd snared whatever he was after.

Then he felt John Russell slide off the Paw Paw's rump and hit the ground. John Russell was up and running before Jarom could turn Paw Paw back to face the figure whose feet were beginning to get their purchase up the hill. John Russell vaulted over a clump of buckberries and tore off toward cover. The woods was maybe fifty yards away, though large single trees with spraddled limbs broke the skyline in the old field, one just ahead of him with its top knocked out by lightning. As Jarom passed it, he had to dodge the remnant limbs where they had fallen. Instinctively, he drew his pistol and raised it to align on the center of John Russell's back.

Not once did the fleeing man look back, though he must have expected the shot at any instant. Nor did he zig and zag but beelined for the fringe of trees that rose to the ridge. Crossing it seemed the goal toward which his whole body and mind were striving. Jarom could see Marion coming in his direction now, his gelding bounding across the open ground in a steady lope.

Jarom raised the pistol, cocked back the hammer to steady his shot, and followed John Russell's back as he made for the trees, gaining some distance now.

—John Russell! he yelled. You, John Russell, stop!

But Jarom knew John Russell wouldn't stop, just as he knew that he himself would not exert the pressure necessary through his crooked finger to trip the trigger. He glanced back and saw Marion getting closer. By now surely Marion, whose hatred of blacks was endemic, could see the upraised gun and the fugitive as he flew. Marion must have been wondering why Jarom didn't fire, or at least why he didn't spur Paw Paw into what would still be an easy pursuit.

Then what had been swelling inside him without shape or substance rose like the head of an infant crowning at birth.

—I can't do it, Jarom said to the part of him that was poised to fire. Finger, hand, hold back. I can't shoot this man, just can't do it. Won't.

In plain sight of Marion, closing within eighty yards now, he raised the pistol and fired well over John Russell's head. John Russell showed no sign of slowing but kept on clambering uphill, his run slowed to a dogged trot as he reached the thickets and undergrowth near the crest of the ridge. Jarom fired again, again for show, the pistol kicking up in the familiar way but the ball cutting air well wide of John Russell, who had nearly reached the ridgetop. The limbs and shelves of rock under Paw Paw's hooves checked her progress until she stopped, as if frustrated by impediments she could not overstep. A third time Jarom fired, and then John Russell was over the crest and out of view.

Marion, pistol still raised, reined in next to him.

—Did you hit him? he asked. Myself, I couldn't get a clear shot at the son of a bitch.

—I might have have pinked him a little, Jarom said, taking comfort in his lie. It'll take more than either Paw Paw or me to find him now.

The two of them made their way to the summit and looked out over an expanse of gray timber, a great cone of wilderness that formed a mesh of limbs thicker than any man could negotiate on horseback. A blush of lavender shown in the buds of some of the near trees, a smear of it in those distant, filmy and blue. After checking his remaining loads, Jarom holstered his pistol that seemed now to hold some new heaviness. But in his chest he felt that some great stone pinching his lungs had been lifted so that he could breathe again.

He knew he was all right when Marion holstered his, still scanning the woods for some sign of the fugitive.

—Did the others get away? Jarom asked

—Not hardly, Marion said. They're down the river, the three of them.

—Dead? Jarom asked.

—Dead.

First they came to one of the women, Berry's charge, off to herself in a little clearing on a bluff near the water. Her feet with her laced-up shoes stuck pathetically from under her sprawled and twisted skirts. She lay on one cheek, one eye fixed in startlement, her arm outthrust, the caramel brown of her forearm contrasting with the pinkish cup of the exposed palm, her fingers clenched in death like the claws of a stricken hen. One arm was tucked under, and her billowing skirts formed a kind of fan. Around her neck hung a spotless yellow bandanna.

Marion led him to Magruder and Berry, who still sat their horses on a little sandbar that extended into the river. The horses showed fatigue now, especially Magruder's whose flanks heaved from exertion. The neck of Marion's arched toward a ragged hole in the ice through which Jarom could make out gelid water. The men themselves were smoking and talking quietly in somber mood. Jarom studied the hole as he would something dark and ominous. Beneath the water with its collar of jagged ice Jarom could make out two forms, one male, one female. Whether they had been drowned or shot was not easy to tell, but the woman named Sallie Bell had a hole in the side of her cheek. Her woolen dress was sopped and heavy, her head clearly visible. Under the cold water her skin had blenched white, her frizzed hair turned the blackest black, the greenish black of a grackle's wing. Jarom could see more of the man but could detect no visible wounds, no bloodstained jacket or shattered face, the eyes squinched closed as if contracted against the cold.

On the other side of the river stood a mill and some outbuildings, half visible through the trees. Smoke from the chimney told him someone lived there, likely decent folk who would investigate and see to the burials, people who would fetch the owners to claim their property, someone in the end who would say that in some crude way the ends of mercy, if not justice, had been served. Marion, puffing one of John Russell's cigars, was obviously pleased with himself. Magruder seemed more furtive, blowing little rings of blue smoke that unraveled in the invisible turbulences of that place. The breath, snorted from the horses' nostrils as it met the frigid air of morning, made it seem for an instant that in some way peculiar to quadrupeds of the equine variety they were smoking too.

When Berry and Jarom had a moment to themselves, Berry told him that Magruder, after ridding himself of his rider, had come along and ordered the woman off Berry's

horse. Protesting at first, Berry finally helped place her foot in the stirrup of Magruder's mount, and the two cantered off together. When Berry heard several shots a few minutes later, he did not have to be told what had happened. Hearing this, Jarom congratulated himself that he would never have surrendered John Russell. Savoring a satisfaction new to him, he tried to imagine John Russell, shivering but alive, hunkered in some hollow tree or doubling back to whatever friend or family he had in that place until he found someone who would work to restore warmth to his body—to spoon him some broth, chuck another stick of kindling on the fire.

Author's Note

"Redemption" is an excerpt from a novel based on the life of Marcellus Jerome Clarke, a.k.a. Sue Mundy, the most notorious guerrilla in Kentucky during the Civil War. Detached from the Confederate army after the death of Gen. John Hunt Morgan, Clarke returned to Kentucky during the closing months of 1864 and participated in a number of robberies and killings that ended with his capture and execution in March 1865, less than a month before the war ended. Among the guerrillas with whom he was associated were Samuel O. "One-Armed" Berry, Bill Marion, and Henry C. "Billy" Magruder. Though altered a bit, the events are based on actual happenings taken from newspapers and court records.