



The Wentz family's log cabin, smoke drifting from its chimney, stood just across the lane from a peach orchard, among rippling fields of rye and wheat. It was a gentle, rustic scene—hardly an appropriate setting for the Battle of Gettysburg.

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by Richard Barnitz

Return to Gettysburg

Mrs. Wentz, putting dinner on the table, paused to glance out the back door. Soldiers in blue were everywhere, and she felt safer for their being there, but they reminded her of her son Henry. Henry was a soldier too—but a soldier in gray. Nine years before, he had left Gettysburg and settled in Virginia, and now he was a sergeant in the Confederate army. His old father rarely spoke of this son, but when he did, he declared that he would kill him if he returned.

“Come and eat, John,” Mrs. Wentz called to her husband. But scarcely had they and their daughter sat down when the door opened without ceremony and a young captain announced, “You’ve got to go quickly while it’s still safe.”

“But the dinner . . .” said the mother.

“It’s an order,” said the officer.

The womenfolk snatched up a few belongings, but the farmer never moved from his chair.

“Hurry, John,” commanded his wife, but the man only walked to the gate, where a horse-drawn wagon was waiting.

“You’d better hide where it’s safe,” he ordered as the women climbed in, “but I’m not leaving the cattle for any dirty rebel.”

His wife protested, but he settled the argument by slapping the horse’s rump, sending the wagon bumping along the lane.

Three hours passed and the firing was increasing, but still the old man sat in his chair on the porch, refusing to leave. Suddenly there came the whistle of a shell, a burst of light above the barn, and scraps of metal drumming on the roof. His knees shaking, the farmer shuffled into the kitchen

and closed the heavy oak door.

The thunder of guns shook the house until the windows rattled, and lead slugs thudded into the log walls and splintered the door. When a china teapot spun off the table and became tinkling fragments on the floor, the old man reluctantly descended the steps to the cellar.

Outside, Union troops scurried for cover as a gray horde swept down, shelling the area. All the while John Wentz sat on a broken chair in the windowless cellar, with the family cat as companion. His back was against the stone wall, and he could feel the earth tremble.

When the thunder of cannon drew closer yet, the farmer, thinking of his cattle, climbed the stairs and started for the barn. But now the only blue soldiers were those on the ground, and men in ragged gray were streaming through the yard. Two of them pushed the old man inside with orders to remain there.

When darkness came and the firing died slowly away, leaving only the almost inaudible murmur of wounded men, the old man crept up the stairs and lighted a candle. He sat at the table and ate cold food—that afternoon’s uneaten dinner—then stepped out onto the back porch. He drew back sharply, for a body lay there, staring sightlessly at the moon. Feeling sick, he returned to the cellar where the cat waited.

At dawn there was a terrific racket—rifle fire and cannon—but at eleven o’clock came silence.

At one o’clock both Confederate and Union lines blazed again, and then once more

the sound of gunfire ceased.

Then came the unexpected—cheering, martial music, and bugles. Unknown to Wentz, the Confederates' final assault—Pickett's gallant charge—was under way. It was utter disaster for the South. Throughout the night that followed, the soldiers in gray lay nursing their wounds and thinking of their ten thousand comrades fallen on the battlefield.

Late that night a figure in gray picked his way to the cabin, moving in the shadow of the broken trees. He explored all the moonlit rooms, then paused, listening. There was something in the cellar. He went down the pitch-black stairs, pausing at the bottom to light a candle. Peering into the shadows, he saw the old man sleeping soundly. He

stood there looking for a long time. Then he wrote something on a sheet of paper, fastened it to the farmer's coat with a pin, and disappeared up the stairs.

Next morning, John Wentz awoke stiff and sore. He went up to the kitchen, kindled a fire, and made himself some breakfast, after which he felt somewhat better. Brushing the crumbs from his coat, he discovered the paper pinned there. He turned it about curiously in his hands, then slowly spelled out the words. "Goodbye, Father; God bless you," it said—and it was signed "Henry."

Late that day two long wagon trains left Gettysburg, piled high with Union and Confederate wounded. When they were gone, thousands of ugly black birds circled overhead—buzzards, the final victors at Gettysburg.

CHECK YOUR READING

1. The Union soldiers made Mrs. Wentz feel
 - A younger
 - B happier
 - C safer
2. Mr. Wentz was bitter about Henry because his son had
 - A never attempted to return home
 - B refused to help support the farm
 - C become a Confederate soldier
3. Mr. Wentz announced that he was going to stay in order to protect his
 - A crops
 - B cattle
 - C chickens
4. The old man left the porch when a
 - A soldier ordered him to
 - B shell exploded nearby
 - C bullet shattered his chair
5. In the cellar, Wentz's only companion was a
 - A canary
 - B chicken
 - C cat
6. Wentz could not get to his barn because
 - A Confederate soldiers turned him back
 - B the building had burned to the ground
 - C army vehicles blocked the yard
7. On his porch Wentz discovered
 - A an unexploded shell
 - B a lifeless body
 - C a Confederate cannon
8. Pickett's charge was the name of the Southern army's
 - A last attack
 - B slow retreat
 - C great victory
9. Henry Wentz left his note
 - A lying on the kitchen table
 - B pinned to his father's coat
 - C nailed to the porch door
10. The main purpose of this story is to show war's
 - A glory
 - B misery
 - C necessity