



ONE IS PRETTY MUCH LIKE ANOTHER

A Time Travel Tale

“Do you think anyone will believe such a tale of travel through time and space?” Edgar Rice Burroughs broke out into a broad grin. “Let me tell you a little tale my father once told me...”

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Every one of the boys had led the same life. They'd had no chance to distinguish themselves. Each had the same public education. They all grew the same crops. None of them had ever traveled farther than a day's ride on horseback from home. For them the earth wasn't just something you grew things in, it was a grave. A grave marked by a stone with the same appearance as everyone else's. Then the war came along. At last a chance to distinguish themselves. They might become the hero who saves his companions. They might rise in rank. Why one even might wave the standard of their country over the parapets of the enemy. For these boys, death wasn't even a penalty to be concerned over. It would be a release from a life that let nowhere.

Back in the day, we were all proud of our uniforms. Even though we still all looked the same. For most of us, it was the first jacket we'd ever worn that wasn't a hand-me-down. But that was two years and many holes ago. Where once they were clean and well filled out, now they looked like an old horse blanket on a scarecrow.

"Order arms," the sergeant shouted.

Everyone was happy to rest their muskets on the ground, they're damned heavy things. Some of the men like to show off. Act like they can carry their weapons on their shoulders all day and night. But they are still damn heavy things. If they weren't, who would care how long you could carry them? My father would have been disappointed in me though. "George Tyler Burroughs, you're in the Louisiana 12th, carry your weapon like a man." I could almost hear his voice all the way from Claiborne parish.

The sergeant was giving us last minute instructions. I wasn't really listening. Loud as our sergeant was, the call of my belly was louder. It's worse when your belly is empty. And out here you always felt like your belly is empty. It's spring though. The way I can tell is that the rain makes the gnawing hunger in your belly worse. It was already halfway through May. In the summer it gets a little better. When the sun isn't baking you to death. The air smelled of stink. The suffocating odor of the Mississippi swamps. It was like a monster that wanted to swallow you whole. It too knew the relentless agony of an empty belly.

Colonel Scott told us we were about to march off to stop the Yankee General Grant and his band of savaging carpetbaggers from reaching Vicksburg. They gone and crossed the river, snuck up on it from the south. A cheer when up from us when we first heard the plan to up and put an end to another one of his pointless expeditions. But the knowledge that we would so be in the thick of the fighting and the hunger in our bellies made us all a little bit extra squirrely this morning.

"Shoulder arms." I almost missed this command, focusing as I was on my hunger. But I saw everyone around me shouldering their arms, so I figured it was best if I did it as well. I guess I'm a poor excuse for a soldier. Yea, I'm proud to defend my home. It was the wet, the heat, the marching and the dying I don't feel all that attached to... especially the dying.

We started marching off into the half-light of the morning. You know, when the sun reflects from every blade of grass and dances right into your eyes. Right now, the mist was engulfing us as if a ghost was swallowing a cornfield. It was a mixed blessing.

"I don't like this," Little Peter Jones commented as we marched.

"Yea, the mist bothers me too."

Peter rambled on. "On the one hand, you're cloaked in the safety of its silvery embraces."

"Hidden beyond the reach of the prying Yankee blue-belly eyes," another replied.

"And on the other hand?"

Little Peter snickered. "You can't see the damn Yankees coming."

We all laughed. Only it wasn't a chuckle at the humor of it. It was more a snigger at the sheer terror of the whole idea. No one in this bunch is a coward mind you. Those had all left in '61. No, it's just each and every one of us would rather see death coming. All any of us wanted was the simple chance to fire back.

The mist thickened and closed in like a net dragging down a struggling fish. But we marched on anyway. Despite the damp, despite the chill in the early morning spring air. "Hey, George Tyler, you think we gonna whoop them Yankees?" A bodyless voice called out.

You could hear the sergeant's voice grumble, even before we heard his words. "If you don't keep your mouth shut so they don't hear us coming, I'll come over there and shut it for you myself."

We managed the rest of the march in silence. Except for the endless shuffling of feet. But even this sound seemed to be swallowed up by the boundless morning mist. Our minds kept wandering to whether it was a god-forsaken Yankee or a good-old Confederate mist. Before anyone could make a determination, the sky broke and the sun poured through like rainwater from a bucket.

Everyone skedaddled for cover. No use giving the blue-coats something to aim at before we know what was about. Everyone peered out at the scene unfolding before us. Men were crossing an open field. They were carrying long, tall brass cylinders wearing some kind of pointed cap. They looked to be pistol rounds, but they were far too large. Seems we'd stumbled into an artillery position of some kind. Everyone's suspicions were confirmed when they fired one of them off. Most Dad-blamed cannon you ever saw. Loud as all hell, but they hardly gave off any smoke. They looked to be some kind of howitzer, pointing up in the sky like they were, not aimed level at a line of men. Some new Northern invention, no doubt. Strangest things people invent to kill each other. No doubt this damn Yankee command was busy shelling our approaching boys. The fog must have let us through their lines, for we'd come up behind them, unseen. We could hear their voices, only it wasn't no Yankee talk we'd ever heard.

"That's German," Hoffmeier muttered. "My grandpappy used to talk like that."



They had the oddest-looking blue uniforms I'd ever seen on a Yankee. Sort of a half-green, half gray arrangement. Some of them were wearing iron pots on their heads. "Must be those damn German immigrants from Louis Blenker's brigade," Little Peter whispered. "Those folks were all over Bull Run. My cousin says there's a whole corps of the buggers with Hooker's army. But I thought they was up Virginia ways."

"Well, I reckon they're here now."

“Just like Yankees to bring over Germans,” Paul protested. “Reminds me of the British bringing them Hessians over to fight us during the first revolution.”

The seemed even the sergeant was convinced they couldn't be from the south. “On my command, I want the company to form a line on my right and make ready. You'll fire on my command. I want a bunch of captured Yankee guns and a parade of dead blue-bellies ready for the cemetery.”

We scuttled about, trying to crawl our way out to form a line, so to be ready when the sergeant gave the command.

“Stand!” the sergeant shouted. At this sound, the Germans stopped what they were doing and turned to face us. They didn't seem bothered by our presence. It could have been the fact our butternut gray was a close relative of their blue-grey uniform. They might have mistaken us as some of their own. The sergeant managed to shatter any such illusions when he gave the command “Make ready.”



Some of them boys looked around as if expecting an officer to give them instructions. The whole bunch of them seemed like deer stumbled upon by a bear. A few of them belatedly started to run when the sergeant yelled “Fire.” But they didn't get very far. When you've been practicing since '61, your volley fire gets pretty good. One of them was moaning on the ground. Jenkins went up to him with a Bowie knife. Grabbing him by the hair, he yanked his head up and then made short work of him with a slash across the throat. Jenkins had no love for Yankees. He looked a bit young to the rest of us. Most of us would have been tempted to finish him with a bayonet.

I'm sure to Colonel Scott's disappointment, discipline became rather lax at this point. These boys had been cooking eggs. They had fresh butter and milk that tasted sweeter than fresh cream. Even the sergeant found himself occupied with filling his stomach. After we made a serious dent in their provisions, Little Peter started showing off one of their rifles. Maybe it was a musket, it was hard to tell. No one had ever seen anything like it.

“Thinks to be a tad short to be a rifle,” Paul exclaimed, “No stock.”

Little Peter smiled. “If it's a pistol, it's the biggest damn pistol I ever did see.”

He pointed it at a small tree and pulled the trigger. The thing went off with a roar. A blast of bullets slammed into the sapling. Before Peter could let go, it had spilled more rounds than half the company. Everyone stared. It had all happened in a few seconds or less. A tiny wisp of oily smoke exited the barrel as the sapling cracked and then fell over. Little Peter had pressed the trigger once and cut a tree in half.

“Boys,” the sergeant cracked a smile, “let's not leave a mess lying around. time to pick up all these loose Yankee weapons scattered everywhere.”

We made quite a chatter as the boys tested the new-fangled shooting irons out. But after a few minutes, everyone's weapon was broken. You could pull the trigger and all you got was a dull click. It was Paul who found there were spare parts inside the map cases hanging from the German-Yankee's suspender-belts. It took almost until lunch for us to figure out how to swap the parts.

“Must be filled with Minié ball pistol cartridges,” Little Peter declared. “Pop a new one in and the lead comes out the barrel and the brass cartridges jumps outa this hole here.”

“Better than a Sharp’s repeater,” Paul announced.

“You ain’t half wrong there,” the sergeant replied. “Okay, you’ all stock up on these new-fangled irons and get these belts on too. Stack your old arms up over yonder.”

Before too long a group of town’s people came rolling out of the woods. They were gibbering like maniacs. One old man seemed to be their spokesperson. For his age, he was quite energetic and effusive. “Blind Jean, get your ass up here.” Jean Rene wasn’t actually sightless, but he was, without question, the worse shot in the company. He couldn’t hit a barrel at ten paces if you pointed the rifle for him. So, the sergeant had taken to calling him, Blind Jean. The man scampered up to answer the sergeant’s call.

The sergeant slapped the barrel of the new Yankee firearm away from him, “Point that thing somewhere else, will ya.” Blind Jean responded with a will and gave an embarrassed smile. “Are these Cajuns?” he asked.

Blind Jean was from Bienville parish and spoke the lingo tolerably well. “It French, not Creole,” announce Blind Jean.

“Can you understand it.”

“I think so.” Blind Jean’s brow furrowed. “He’s thanking us for killing the Germans.”

“Tell them no thanks is necessary. It’s our job.”

Blind Jean translated. The old man became excited once more. Blind Jean tried to slow him down so that he could get the translations right. Finally, he turned to the sergeant. “He says he can lead us back to our lines.”

“Thank the kind man for his offer,” the sergeant replied. “Tell him he seems a bit old for the trek.”



There was another bout of French between the two. “He agreed he is too old to come. He says this young lady will escort us, she is with the Resistance. I can’t seem to get him to explain what that means.” A young lady stepped forward, she was wearing what looked like a heavy housecoat and a bright red hat, the likes of which none of us had ever seen. She smiled but said nothing.

“Well tell her if she can take us to Colonel Scott or General Pemberton’s headquarters, we’d be most obliged.” There was a further exchange in the dialog between the three, with Blind Jean obviously taking the worst of it. Continually unable to get the old man to slow down. “She says she can take us to the headquarters at La Vienville Manor.”

“Ask them where we are.”

There was a hurried exchange. Then Blind Jean turned to the sergeant. “He says we’re at Franqueville.”

“Franqueville, Normandie,” the old man chattered.

“Where the hell is that?” The sergeant took off his hat and apologized to the young lady for his indiscretion. He felt almost embarrassed to use such language in front of a lady. But not speaking English, she had no idea what he was talking about. He turned to Blind Jean. “You ever hear of Franqueville?”

The Cajon gave him a sarcastic look. “How would I know?” He protested vehemently. “I from Louisiana, not Mississippi.”

They were interrupted by Private Paul, who was busy protesting the sergeant previous order. “We can’t find no touch hole to spike these guns, Maurice.”

“How many times to I have to tell you it’s Sergeant, not Maurice.”

“Yes sergeant, but we just can figure out how to do it is all.” They argued back and forth for some time. Like the tide coming in, the argument splashed over to the old man. Soon he and Blind Jean were babbling as well. Apparently, the old man was anxious to know what was happening.

“Sergeant, the old man here says he and the others can take care of the guns. But he says we must get going, more Germans will be coming down the road any minute.”

The Sergeant pondered this but decided they needed to get back to the rest of the 12th. The young lady indicated a path down to the right and the sergeant set the company to marching. He and Blind Jean stayed behind for a moment to thank the old man for his assistance. As they left, the old man shouted “Vive la France!” It was the only thing the sergeant had understood.

“That bugger has slipped a gear. This is the Confederate States of America, by God. We’re not fighting to give the place back to the French.”

We marched off down the trail the young lady indicated. The trail was rocky. It was then that we all started to notice. You couldn’t smell the algae choked swamp ways of the Mississippi River anymore. In fact, the smell was all wrong. It wasn’t even close to right. The Mississippi has a real scent to it. Like a grave that’s been dug and left open too long in the rain. It was like the wind had shifted, or we’d accidentally walked to Alabama. The last option wasn’t even remotely possible, but it would have explained why the air smelled so different.

The trees looked okay, but the ground wasn’t furrowed. There wasn’t a cotton plant in eyesight or any other crop for that matter. We passed the strangest looking cows. They all had black eyes as if the Yankee army had been punching out the livestock. All us farm boys from East Louisiana just found this chillingly out of the ordinary.



A voice rang out from the woods. “Who goes there?”

We could tell it was a good ‘old southern boy from his inflection. “Colonel Scott’s command of the 12th Louisiana,” the sergeant hollered back.

“Well, I’ll be. Private Wilson, 116th Infantry Brigade, 29th Division, Virginia National Guard. I didn’t know there were any Louisiana National Guard boys out this way.” Stepping out from the wood, no one knew what to make of him. His uniform, if that’s what it was, was a loosely fitting, green cotton

smock with pockets sewn everywhere. He was wearing an iron pot similar to what the German-Yankees had been wearing. It looked uncomfortable.

"I almost shot you," Private Wilson explained. "What are you 'all dressed like Jerry for?"

Everyone was too stunned to answer. Another green dressed soldier broke from the woods. "What are you doing, Private Wilson? You're supposed to be asking them for the password."

"Sorry, Sarge. It just that I know what a boy for Louisiana sounds like. You can't learn that you got to be born thereabouts."

It was clear from the other soldier's face he wasn't convinced. Several other green-clad men armed with strange rifles popped out of the woods. The unhappy one, who seemed to be in charge, gave our sergeant a grim look. "Let's see your dog tags."

"Our what?" Sergeant Maurice replied.

It took a moment, but everyone seemed to get on edge. In the next moment, everyone's rifles were up. It was a Mexican standoff. Two sides, each with rifles pointed at each other at a range with precluded missing your targets. Fortunately, no one moved at first.

Up until this point the woman who had been the company's guide had said nothing. She'd been as silent and as sneaky as a raccoon. Now she was a bundle of noise. She approached the green soldiers and began yammering away like she was a key operator at a telegraph office. The pounding of her voice was like the screeching of an eagle, only twice as fast. Even Blind Jean lost track of her dialog. But by the end of it, everyone had lowered their rifles. A moment of tension had been turned to a scene of comic theatre.

She waved a gay farewell and practically danced off back the way she had come. There was a lightness in her steps which made her appear like a little girl. One who had lost her jump rope and was anxious to recover it. Where moments before every soldier was glowering at each other, now all eyes were following her. No one could keep their eyes off her. And so it remained until she receded out of everyone's sight.

"Sir," one of the Virginia boys commented, his rifle still lowered.

"What is it Nately?"

"The uniforms sir."

"What about them? That's no GI issue."

"No, sir. If you look at them closely, those are butternut grey uniforms. They're Confederate, sir. You know from the War Between the States."

"Yeah well, those MP-40's they're carrying don't look like your standard CSA issue to me."

"These?" Our sergeant held up one of our captured weapons. "We picked these up back there from a bunch of Germans." He indicated the trail we'd been walking down. You could still see our muddy footprints in the wet soil.

Private Danby lowered his submachine gun and unslung his issued musket. Being a family air loom, and knowing his daddy would be pissed, he'd not stacked the weapon as ordered. "You think we should be carrying these." He showed off his prize 1858 Harpers Ferry Rifled Musket, the very same one which had once been to the hanging of John Brown.

The green soldiers gasped at the percussion-cap weapon from another era. Only it didn't look old like the ones you'd find in a museum. This one looked brand spanking new. "Sarge, look at their shoes." He glanced down at their feet. What he saw was old worn out lowcut brogans. Not modern army boots at all. Not even the German's wore those. But what really impressed him was Little Peter's feet. He'd lost his pair in the Mississippi mud some weeks back trying to catch a fish with his bare hands. He'd been walking around barefoot ever since. "Even the Italians aren't that bad off," Nately explained.

"Alright, somebody better take them back to HQ so we can see what going on here." The angry green soldier indicated a way forward. From his stripes, he seemed to be a sergeant as well. We were reluctant to follow his instructions. But we were even more reluctant to open fire on boys who were clearly from Virginia. Eventually, we went along.

Their headquarters was a sight to see. Enormous tents the same color as their uniforms. And huge iron railroad monsters mounting canon. They seemed to be running using some kind of steam engine without a smokestack. On the side was painted a single white star. It was like some great ironclad had beached itself on the shore. Or perhaps it was some monstrous railroad engine, straight out of hell itself. A train without the need for any tracks.

No one was looking for trouble, but then that's always when it starts. The birds stopped chattering and bullets started flying through the air. Everyone ducked. The experience and reactions of a soldier are not dependent on their uniform. Our sergeant had some tactical experience with the Army of Mississippi. "Skirmish order," he shouted. Soon, everyone in the company was taking cover behind trees and ditches.

All hell broke loose. We'd all seen many bullets flying before, especially on our foray into Kentucky in '62. But none of us had seen anything like this. There was no break between volleys. It was a continuous chatter of guns going off, explosions... all without any smoke to hide behind. It didn't seem like a fight, it seemed as if we were in the middle of a massacre.

The sergeant had to kick a few of the boys back into action. There was a whole knot of them around Little Peter. He was dead. He had his head blown clear off. It was a sad sight to see. Little Peter had been with us since '61. Now he was joining up with Big Peter Jones who'd bought it in '62.

It took some getting used to, reloading while hugging the ground, but it's a sign of a soldier to adapt. The ones who don't adapt aren't called soldiers, they're called casualties. One of the green soldiers crawled up to us. "Hey," he called over from a nearby tree. "Don't hold the trigger down. Squeeze it and let go. Short bursts. Short bursts."

None of us had any idea what a "burst" was. But he was right, squeezing worked better than holding the trigger down. It meant you didn't have to reload so damn often. Many a soldier had lost a battle when the ammunition had run dry. We still didn't know who we were shooting at. But it didn't matter. In

Louisiana, we shoot back at anyone who shoots at us. This rule goes double for the men of the 12th Infantry regiment.

One of them on the other side threw a stick at us with an upside-down cup nailed to the top. Damn stupid thing to do in the middle of a fight if you ask me. One of the Virginia boys in the green dress grabbed it and threw it back, like a rock skipping across a pond. When it came to rest, it exploded with a frightful bang. We'd all used hand bombs and grenades before, but most of us had given up on them. They weren't particularly effective. But these bombs were different. They packed a punch. Must have been because of the stick at the bottom.

One of the green soldiers passed us a bag. Inside was a whole bushel of hand bombs, but they were missing the sticks.

One of the Virginia boys made a motion with his arm, swinging it over his head. "Throw it," he finally yelled.

Paul stood up and gave one of them a toss. Nothing happened. Guess you need a stick for it to work.

"Pull out the pin first."

Examining one of the hand bombs, Paul noticed it did indeed have some kind of pin and a single chain link attached to it. The chainring made a nice handle, so Paul pulled on it. The pin slid right out, and the handle came flying off like it had seen a ghost or something. Paul smiled and held it up as if he was showing off for Miss Gibson, our school teacher.

"Toss it." The Virginian screamed.

Paul's face crumbled. He couldn't figure out what he could have done wrong.

"Toss it NOW."

Paul got the message. Standing up he gave the hand bomb a toss. It never even hit the ground. It exploded high in the air. This was followed by a whole collection of screams and moans from the fellows who'd been shooting at us. Seems you didn't need the stick after all.

Paul had always been a fast learner. He'd memorized the nine's multiplication table faster than any of the rest of us. Earned him a prize. On his own now, he was pulling out pins and tossing more hand bombs at the fellows who were shooting at us. He seemed to be making quite an impact. I'd say he was standing up again to toss his fifth bomb when he turned his head to face the rest of us. There was a nice clean hole in his forehead.

Most of us didn't feel too bad for him. He'd turned over his last clod of dirt and yanked out his last weed. What we were most sad about was for ourselves. We'd all lost a friend. Paul fell over like a tree before an ax and the hand bomb rolled out of his fist. The green boys scampered away as if they were at the Sunday races. Jenkins lunged for the hand bomb and gave it a toss. Like the others, it made a bigger flash and more noise than a twenty-four-pounder loaded with canister.

Behind us, we could hear the rattle of one of the land ironclads. By God, it was moving. Seems the track this train ran on was wrapped around a set of wagon wheels. It lay down the track as neat as any railroad man, running over the track as it went. Then behind it, it picked up the track again. Damn clever

these Virginia boys. Once the first one got rolling, a second one followed. We figured there must have been thirteen in their troop since each one carried a star. You know one for each of the southern states. Like the Stars and Bars.

Whoever we were fighting didn't care much for these rolling train monsters because they soon skedaddled out of there like jackrabbits in front of a fox. Once they left, we followed some of the green boys to check out who we'd been fighting. There were wearing the same kind of uniforms the artillery folks we'd taken out had been wearing. A few of them were dressed in overcoats made from different color leaves all stitched together, only it was all pressed into one cloth.



We explained to the Virginia fellows we'd gotten our new rifles from some other boys dressed in the same style. Their artillery unit must have been in place to support the attack we had only just finished fighting. Everyone agreed it was a good thing we'd overrun the artillery position or things would have gone much worse for everyone.

When we returned, Jenkins was sitting with one of the Virginia boys. They swapped hats. Jenkins looked ridiculous wearing a pot over his head. Sergeant Maurice gave him a stern eye and Jenkins gave the soldier back his iron pot.

"You boys did a fine job," the green sergeant complimented us. "If you'll come with me. I'll take you up to Battalion CP. I'm sure the captain would like to see you."

Sergeant Maurice agreed, hoping we'd be able to find Colonel Scott up there. The command post was an old farmhouse with plaster falling off the walls. It seems the folks who owned it had taken off and the place was a bit rundown. There were green uniformed boys everywhere. The captain was dressed in a wrinkled uniform not too different from the privates in his company. It didn't seem right. You know, an officer who wasn't all decked out in a sword, a red sash, armfuls of gold braid and a flamboyant feather cap. But what made matters worse was the fact the Virginia boys were commanded by someone from New York. Nobody was quite sure how to feel about a Yankee officer being in charge.

The captain introduced himself as Dix. He thanked us for taking out the German artillery. The New Yorker was unexpectedly gracious. "You folks did a fine job out there today." He complimented us on how quickly we seemed to pick up modern warfare.

Sergeant Maurice downplayed our participation. "Well, you know one scrape is pretty much like another."

He and Sergeant Maurice conversed for a bit. The sergeant was being about as polite as any southern gentleman could be while chatting with a Yankee from up north. Truth be told, none of us were listening. We were too busy gazing at a piece of paper on the wall. It featured a very scandalously clad woman, but even this wasn't the object of our attention. The broadsheet was clearly a calendar and it was labeled June 1944. Next to it, tacked on the wall was an old glory flag with way too many stars. It must have had at least six rows of stars, eight stars to a row. It could only mean one thing... these Virginia boys had gone crazy. They'd become turncoats, fighting for the north. We were steamed, I can tell you.

Yet while we weren't paying attention, Sergeant Maurice had agreed to let these "Virginia Tories" walk us up to the divisional headquarters. At the sergeant's command, we formed up in column. Those green-coated turncoats gave us quite the look. It was if they'd never seen anything like us before. But we were Louisiana soldiers, after all, not turncoat Yankees. You'd think they'd never viewed pride before. Next thing we know we were on the road again, everybody nervously fingering their triggers. Nobody had a hankering to visit a northern prison camp. It was a tense moment. That's when the fog rolled in on us again. It closed in on us like we'd fallen into a pile of damp cotton. It grew so bad we could hardly see the ranks walking in front of us.

When the sky cleared, we were facing a whole regiment of blue-bellies, rifles at the ready. They were aimed, point-blank, directly at us. It was almost nightfall. In the fading light, we could see Joe Pemberton's familiar army running down the slopes of Champion Hill. They were headed straight back to Vicksburg.

We all stared in shock as Sergeant Maurice laid down his rifle and put up his hands. "Come on boys, were surrendering." At first, no one moved. Then he spoke like the headmaster he'd once been. "I think when we go home, we can definitely say we've been places and seen things no one in Joe Pemberton's army has ever seen. That is if anyone will believe us."

We started dropping our fancy new weapons to the ground and picking up our hands.

"Besides," Maurice explained, "I think we all know how this is going to turn out."