

Battle Scars

John Wilson

KCP Fiction

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For Blaire

April 26, 1862

McGregor Plantation

Charleston, South Carolina

Something was wrong. The gardens were overgrown, the house paint was peeling, ivy rambled out of control, and even some panes in the upstairs windows were broken. How could the plantation have got so run-down?

Nate McGregor crouched at the end of the drive, looking more like a beggar than a soldier. The soles of his boots flapped mournfully and the dust of many miles hung about him. He was dirty, unkempt and dressed in tattered clothes that were little more than rags. Distant thunder rumbled and the warm air felt heavy and oppressive.

Nate wondered if his father was dead. He knew he had been sick — that was why Nate had made the journey here — and James McGregor's death would explain

the run-down look of the place, but when had it happened? Nate had last seen his father at Christmas. If he had died soon after, surely Nate would have heard. If he had died recently, how had the plantation deteriorated so quickly? It didn't make sense.

After about ten minutes, during which nothing moved and the only sound was that of the arguing crows in the overhanging trees, Nate stood up. There was no point in putting it off any longer. He trudged down the rutted, tree-shaded drive and climbed the steps to the heavy front door. Nate had raised his hand to the brass knocker before realizing that the door was ajar. Gently he pushed it open and stepped into the dusty hall, furnished exactly as he remembered it. The doorways leading to the dining room, the study, the kitchen, the stairs curving up to the bedrooms — it was all so painfully familiar. A harsh flash of lightning threw the hallway into stark relief, making Nate jump. It was immediately followed by a rumble that seemed to come from beneath his feet. He headed across the hall toward his father's study.

As he approached the open door, Nate could see the book-lined walls, the fireplace and, to one side, his father's huge desk. It was strangely neat, the papers precisely stacked. Tentatively, Nate stepped into the room.

The door hit Nate a stunning blow on the side of the head and threw him against the wall. An arm wrapped itself around his neck, and the hard edges of twin shotgun barrels felt cold against his temple.

"Didn't I tell you and your thugs never to set foot here again?" a familiar voice said.

"Father!" Nate coughed against the pressure on his throat.

"You can't fool me. Nathaniel's dead at Shiloh. I got the letter. He died a hero. I ought to blow your brains all over the wall."

Nate heard the hammer of the shotgun cock. He struggled to draw in enough breath to talk. "I ran away," he gasped. "I met cousin Walt from Canada."

"Canada?" The grip on Nate's throat loosened.

"Yes, and Sunday. He saved my life."

"Is it really you, Nathaniel?" The shotgun fell away. Nate pulled back and turned.

The figure before him was familiar but, like the house, James McGregor was changed. The hair was still snow white, but it straggled unkempt over the shirt collar. The lines on the face were deep canyons and the always-thin hands seemed almost skeletal. But the most obvious change was in the eyes. They had previously regarded the world with certainty. Now they nervously fled back and forth as if they expected betrayal on every side.

"You're not dead!" The words escaped Nate before he could control them.

A strange smile flickered to life over James's face. "Not yet," he said. "They can't kill me — though they've tried. Oh yes, they've tried, all right. But now you're back, Nathaniel, we will show them what for. My pistol's in the desk drawer. You get it. We've got them bested now for sure. You watch the back of the house. I'll watch the front."

The old man's eyes swung wildly, their movement mimicked disconcertingly by the shotgun barrels. Nate's shock at finding his father alive was rapidly giving way to confusion. "What do you mean?" Nate asked. "Who are they?"

"They!" his father answered loudly. "The Heywards. My own mother's family. They're trying to kill me and take over the plantation. They've already driven all the slaves off with their threats. But they won't scare me so easily." James whispered conspiratorially, "It's Elizabeth, you know."

"What is?" Nate asked in slack-jawed confusion.

"Why, the cause of all this trouble. Things were just fine until your mother had to go and die. Then that man Lincoln gets himself elected and all has gone to hell."

Lightning flashed harshly and deep thunder shook the house around them.

"They're back! They're back!" James yelled wildly, suddenly overwhelmed.

"No!" Nate said. "It's just the storm." But it was no use. His father was oblivious to everything but his mad thoughts.

"You won't get me!" he shouted, raising the shotgun. "Nathaniel's back now and we will defend our home to the death."

Nate lunged at the gun and twisted it aside. He was deafened by the explosion as both barrels went off. A shower of plaster fell around them as a great ragged hole was torn in the high ceiling. The smoking shotgun

fell with a dull clatter and James slumped to the polished wooden floor.

He looked frighteningly frail, hugging his knees, rocking back and forth, tears trickling down his cheeks. Over and over he mumbled, "Won't get me now that Nathaniel's home."

As Nate tried to comfort James, the old man was wracked by shuddering coughs, and a bright trickle of blood dribbled from the corner of his mouth.

"Let's get you up to bed," Nate said once the coughing had passed.

"We mustn't let them in!"

"I'm home now. I won't let them in."

James allowed himself to be led upstairs.

Once he was in bed, propped up on a pile of pillows and with the blood cleaned off his chin, he seemed more like his old self. The madness seemed to have passed.

"Why are you back from the war?" he asked Nate.

"I came to see you."

"Before I die?"

"You're not going to —," Nate protested, but his father raised a skinny hand to cut him off.

"Yes, I am. And soon. But I am glad to have this chance to talk with you. I haven't been the best father in the world."

James waved off his son's protest before it began.

"All fathers make mistakes, but without a mother you have probably suffered from mine more than you

should have. What I regret most” — Nate waited patiently while a coughing attack passed — “is losing your legacy. Your grandfather Angus built up this plantation to pass to me, and I wanted to do the same for you. Instead, I have lost it all.”

James was close to tears. Nate reached over and squeezed his bony hands. “No one can help the war,” he said.

James smiled weakly. “Oh, the war didn’t help, but the damage was done long before the Yankee blockade stopped the cotton trade. I’ve never had a good head for business, and I trusted people I shouldn’t have. The overseer, Frank King. I trusted him with the book-keeping and he robbed me blind. When it was all gone, he ran off.

“I’m sorry, Nathaniel. There’s nothing left but debts. I should have sold out. The Heywards made an offer, but I was too stubborn. I wanted more. But they shouldn’t have run off the slaves.”

The wild look was back in James’s eyes. “They tried to kill me, Nathaniel. But we won’t let them get us, will we?”

“No. No.” Nate soothed his father until the old man calmed down. “You don’t need to worry, Father, everything will be fine. And Frank King is dead.”

“Dead?”

“Yes. Do you remember Sunday, the slave who ran away? He killed King just before the Battle of Shiloh.”

“Sunday?”

“I met him in the battle. He was fighting for the Union, alongside my cousin, Walter.”

“Cousin?” A puzzled expression crossed James’s face.

“Yes. The Canadian McGregors — grandfather Angus’s brother Lachlan’s family. Since the War of Independence they’ve been living near a place called Cornwall in Ontario. Apparently, Sunday fled to Canada and ended up not far from Cousin Walt. Frank King followed him and tried to recapture him, but couldn’t.

“Then King did something I don’t understand. He went back to Canada and kidnapped Walt. He had become a crimping agent and sold him to the army. Even King must’ve seen that was a stupid thing to do — go into a foreign country to kidnap one person. It wouldn’t be worth the risk for the small fee. It makes no sense.

“Anyway, Walt and King became part of Nathan Hanson Woods’s irregular cavalry. They attacked a baggage train that Sunday was guarding at Shiloh. Sunday killed King and Walt escaped. Later, during the battle, Walt almost killed me but Sunday recognized me and the three of us got away.

“We traveled together for a few days but then Union cavalry found us. I hid, but Walt and Sunday went north. Sunday wanted to join a black unit in the Union army. Walt was headed home.

“Sunday can talk now. Walt taught him some kind of language you make using your hands. Walt’s so

different from me, yet was like finding a part of myself that has been missing all my life.

“After this war is over, I will go find Walt in Canada and reunite the family. You see, I have a fine legacy — a new family. So you don’t have to worry about the plantation.”

“There’s so much I don’t understand,” James said wearily. “This war has thrown everything upside down — slaves fighting beside Canadian cousins against my son.” The old man shook his head sadly. Gradually, his eyelids drooped and he slept.

May 7th, 1862

Charleston, South Carolina

Dear Walt and Sunday,

There are many things I want to tell you, but I must begin with the saddest.

Father died this morning at about 6 o’clock.

It was peaceful and not unexpected. Since I have returned home, his body and his mind have gone downhill steadily. I tended to him as best I could, but there was nothing anyone could do. I was with him last night, and he had a quiet time, with not too much coughing. I had dozed off in the armchair and, at first, I thought it was the morning sun that had awoken me, but it was the strange silence in the room. His struggle was over at last.

I am glad at least that I arrived here in time. There were moments during these last days when he was lucid and we could talk.

I will bury Father in the small cottonwood grove out back, beside Mother. He would like that. Tomorrow, I will go and sell the plantation to the Heywards. They are my grandmother’s family, and Father said they were interested in buying. The plantation is bankrupt, but the sale might pay off the debts and leave enough for me to travel to Richmond.

I am going to join General Longstreet's Corps. There is no doubt the army needs me in these troubled times, but that is not the main reason for my going. I have very little alternative. With the plantation gone, I thought of coming up to Canada to see you both, but that would smack of running away, and I must finish my duty. Death holds little fear for me after what I have seen, and the thrill of battle is undeniable. In any case, they say that, whatever happens, the war will be over soon — by Christmas at the latest. Don't worry about me. I have Judith Henry's sampler from Bull Run to keep me safe.

Perhaps I will come and visit when this is all over. For now, I will say good-bye and good luck.

Your cousin and friend,
Nate

December 7th, 1862
Cornwall, Canada

Dear Nate,

Your letter from Charleston of May 7 has only just arrived. Who knows where it has been in these troubled times. I suppose it is something of a miracle that it has arrived at all.

Sunday and I were sorrowed to hear of your father's death. As you said, it is a blessing that it was peaceful — and that you arrived in time.

Well, it is almost Christmas and the war is not yet over. I wonder what you are doing and where you are. Are you still in the army? I will send this care of Longstreet's Corps at army headquarters in Richmond and hope that they forward it to you. Isn't it strange that I can send a letter to a soldier I was fighting against just this last spring?

Our news is much less dramatic than yours. After the cavalry found Sunday and me in Tennessee, they took us to Murfreesboro. I wired Father to tell him we were all right, and he wired some money down so we could travel by rail. Even so, it was slow going, made slower by a stop in Montreal to see my mother, and it was June before we finally made it back to Cornwall.

At first it was wonderful to be safe and sound back at the farm. Sunday moved over to Touss's old place — remember I

told you how he was our neighbor who was part of the Underground Railroad and was killed at Shiloh by Frank King? — and I kept busy with the summer work. But when things slowed down in the fall, we both began to get restless. We had seen and done so much that sitting around all winter wasn't appealing.

Sunday came over frequently to visit and practice his sign language and became anxious to get back into the fight against slavery. Mother came to visit in October, and we were sitting on the porch discussing the recent big battle at Antietam and Mr. Lincoln's announcement that the slaves were to be freed.

Mother said she was sure that Mr. Lincoln would allow black men into the army, just to prove that all his fine words about freedom meant something. Sunday signed that he would go tomorrow. Mother said that Boston would be the place to go — they were strong abolitionists there. She has this talent for sweeping statements that seem dumb but have a way of cutting through complexities.

Anyway, she even knew folks there — the Boston Shaws, she called them very grandly. She'd met them years ago when they were all in some sort of commune with famous writers, like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Ralph Waldo Emerson. (She says that Hawthorne was always complaining about the interruptions. What did he expect in a commune?) Apparently everyone got paid a dollar a day whether they worked with their hands or their minds.

To get back to the Shaws, there are Francis and Sarah and they have a son called Robert. Mother wrote them and they invited us down. Robert has been offered command of the first black fighting regiment, the 54th Massachusetts. Sunday is in a fever to join up. I cannot, as only the officers are white and I am not material for an officer, but I shall accompany him and find a place for myself. We are to leave in a few days.

Father is none too keen on the idea, but he accepts my decision. How can I stay here when Sunday has gone? I would feel useless, and the cause is noble enough that I wish to play some small part. And the war cannot go on much longer. The South is near exhaustion and one more good campaign should end it.

So, that is Sunday's and my news. We hope you are well and that this letter reaches you. When this is all over, you are more than welcome to come and stay with us at the farm for as long as you wish. Let us hope that it will not be too far in the future.

If you write again, do so to Father at the farm. He will forward to wherever I am.

Good luck and take care.
Cousin Walt

P.S. Sunday says hello.