

ONE

Even though he knew it was coming, Pete Thorsen couldn't help but flinch when the first shot was fired. The blast shattered the soggy stillness that hung over the field and ignited a frenzy of activity. Men in blue sack coats and forage caps stormed out of the trees screaming "Chickamauga! Chickamauga! Chickamauga!" and unleashed a hail of gunfire. Puffs of black smoke drifted skyward.

On the crest of the hill, Pete could see men hunkered down behind the earthwork and timber fortifications, their long-barreled weapons trained on the blue horde running madly across the field toward them. They held their fire, anxiously waiting for the foe to get closer, and watched as some of the attackers stumbled over the rough terrain and others stopped to perform the cumbersome task of reloading their muzzleloaders.

"Jeez, this is something, huh?" Harry McTigue said as he squinted through his binoculars. "It almost makes you want to become a reenactor."

"Very dramatic," Pete agreed. "I thought this was going to be like a Memorial Day ceremony with a bunch of septuagenarians in old

uniforms firing their guns in the air.” He knew his comment would get Harry going.

Harry lowered his binoculars and stared disbelievingly at Pete from beneath his tattered brown slouch hat. “I know you’re a smart guy,” he said, “but sometimes I think you spend half your time under a rock. Thousands of people around the country are into Civil War reenactments in a big way. They keep our history alive.”

“I guess it’s as good a thing as any to do on a Sunday afternoon,” Pete said.

“And you call yourself a patriotic American,” Harry said disgustedly. “I’ll bet you wouldn’t be so cavalier about it if some group were staging a mock Viking invasion of the Frankfort port. A bunch of savages in wolf skins and horned helmets in their strange boats, foaming at the mouth until they could reach shore and begin to rape and pillage.”

“Sounds like a myth about the Norsemen started by some weak-kneed Scots,” Pete said.

“Ha, you know it’s true. But what you’re watching now is part of a titanic struggle between two factions of a superior culture that was destined to rule the world for centuries.”

“I’m always amazed by the way you combine eloquence with superior knowledge of so many subjects.”

Harry got a faraway look in his eyes. “A newspaperman needs to be attuned to what’s happening around him,” he said earnestly. “You spend time under a rock in my business, you won’t last long.”

He resumed watching the mock battle and after a while turned to Pete again and said, “You probably don’t know why the Union soldiers screamed ‘Chickamauga! Chickamauga!’ when they started their attack, do you?”

“Could it have something to do with the Union army’s defeat at the Battle of Chickamauga?” Pete asked, feigning innocence. “Maybe a cry for revenge?”

Harry looked crest-fallen. “I’m surprised you knew that,” he said.

“It’s in the pamphlet.” He tapped the pocket of his windbreaker. “Plus I once toured the Chickamauga battlefield.”

Harry scowled at him as though not knowing what to say and then went back to watching the reenactment through his binoculars. The Confederates had begun to return fire from their dug-in position on the ridge, and the black powder smoke created by gunfire on both sides hung low over the field like bad smog on a windless day in Los Angeles. Northern Michigan didn’t have a mountain range to hold in the smoke, but the heavy weather served the same purpose.

Pete inhaled the pungent odor of decaying leaves and tried to ignore the light drizzle that had been falling since they arrived. The moisture collected on his cap and in the tufts of sandy brown hair that protruded from the back and a trickle ran down his neck. He shuddered and brushed at his hair and zipped his L. L. Bean Weather Challenger jacket tighter around his neck.

The reenactment they were watching was one skirmish of the Battle of Missionary Ridge that took place near Chattanooga, Tennessee, in November, 1863, and was the centerpiece of the Thaddeus Clayton Festival. Pete wondered what the weather was like during that battle and contrasted the soggy conditions of the reenactment with the glorious spectacle of the day before when the vivid hues of sumac and Indian paintbrush and goldenrod and the flaming leaves of the hardwoods lit up the landscape in a celebration of splendid autumn weather. He consoled himself with the thought that it might be raining, but at least the icy talons of winter hadn’t seized the area yet.

He was jolted out of his reverie by a new surge of action. The Union forces had split and some of them were mounting an all-out assault on the Confederates’ right flank. Pete could see rebel soldiers on the ridge shift to that side in a panicky effort to shore up their defenses. Union troops who weren’t involved in the flanking action dropped to their knees and commenced a withering barrage of fire to provide cover for their attacking comrades.

As Pete watched, he noticed the occasional puffs of white that mingled with the black smoke hanging over the field. Harry noticed it, too, and lowered his binoculars again and grinned. "You know what that white smoke is?" he said. "That's Cream of Wheat. A few of the guys pack the stuff into their muzzleloaders to add authenticity and realism to the battlefield."

Confident he'd regained the upper hand in the knowledge battle, Harry gave Pete a smug look and resumed peering through his binoculars. A few minutes later he said, "Oops, there goes Colonel Clayton's horse." The Colonel slid from the saddle and stumbled to the ground when his horse reared up on its hind legs. Clayton brushed some of the mud from his uniform and clamped his hat back on his head. Over the din of the gunfire and bugles, Pete could hear him resume shouting encouragement to his troops.

"The Colonel takes a hit in this battle, you know," Harry added.

"I assume that means he gets shot."

"Yeah, although reenactors use the term for someone who gets killed with a sabre or bayonet, too."

"What we just saw wasn't where the Colonel caught it I gather."

Harry, always eager to share his knowledge, said, "In the real battle of Missionary Ridge, Colonel Clayton's horse was shot out from under him before he caught a bullet himself. The reenactors are sticklers for detail, but I'm sure they feel they can't go around killing horses just for the sake of authenticity."

"Makes sense to me."

"Here's something else for you," Harry said. "Colonel Thaddeus Clayton served under the great General William T. Sherman who split the Confederacy by his march through Georgia to the sea. Did you know that?" he asked pointedly.

"I did know that."

"You must have read my newspaper this week. I laid out the whole story in my feature article."

“Yup,” Pete said. “I read it there and again in the festival pamphlet which told the same story in more concise language.”

“Concise language,” Harry sputtered. “Did you notice that typo on the second page of the pamphlet? There couldn’t be more than four or five hundred words in that scrap of paper and whoever proofed it still couldn’t catch the typos.”

“I didn’t notice.”

“Of course not,” Harry said, snorting. “You lawyers are trained to spew out your lines and accuracy be damned as long as you can get someone to buy your half-truths. The first thing they taught us in J-school was to be careful with our spelling and editing. One typo can destroy the entire credibility of the story and its author.”

Pete suppressed a grin. They’d had the same discussion several times before, and Pete had to admit that for a small town newspaper, *The Northern Sentinel* was as free of errors and typos as you were likely to find. Pete had a similar mania for accuracy and it was one of many factors that created his bond with Harry.

He resumed watching the simulated battle. The field was now strewn with the bodies of Union soldiers, and on the crest of the ridge, he could see numerous Confederates slumped over the fortifications as well. Plenty of troops on both sides had taken a hit, to use Harry’s term.

Colonel Clayton, on foot since the incident with his horse, had his sabre drawn and was holding it aloft, exhorting his forces to continue attacking. Clayton alternated between facing the Confederate defenders defiantly and turning to shout encouragement to his troops. Suddenly he shuddered and clutched his chest. He continued to stand upright for a few seconds and then crumpled to the ground.

“I think he just took his hit,” Pete said.

“That was it. That was the end for one of the most valiant heroes Michigan has ever produced. You have to admit that looked pretty damn realistic.”

“It did,” Pete said admiringly

On the battlefield, the Union troops still standing saw their leader fall. They bellowed with rage and intensified their attack on the Confederate defenses. The blue-coated men with Henry repeating rifles unleashed another hail of gunfire. The Confederates sensed that the tide of battle had turned against them and abandoned their positions and began to scramble down the back side of the ridge. The Union forces broke through what remained of the defensive line and fired at the fleeing enemy. Then they held their rifles triumphantly above their heads and let loose with screams that were even more primal than the ones with which they'd launched the battle.

The reenactors who'd taken hits began to rise from the wet ground and enthusiastically high-five each other in a display of exuberance over their performance. The three-piece brass band started to play the Union anthem, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." The blue-clad soldiers, suddenly solemn, sang along in an off-key but spirited chorus.

Colonel Clayton remained on the ground. One of the reenactors went over to where he lay and said something to him. When the Colonel didn't move, the reenactor rolled him over, and after examining him for a moment, frantically called to the EMTs standing by an ambulance parked just outside the rope that separated the spectators from the reenactment area. The EMTs pushed the gawking reenactors aside and knelt by the Colonel's body. Pete had been watching everything through his binoculars, but his view was blocked when the mob crowded around the Colonel again.

"I think something's wrong," Pete said.

"You don't suppose he had a heart attack, do you?" Harry asked, plainly concerned. "That's Thomas Edinger playing the Colonel, you know. Edinger's the one who wrote all of the books about Clayton."

Pete continued to watch through his binoculars but couldn't see anything because the reenactors blocked his view. Then the sea of blue parted briefly and he saw what looked like a red stain on the front of Edinger's uniform.