



# THE CHARGER

## CLEVELAND CIVIL WAR ROUNDTABLE

OCT., 2015

VOL. 37, #2

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*Join us for our next meeting.*

- *Wednesday, October 14, 2015*
- *Drinks @ 6pm Dinner at @ 6:30 pm*
- *Judson Manor*
- *East 107th Street & Chester*

*Speaker: Prof. Michael Panhorst*

*The Memorial Art & Architecture of Vicksburg National Military Park*

*Presented in conjunction with the Cincinnati Civil War Roundtable.*

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## “No Horse of Mine”

By William F.B. Vodrey

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Sam was his name, or at least that’s what he told people. Not that too many asked, not these days, not when they saw his eyes.

He had once worn gray and cheered the Confederacy as loudly as anyone, but victory was no closer now than it had ever been. The war was the war, all-encompassing, and the news lately had been grim: Stonewall dead, Lee marching back downcast from Gettysburg, food riots in Richmond, niggers fleeing north by the thousands. If he was honest with himself – something that didn’t come naturally, not these days – he had to admit that he really didn’t care much anymore.

He had seen things and done things that he wouldn’t even have been able to imagine before the war. Terrible things, and too many of them, yes. He was not proud of it. He was a young man by years, not even yet twenty-three, but he had grown old, far too old, far too quickly after the deaths of his parents and sister. He had been away when it happened, on a now-forgotten errand to Somerset, and through his tears upon returning had found nothing to tie their murders and the ruination of their farm to those clad in either gray or blue. Freebooters, deserters, ruffians and vagabonds of both sides came through the area regularly by then; it could just have easily been either. As a Southerner, of course, it suited him to blame the Lincoln men, but in his heart he could not be sure.

Sam had joined a cavalry regiment and been proud of his new uniform, determined to repay the Federals in blood and iron for what he had by then convinced himself they had done, but four battles – each worse than the one before – had changed him; had dissuaded him from the virtues of patriotism and martial ardor. The incompetence of his officers, the wretched food and shoddy supplies, the filth and boredom of military life, and most importantly the horrors of the merciless battlefield had further set his thoughts adrift. It had all made him question his oath, the Cause, all of that, and had finally led him to decide to go his own way.

And so he had. There came a night, on a two-man patrol with a corporal he’d long hated, not far beyond the Confederate lines near Ensworth, that he had shot the other man and ridden off into the darkness. From then on he would fight for himself and no other. From then on it was his war alone. All alone.

Upon due reflection, what he decided upon was a sustained practice of horse thievery. That, he figured, would do nicely. That would be his war.

Sam had called upon the remote farms and ramshackle country houses of Dobbs County for almost three months now, taking what he wanted and knocking down anyone who got in his way. Sometimes a glare was enough for him to have his way, or the display of his pistols, but sometimes it wasn’t. He had been cursed at, and shot at, had endured cold and rain, and changed mounts as the occasion arose, which was often. He had not eaten well, but there had been enough. The lice bothered him, and he knew he smelled, but that was of no importance to him.

He was tired enough of his own skin and of the privations of life in the wilderness that he had not particularly minded the threat of death when it presented itself forthrightly to him. If he died, he died, and he had grown almost comfortable with the thought. He was not a fool; he avoided the armed and uniformed men of both armies

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with the same disinterested skill. When he nevertheless inadvertently met up with them, or with the farmers or townsfolk of the county who had come over time to hate and fear him, sometimes the bullets whizzed past and he had found something almost whimsical in the sound. Death came his way now and then, yes, it surely did, and he dealt it out to others as the need arose, which it occasionally did.

It was not yet his time to die. It just wasn't. He knew that in a way he did not understand, but nevertheless accepted with calm and without pride, for he was not a prideful man. He had a talent for horse thievery, though, which surprised him at first, before he came to take it for granted.

It was early October – he could not rightly say the exact date, having had neither the opportunity nor the need to consult a calendar in some time – but a crisp autumnal afternoon in any event, and he knew it was time to get himself another horse, for this old mare was becoming lame. He thought maybe he might get himself some food, and a spot of whiskey would not be unwelcome.

He was making his way towards the Carpenter farm, well away from the Widow Marsden's place, when he came across two niggers on a back road. He had plainly come upon them unawares, the fall of his horse's hooves too soft to be heard in the thick dust of the road. They were carrying knapsacks, were these two men, and were filthy, as was he, and their eyes widened when they saw him. He was too tired to find it comical, as he had in his former life, what now seemed like ages ago.

"Who are you?" he asked them, in the old and customarily peremptory tone of command, now once more taken up as a matter of course, of a Southern man talking to a darkie.

One looked at the other and they wordlessly seemed to communicate something in that instant. Sam repeated, still more harshly, "Who are you?"

"I'm Fred," said the taller one, "and this here's Eustace, suh."

"Fred and Eustace. I don't know you, but I don't reckon I would. Where you from, boy?"

"We's from Kingston, originally, suh. But now we's goin' to Boyle's Crossing."

"Is that so. Who's your master?"

The eyes on the tall one, Fred he said his name was, narrowed just a little. Just a little, but enough that Sam noticed it. "We don't got no master," he replied with something passing for dignity. "We's free."

"Yeah? You got any papers to show that?"

"Yes, suh."

"Let me see them."

Fred straightened a little. "Well, suh, why do you want to see them?"

Eustace was looking at Sam, staring at him really, and Sam didn't like it. He said, "Never you mind that, boy. You see this uniform? I'm a Confederate soldier, and I ain't supposed to let no slave property high-tail it north

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when it ought to be back on the plantation, doing what it ought to be doing. You hear me? This here road heads north, don't it? So if you're free, let me see those papers."

Fred seemed to consider that for awhile. "Well, sir, you know what, I think I'll decline. Respectfully, of course." Eustace smiled a little and nodded. He didn't take his eyes off Sam.

Sam laughed, and spat on the ground. "I don't give a damn for your respect, nigger. To hell with that, and to hell with you. But I'll see those papers or kill you on the spot. It's all the same to me. Runaway slaves as good as dead if I find 'em."

"We ain't runaways," Eustace said, finally speaking up, but Sam thought he was lying. Knew he was. The black man went on, "You just a no-account deserter and we don't have to show you nothin'."

That was more than Sam could bear, although – and maybe especially because – it was true. But they didn't know that, and he'd be damned if he'd concede the point. He drew a pistol, his favorite, the big Navy Colt, dark and heavy in his hand, and immediately felt a kind of calm that was yet still angry enter his veins. He pointed the weapon at the two darkies. Fred, it gave him a little thrill of satisfaction, flinched to see it. Eustace just kept staring and staring at him, like he was going to knock him off his horse by the sheer directness of his gaze.

"You want to watch your mouth, boy, and quit staring," Sam said sharply. "Watch that mouth or I'll close it for you once and for all. Now let me see your papers."

The two looked at each other again and, after what seemed like an intolerably long time,

Fred said quietly, "No, suh, I don't think we're going to show you our papers. Why don't you just leave us alone, and we'll leave you alone, what do you say?"

But Sam shot him where he stood, and when Eustace, with a cry, began reaching into his knapsack Sam shot him too, and they both fell and Fred was still moving so Sam shot him again, shot them both, made sure they were dead, which in due course they both were.



He was not a prideful man, as heretofore stated. He went through their blood-spattered clothes and their knapsacks, finding three Yankee dollars, and some apples, and some neatly-wrapped yellow cheese, and a hunk of bread, as well as some other things, odds and ends of no use to him. He took the money, and he put the food away for the moment, still in hopes of finding a better meal at the Carpenters'. Eustace, he found, had a big knife in his knapsack, and he thought maybe the nigger had been going for it when he shot them. There were some papers but he didn't trouble to look at them, there now being no particular reason to do so.

Not three minutes later he mounted up and rode on, leaving the dead to the flies and the scavengers. The autumn sun began dropping to the horizon, and somewhere not far distant a bird called. He did not look back.

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Several weeks later, it was getting colder day by day, and Sam could tell that the snows were not far off. He had moved out of Dobbs County and into what was new territory for him. He had had the sense now and then that he was being watched, that unfriendly eyes were marking his comings and goings. He did not want to become so known as a presence in the backwoods and farms in those parts that his movements might be anticipated, and that he might then run into an ambush or a patrol, taken unawares despite his precautions.

So he left Dobbs County and found himself in the adjoining Jessup County, relatively unfamiliar territory to him. He hadn't been in Jessup much at all before the war, and was uneasy in having to learn his way, but by now he had some confidence in his ability to live wherever he found himself.

The day came when his horse was beginning to wear out and he knew that he again needed a new mount. He found an isolated farmhouse and, by careful scouting, determined that a man, a woman and what appeared to be their teenage daughter lived there. There were three horses in the barn. He needed food, too, so he decided to take the direct approach, as he had so many times in the past. He rode up, dismounted and kicked in the door, pistol in hand.

The three were at the table together. They were plainly alarmed but said nothing. "Get me some food," he ordered the lady of the house, a thin, stringy-looking woman who looked like she'd never smiled once in her entire damn life. She stood up. The husband, a small man, older, with tiny eyes and a thick beard, and the daughter, freckled but not ever likely to be called pretty, were still sitting at the kitchen table, watching him as carefully as could be. They said nothing, so he went on, "Give me some food in whatever you have to carry it in, and be quick about it."

"All right, mister," the lady said, slowly opening a drawer and then a cupboard, filling a small sack with hard bread, dried corn and some peanuts. She handed the sack to him, glancing uneasily at his gun as she did so.

He weighed the sack in his hand; it would do. He could see they didn't have much, and he retained some tiny residual residue of human charity, at least, such that he didn't want to clean them out entirely. "All right," he said. "Don't none of you come out of the house for ten minutes, now, you hear?"

They all nodded like marionettes; the father's eyes narrowed a little as he did.

Sam went back outside, closing the door behind him; it swung on just one hinge now. He led his horse quickly to the barn, selected what looked like the best of the horses there, and transferred his saddle, blanket and other gear to it.

He was just finishing when he heard a sound, a small sound, not far away. He turned to see the husband there with a shotgun. "You ain't taking no horse of mine, mister," the man said in an even voice, and at once pulled the trigger.

Sam was already moving, throwing himself behind a beam, onto the uneven dirt floor, hitting hard and rolling.

The roar and the stink of the shotgun blast filled the barn. The man had fired where he had just been, and had plainly missed. Sam drew his own gun and came up shooting. He missed too, the first shot, but the second and maybe the third hit the man in his side and he fell without a sound, fell like a dropped hammer.

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Sam didn't check him. Unsure what the wife and daughter might be up to by then, he figured he ought to be taking his leave of the place, and did just that. As he galloped back down the road, he thought he heard screaming somewhere behind him, and then another bang, a rifle from the sound of it. Instantly he felt the impact on his upper right back, knocking him forward, almost out of the saddle, as if a giant had walloped him in some ill-conceived gesture of companionship and good cheer.

Far from it. He had been shot. He gave the spur to his horse and kept going, as the pain hit, as it sunk in, wave upon wave of agony radiating out from his wound. He kept going and left the farm behind.

Sam rode along for a long time – he didn't know, couldn't tell through his pain, just how long – and eventually the sky began to turn orange, then red. He hurt, he hurt real bad. He heard nothing more behind him, but on he rode just the same. His new horse, as if resentful for its master's killing, fought him as they went, and he used the reins and spurs harder than he might have otherwise. His back hurt terribly and he wanted shelter, but found none until night had come to the woods around him. At last he came to a closely-growing group of trees that, he hoped, would shield him from hostile eyes. He tied the horse to a tree, wincing, almost screaming, as he did so, and eased himself to the ground, onto his stomach. He was very hungry, starving even, but his fatigue and pain won out, and he fell into an uneasy asleep.

He awoke to a long rumble of thunder. He did not feel at all rested. It was still dark, and he was dimly aware that he was soaked to the skin. A steady cold drizzle of rain fell on him, and in a flash of lightning he saw the horse not far away, where he'd tied it, looking as forlorn and weary as he himself felt. The thunder sounded again and he pulled his wool coat around him, hurting far too much to rise and get his raingear from the saddle.

The storm went on and on, and he eventually drifted back to sleep, never free of the fiery pain of his wounded back.

The next time he woke, it was with a start, almost a jolt, instantly aware that he was not alone. He was on his back now, and hurt even worse. His hand went to his pistol, but a booted foot stepped on his wrist and he could not draw the weapon.

"Watch out there, son," said a cavalry trooper in Federal blue, three yellow chevrons on his sleeves, bearded and grizzled. He reached down and took the pistol away. "Don't think you need this just now."

Sam started to get up but became dizzy from the pain. He slumped back, wet and hurting. He saw that it was not long after sunrise. The Yankee sergeant was with four other men, each in blue, all ragged, unshaven and smelly. They had carbines slung over their shoulders, and sabers hung at their sides. Three remained mounted; one, a gangly youth, stood nearby, holding his carbine at the ready with a nervous alertness.

"He looks mighty pale," the youth said.

"Reckon he's been shot," said another. "Bleeding out. I know the look."

"You been shot, son?" the sergeant asked, not unkindly. Sam nodded. "Whereabouts? Where on you, I mean?"



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“M’back,” he whispered.

“Where?”

“My back,” he said, more distinctly, finding that it hurt even to talk now. “Here.” He tried to gesture but found, to his mild surprise, that he couldn’t.

“Is that right?” the sergeant said. “Well, let’s see.” He patted Sam down for other weapons, taking his other pistol and his knife, and lifted his shoulder. Sam screamed in pain, flushing a bird from a nearby bush. The sergeant held his shoulder up off the ground for what seemed like forever, looking him over. Sam nearly passed out from the agony before the sergeant let him back down. “Yep, you were shot but good, son. Why’d somebody want to shoot you?”

Sam licked his lips. “Don’t know.”

The sergeant chuckled softly. “Oh, I reckon you do. I surely do. Couldn’t have been on account of you’re that horse thief we keep hearing about ‘round here, could it?”

Sam shook his head. It hurt and he stopped.

“This your horse here?” The cavalryman nodded at the tethered beast.

Sam nodded, and gasped a little. That hurt, too, even worse.

“How long you had it?”

“Awhile now.”

“How long?”

What should he say? “Dunno. Six, seven months, maybe.”

“Uh huh. Is it branded?”

Sam didn’t know; there hadn’t been time to check. “I... I forget.”

“Not the kind of thing you’d be likely to forget, having a horse that long, is it?” one of the other troopers said.

Sam didn’t look at him; didn’t respond.

The sergeant hawked up a gob of phlegm, a long, disgusting sound, and spat it on the ground. “Come to think of it, looks a lot like the horse Mrs. Spence said got stolen yesterday by a man she described as looking a lot like you.”

“That’s right,” said the youth, as if eager to please.



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Sam said nothing.

“A man she thinks killed her husband, but who her husband shot and wounded ‘fore he died,” said the sergeant. “But I guess he got his licks in, huh?”

Sam didn’t like the sergeant’s expression, to say nothing of his words, and was silent. Didn’t seem to be any point in saying anything.

The silence stretched out.

“You’re in secesh uniform, armed, with a horse that ain’t yours,” the sergeant said at last. He looked at Sam a little longer, speculatively, then turned to the others. “Well, now, General Thomas don’t like no horsethieves, does he, boys? Or secesh deserters, murderers?”

They answered. “No, he surely don’t.”

“Nope.”

“Hell, no, Sergeant.”

One of the troopers still in the saddle said nothing, clearly bored with it all.

“I reckon I could just shoot you now, and nobody’d say boo,” the sergeant said, hefting Sam’s guns in his hands, “but I ‘spect you’re gonna die soon anyway, from the looks of things.”

Sam stared at him, tiredly hating the man but not able to do much about it.

The sergeant spat on the ground again and turned to Sam’s horse. He untied it and mounted his own horse, leading Sam’s behind him. With it went Sam’s provisions, his gear, his blanket, and with it, most likely, went the possibility of any kind of tomorrow. “Well, g’bye, then, Johnny Reb,” he said. “Nice talking to you.”

They rode off, and Sam just lay there. That seemed like the thing to do. He closed his eyes, alone with his wound, alone with his damn pain, the wave upon wave of it. He was cold and wet and unarmed and hungry, and something else he didn’t even want to think about. No. He wouldn’t.

Time passed, a long time. It was quiet.

Clouds passed overhead, then thickened. It grew dark once more. After awhile the rain started up again, a drop or two, then a dozen, then a cold, steady downpour, but he did not feel it. He was no longer in pain. He felt nothing, saw nothing, knew nothing. Alone and unmourned, he never would again.

The war kept on, of course, but then after awhile it stopped, too.

