

The Road Home

Book Chapter

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## Summary

In 1863 the Civil War raged in Tennessee and Georgia. As the fighting surged from field to forest, soldiers from these states were tormented by the realization that home was often just over the next hill or around the next bend in the river. This book chronicles the battle experiences and the inner struggles of a young Confederate soldier trying to reconcile his desire for home with the call to duty and valor.

## The Road Home

A thick cloud of dust rose from the rutted Tennessee lane marking the advance of a Confederate foraging patrol.

“C’mon, boys. Let’s keep ’em movin’!” Lt. Harper urged.

“He sure is afta’ us today,” commented Simon Walker.

“Well, the way Billy Yank’s been on us recently, I can’t blame ’im. These foraging patrols are the only things that keep us fed,” panted Rassic Harden.

“Yeah, guess yo’re right,” agreed Simon shifting his rifle to his left arm. “Just seems like I’ve done more marchin’ these last few months than all the rest of my seventeen years.”

“Well, you should try doin’ it on a set of knees that are a decade older than yours!” complained Rassic wiping the sweat from his brow.

At the crest of the steep hill above their camp, the lieutenant barked, “Company halt! Dismissed.”

Simon commented to his friend, “Home sweet home!”

Breaking rank, Simon and Rassic hobbled back to their camp by the edge of the creek.

“Sometimes I don’t know why we bother with this ol’ thing,” Simon complained as he flopped down beneath their ragged tent. “The wind cuts through it like a sieve.”

Rassic agreed with a grimace, “She’s seen better days. That’s fur sure.”

Tents were not the only thing that had worn thin in the poorly supplied 2<sup>nd</sup> Tennessee regiment. Once dapper grey uniforms were now stained and tattered. Shoe tops were separated from worn leather soles. Even formerly pristine flags were faded and riddled with bullet holes.

But most of all, the bodies and souls of the men were ragged and weary. The few who had managed to survive two years of war were no longer the idealistic young men who had

enlisted to defend their country. Daily deprivation, along with the relentless loss of commanders, friends, and brothers, had aged them far beyond their years. Now these soldiers merely struggled to survive this seemingly endless war.

“Simon, you think we got enough firewood to last the night?” Rassie asked while stirring beans scavenged on their morning patrol. At that moment, their friend Jacob Fields strolled over to their fire.

“Ain’t it just like ol’ Jacob to come runnin’ when he smells food?” Rassie laughed.

“Well, my mama always taught me not to be late for supper!” Jacob retorted.

“Go ahead an’ eat my part,” Simon invited holding out his tin plate. “I’m not too hungry.”

“Ya sure? If yo’re gonna make it in the army, my young friend, yo’re gonna have to learn to eat when ya got the chance,” Jacob advised.

Rassie chimed in, “That’s true. One small shift in the front line can cut off yo’re supplies and leave ya with no biscuits for a long time.”

“But ya’ve never heard of an officer starvin’, have ya?” Simon grumbled. “Starvation is the bane of the enlisted man. Ya’d think they’d follow the teachin’ of the Good Book to not ‘muzzle the mouth of the ox that treadeth out the grain.’ I mean, we’re the ones doin’ the fightin’. Why should I starve and get shot at while the brass eats well and stays safe?”

“Sounds like someone is a lil’ cranky!” Rassie joked.

In fact, Simon was more than cranky. He was miserable. Although he prayed fervently every night before stretching out on the hard ground, sleep eluded him. The bloody memories of twisted, shattered limbs, mangled corpses, and dead, bloated horses haunted his dreams. The

crack of rifles, the boom of cannons, and the screams of wounded comrades jarred him awake from his nightmares.

Abruptly, Simon asked, “Do ya ever get over it?”

“Get over what?” Jacob responded.

“The nightmares.”

“No! That is the short answer, but there is also a long one. Over time, the vividness of the memories and the sharpness of the pain go away as the battles run together and ya lose count of the people ya lost. All that remains is a constant ache. The only way to stay sane out there is to find some reason to keep goin’. Few men make it once they lose all reason to live,” Jacob explained in a low voice.

Silently, Simon bowed his head and contemplated Jacob’s words. He simply wanted to go back home. He longed to wrestle with his two little brothers, to smell the freshly turned earth as he walked behind the plow, and to sink his teeth into his mom’s warm peach cobbler. Most of all, he longed for the reverent peacefulness of his small country church. Somewhere deep inside he realized that going back home was the relentless desire that propelled him forward.

An order to break camp harshly interrupted his musing. Three hours of marching finally brought the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tennessee to LaFayette. Struggling through rivers of mud that used to be streets, they arrived at the train depot. There they boarded a string of railroad cars.

Jacob griped, “I hate being packed into these cattle cars like an animal! It makes me sick.”

“Well, in my book it beats walkin’,” Rassic commented trying to find a comfortable spot on the rough wooden floor.

Timidly, Simon confided, “My eighteenth birthday will be in two days.”

“Oh! Our lil’ Simon’s growin’ up,” Jacob mocked affectionately.

While it was true that Jacob was only three years older than Simon, he had served in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tennessee since the start of the war. Countless battles and skirmishes made Jacob feel like an old man.

“Yep, ya sure come a long way since ya enlisted,” Rassie laughed. “Jacob, do ya remember the first time Simon here pulled picket duty with us?”

“Yeah, he almost shot our relief guards!” Jacob chuckled. “And he couldn’t load his gun ‘cause his hands shook so bad durin’ his first lil’ scrape.”

“But ya sure are a soldier now,” Rassie assured Simon.

Both of the older men cared for Simon and would do anything for him. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tennessee, veterans looked after “green” troops.

“I do believe it’s gonna rain today,” Rassie observed.

“I agree,” Jacob replied. “It’s beginnin’ to look stormy.”

“How can ya talk about the weather when we’re headed to Chickamauga? We’ll be fightin’ jist a half-day’s walk from my home!” Simon exclaimed.

“Don’t ‘spect it to match up with yo’re memories,” Rassie cautioned.

When the troop train finally rumbled into Ft. Oglethorpe, rain was pouring down. The three friends jumped off as the transport crawled to a halt. Marching toward the Confederate line near Chickamauga Creek, Simon looked around in a daze

“Not quite what ya ‘membered, is it?” Rassie said.

“Not at all!” Simon whispered gazing at his hometown. “That used to be a feed store, and I bought candy over there. Look! It’s a hospital now.”

Putting a hand on his shoulder, Rassic counseled his young comrade, "Nothin' to do but keep goin'."

Seeing the growing fear in Simon's eyes, Jacob attempted to lighten the mood. "Don't worry, Simon. You'll be fine. The Yanks usually pardon children!"

"Yo're profound insight amazes me!" Simon responded sarcastically.

"I try," Jacob smirked.

"All right, ya two. Sometimes I feel like y'all's babysitter," Rassic grumbled.

Ahead, the three glimpsed their company's position behind a long stretch of entrenchments. Conversation ceased. Over the sound of distant artillery, Lt. Harper shouted, "The Yanks are preparin' for attack. I think I speak for all of us when I say I'm tired of all this marching we've been doing. Today, I'm in a fighting mood! So no matter what's hurled at us, we will hold!"

No sooner had the words left his mouth than the artillery roared. Lt. Harper jumped back into the trench as the cannon balls began to strike the Confederate fortifications.

"Quite a convincin' speech," Jacob muttered pressing his body to the wall of the trench.

"I bet that wasn't the endin' he planned," answered Simon as he attempted to sink even lower.

"Here they come!" yelled Rassic.

When Simon cautiously peeked over the edge, he saw a massive Union line headed toward them.

"Now's your chance. Pour it on 'em, boys!" encouraged Lt. Harper.

Simon and the rest of the men fired round after round into the oncoming troops. In spite of this, within minutes the Union soldiers reached the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tennessee's line and jumped into the trench.

Simon stabbed one blue-clad soldier with his bayonet. He struck another with the butt of his rifle. However, just as Simon turned to look over his shoulder, another enemy attacker hit him across the face knocking him to the ground.

Wiping the blood from his eyes, Simon looked up to see the Union soldier raising his gun to finish him off. However, before the Yank could squeeze the trigger, a bayonet thrust halted him. Through a red haze, Simon saw a scarred hand stretched toward him. It was Rassic!

"You won't be gettin' a medical discharge today. We still..." Before he finished speaking, a bullet silenced Simon's mentor. Mercifully, a curtain of blackness descended on Simon.

When Simon awoke, the sounds of battle had ceased. Only the desperate cries of the wounded and dying broke the eerie silence. Peering through the twilight, he recognized Jacob huddled over Rassic's lifeless form. Weakly, Simon called to him.

Jacob rushed over to him. Seeing his friend's head wound, Jacob asked, "Are ya all right?"

"Yeah, I jist...I jist..." Simon stuttered.

"Jist what?" Jacob persisted.

"Jist want to go home. I'm tired of fightin'."

"I know, Simon, but ya can't go home right now. That'd be desertin', and they'd hang ya for sure," Jacob warned.

"That doesn't sound as bad as what just happened, as bad as losin' Rassic."

“Well, Simon, we can’t decide when we return to our families jist like we can’t decide when we go home to heaven. All we can do ‘til we are called is to ‘fight the good fight’ like the Good Book says. Now I ain’t gonna stop ya, but ya better think about it. Do ya want to be remembered as a man who fled in the face of danger or as a man who stayed and fought?”

With Jacob’s words washing over Simon, the battle in his mind was more relentless than the one he had just fought.