

SPRINGER

BY LARRY P. SHERRILL

A slight breeze meandered across the front porch. It was a warm morning for early March in Carroll County. The jonquils that Mattie had planted two years earlier were beginning to bloom and the scuppernong vines were starting to bud.

Springer and Mattie were sitting in the swing as their month-old baby began babbling and grabbing at Springer's beard. "I think Houston's grip is getting stronger", Springer said. Mattie smiled, the hint of a tear barely visible. "He'll be running around like a guinea chicken by the time you get back".

Barking interrupted their quiet swinging. Their dogs ran down the road to greet the wagon making its way across the bridge, headed their way. Richard and Dudley Jeter stopped their wagon in front of the house and jumped off. They had offered to pick up Springer on their way to the recruiting station in Bowdon. With the Jeter boys standing around waiting, it was awkward saying goodbye to Mattie. Springer's eyes moistened a bit as he kissed her. He gently tugged Houston's nose, causing him to look up and smile.

Mattie stood in the front yard and watched the wagon descend the small hill by the hog troughs. As the wagon went up the other side of the hill, she helped Houston wave goodbye. The wagon reached the bend at the top of the hill, slowly angled left, and disappeared.

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Richard and Dudley had been bickering off and on for the last two days since their train had left Chattanooga. "I'm sick of this train. All we been doing since we joined up is marching in circles, waiting in lines, waiting at train depots, and sitting on this train car", Richard complained. Dudley countered, "Richard, just shut up." "You shut up". No one noticed Springer rolling his eyes, quietly shaking his head, and murmuring to himself, "Jeters".

Gazing out the window, he pulled the blanket up around his shoulders. It was around six o'clock in the morning and all he could see out the window were pine trees and oak trees. A light drizzle was falling, making the train car damp and cool. Bug bites were making him itch, he was sore from sitting, the corn cakes tasted like pig slop, and the water was so bad he didn't want to drink it. Two more days.

Springer, of course, was unaware that his itching was caused by typhus-carrying body lice. The lice were silently and invisibly spreading around the train car, embedding themselves in the blankets and the clothing of the unsuspecting soldiers.

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The month and a half since Springer left home had passed quickly. His first three weeks were spent in training at Franklin, Georgia, about twenty-five miles south of Bowdon. Then, his company boarded a train for Camp MacDonald, north of Atlanta. After spending only one day there, they left for Knoxville, then inexplicably doubled back to Chattanooga where they waited for a couple of days for orders. Finally, they left Chattanooga on a trip that took four long days, arriving at Bethel Springs, Tennessee yesterday, April 11th.

Tonight was Springer's first night on guard duty. According to Captain Thompson, a battle east of Bethel Springs at Pittsburgh Landing had gone badly and Grant was pushing south toward Corinth. Therefore, it was important that Springer and the other guards be on lookout for Yankees sneaking up under the cover of darkness to reconnoiter troop strength and to look for weak spots in the Confederate line.

When Springer reported for his fourth and final night of guard duty, he did not feel well. By midnight his head was pounding and he was shaking from chills. Two hours later, he was coughing and too weak to continue his shift. Midmorning, he developed diarrhea. After two weeks, Springer was not improving and he was dehydrated and weak. Resting in a cotton gin converted into a makeshift field hospital, he mustered the strength to write Mattie a couple of letters. His condition continued to degrade, and at the end of April the company medic recommended that he be transferred to the hospital at Lauderdale Springs.

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Originally inhabited by the Choctaw Indians, Panti was a village in eastern Mississippi nestled comfortably by springs that were well known among the Indians for their healing properties. Settlers renamed this area Lauderdale Springs after Col. James Lauderdale, who served under Andrew Jackson in the War of 1812. In the 1850's, enterprising whites had developed the area into a health resort. When the war broke out, the Confederate military provisioned the resort as a hospital. John Gay had been a nurse there since early March, two months prior to Springer's arrival.

Springer went to the back porch and drew up a bucket of nice cool water. He could hear Mattie in the kitchen quietly singing. Houston was laughing as he ran around the yard chasing guinea chickens. Springer descended the porch, walked past the smokehouse, down the hill, across the creek, and to the edge of the field where he had left his mules in the shade. He started plowing again, calling out to his mules, "gee-haw-gee-gee". Suddenly, he stopped, feeling faint. It was a hot day and his forehead was covered with sweat. His nurse, John, reached over and wiped Springer's forehead with a cool cloth. Springer jerked unexpectedly, catching a deep breath. He exhaled slowly and over the course of the next few minutes his breathing became fainter and fainter, finally stopping altogether. A gray patina seemed to descend upon him from head to foot as his color left. John closed Springer's eyes. Taking a pair of scissors from a night table beside the bed, he cut a lock of hair and put it in an envelope. He would include it with a short letter to Springer's wife.