

"Union Dues"

Writer #69

DE #10

FADE IN

EXT. FROSTY WOOD - DUSK

A Union Army soldier sprints through the trees, jumping logs, ducking under branches, eyes straight ahead.

EXT. SNOW-COVERED FIELD - DUSK

He eventually comes to snow-covered clearing and stops to breathe. He spots a small, stone shack on the far side of the field which appears to be abandoned. Wind whipping through the clearing, GEORGE (20s), shivers and pulls his hands down into his sleeves. Folding his arms tightly across his torso, he glances in every direction, and seeing no signs of life, hurries over to abandoned shack. Upon reaching it, he pulls open the door and steps inside.

INT. STONE SHACK - DUSK

It's dark inside, but not so dark that George doesn't immediately notice several other figures in the shadows. He's barely able to raise the gun tucked away in his belt before several other guns are pointed at his face. The stand-off lasts several seconds. Finally, one of the figures steps into a ray of light. EVERETT (late 20s), also wearing a Union uniform, stares hard at the newcomer.

EVERETT

Deserter?

George considers how to answer, keeping his gun at the ready. Not getting a response, Everett lowers his gun and nods.

EVERETT (CONT'D)

You bring any food?

George shakes his head. His eyes adjusting to the dark, he watches Everett and another soldier, JOSIAH (barely 18), sit down against a wall. The third soldier, a dangerous-looking man named CYRUS (late 30s), lingers with his gun on George.

CYRUS

Well if ya ain't got nothin' to offer, maybe you should move on, friend.

EVERETT

We got room, Cyrus. Sit down.

Cyrus looks at Everett with menacing eyes.

CYRUS

You givin' me an order, *Lieutenant*?

Everett looks down, suddenly distant.

EVERETT

...I'm not a lieutenant anymore...

Cyrus grunts with satisfaction and sits down in his corner. George sits hesitantly, back against the door. It's silent.

GEORGE

I'm George. Wind's blowin' somethin' fierce out there. I can barely feel my hands. I'm lucky I found this place.

EVERETT

Yeah, we all were.

(snide)

Or we might never have had the pleasure of meeting Cyrus here. I'm Everett, by the way. This is my kid-brother, Josiah.

GEORGE

Well I suppose, cold or not, we should be off before too long. If the four of us can find this place so can the Union scouts.

CYRUS

Ahh, there ain't been no Blue Bellies in these parts for days.

GEORGE

Still... shouldn't we at least --

CYRUS

You're too nervous, friend. They ain't any more fond of bein' out in this squall than you. We got a few hours. ...So what's your story?

George is a bit slow to answer.

GEORGE

...Same as most I reckon. Not enough food, or money. Just couldn't take no more...
...How 'bout you?

CYRUS

That ain't none of your business.

George raises an eyebrow and turns to Everett who is staring blankly at the ground.

EVERETT

We best be gettin' some sleep...
while we can. We can each take a
watch. Who'll go first?

CYRUS

I might as well. Wide awake...
probably won't sleep a wink anyway.

The others bed down. Cyrus slips a flask from his jacket and takes a quick sip while the others sleep. He leans his head back against the wall, pondering something. His eyelids start getting heavy. In a matter of minutes he's asleep.

INT./EXT. STONE SHACK - DAY

Horse whinnies startle George awake. Remembering where he is, he turns to look out a hole in the door. The day is bright and clear... and at least a dozen Union soldier approach on horseback. He doesn't say a word but wakes the others, gesturing for them to stay silent.

They take turns looking outside, the soldiers forming a semi-circle around the building about 25 feet away. While the men in the shack make sure their weapons are loaded, a commanding officer outside steps down from his horse and studies the shack. CAPTAIN SHAW (30s) is well-groomed and narrow-eyed.

CAPTAIN SHAW

Hello inside the building! I am
Captain Nathan Shaw. I'm here to
arrest the deserters taking shelter
inside this building and bring them
to justice. If this does not
describe you, please speak up.

Everett and George look at one another, unsure what to do. Cyrus steps between them, up to the door.

CYRUS

Yeah we're in here you over-dressed
peacock! And if you want us you'll
have to come and get us!

Cyrus pulls his rifle up to a crack in the wall and fires at the soldiers, who immediately scramble for cover and begin firing at the stone structure. Everett and George instantly grab Cyrus and throw him to the ground, one of them wrestling his gun away, the other punching his face. Outside, Captain Shaw tries to calm his men.

CAPTAIN SHAW
Hold your fire! Hold your fire!

When his men cease firing and no addition gunfire comes from the shack, Shaw hesitantly moves out from behind his horse.

CAPTAIN SHAW (CONT'D)
(to the shack)
I'd like to avoid unnecessary violence if possible! And I hope that was not the smartest man in your party!

Shaw stands silent a moment, waiting for a response.

EVERETT
That man doesn't speak for us. He's been taken care of.

Inside the shack, George finishes tying Cyrus' hands behind his back. The older man blinks and groans, blood dripping from a wound above his eye. George nods to Everett who glances over at his brother, sitting in a corner, rocking back and forth, tears in his eyes. Everett turns to the door.

EVERETT (CONT'D)
We don't want violence either, Captain, but I'm afraid surrender isn't an option. ...I'm sorry.

Outside, Captain Shaw looks disappointed.

CAPTAIN SHAW
I'm sorry too. Ya know, I used to think that any man could see the need for uncommon valor... and when the cause was great he'd raise himself up to a higher standard, put aside selfishness, and expend his life for a something truly worthy. Perhaps I was naive. Instead of fighting the enemy, in a war that will determine the very course of this nation, I'm hunting down cutthroats and cowards, from my own army!

No one inside the shack speaks.

CAPTAIN SHAW (CONT'D)
In fact, it's even worse than that. The truth is I'm not here for deserters.

(MORE)

CAPTAIN SHAW (CONT'D)

...I'm here to find the man who's been selling secrets to the Confederates... and I know it's one of you.

The men inside exchange looks of shock, then all eyes focus on Cyrus. George kneels in front of him, looks him in eyes and places his pistol against his cheek.

GEORGE

What did you do?

Without hesitating, Cyrus spits a mouthful of filth into George's face. George stumbles back, wiping it away.

CYRUS

I ain't no spy. I may be a good-for-nothin' thief, but I care about the South even less than I care for the North. So back off.

EVERETT

Look, we need to stay calm here. If we start getting jumpy, someone's gonna do something stupid.

CAPTAIN SHAW (O.S.)

I know you boys are probably getting suspicious about now, wondering who this traitor is, and if he's dangerous. Well consider this...

Outside, Shaw pulls a paper from his saddle bag.

CAPTAIN SHAW (CONT'D)

In our last engagement with the Rebels, we found ourselves implausibly out-manuevered and out-matched. We couldn't understand how the Confederates could have so plainly anticipated our strategy. Then we found this. A letter containing intimate details on Union troops, locations and tactics. And it was obviously not the first. We'd been betrayed. And we lost a lot of men. I... lost too many. Oh yes, he's dangerous.

Inside, George tightens his grip on his gun and studies the faces of the other men anxiously.

CAPTAIN SHAW (CONT'D)

Here's what I'm going to do. I have to find this man, and if you help me you're free to go, deserter or no. Just give me the man I want. If not, then I'm afraid I'll have to burn that shack to the ground.

In the shack, Josiah starts to panic. He raises his pistol, aiming it at Cyrus, then at George, then Cyrus again.

JOSIAH

Well we know it's not us. Tell 'em, Everett!

Everett just looks at his brother, sympathy in his eyes.

JOSIAH (CONT'D)

(increasingly emotional)

Tell 'em! Tell 'em I'm a coward! I couldn't fight! Tell 'em, killin' made me... sick. Tell 'em it's my fault. It's my fault we're here...

Josiah falls to the floor sobbing. Everett kneels next to him, kissing him on top of the head.

EVERETT

(to the others)

It wasn't us.

CAPTAIN SHAW (O.S.)

My men have started looking for fuel for a fire. When we've found enough, you'll be out of time. I'd make good use of that time if I were you.

INT./EXT. STONE SHACK - DAY (LATER)

Cyrus considers the two brothers.

CYRUS

Well if it wasn't you two and it wasn't me, then it has to be him.

Cyrus directs his gaze at George.

GEORGE

Right, it clearly couldn't be you, 'cause you're a man of principle.

CYRUS

Yes. And you're just a poor hungry soldier who showed up right before the posse.

EVERETT

He's right. You were also quite insistent that we shouldn't stay here long.

GEORGE

That's right, I was. Maybe you should listen to me this time!

EVERETT

They were tracking you the whole time. You brought 'em right to us. ...You're the traitor.

George realizes he's out of excuses. He levels his gun at the two brothers. Everett reciprocates. They both hold their ground, guns held steady, keeping the other in check.

GEORGE

So what if I am? Gonna preach to me about my sin?

EVERETT

It doesn't bother you... that all those mean are dead?

GEORGE

Those men were soldiers, in a war, and I didn't pull the trigger. I played one, small part.

EVERETT

...Why?

GEORGE

Because... I believe in the South. But I don't expect you to understand.

EVERETT

So what now?

GEORGE

...I honestly don't know. But if I go out that door, I'm a dead man.

Everett doesn't know what to say, realizing George is probably right.

Outside, the Captain's men are busy trying to find wood dry enough to burn and stack it high on every side of the shack. The Captain himself just leans against his horse, waiting.

INT./EXT. STONE SHACK - DAY (LATER)

The standoff between Everett and George continues.

CYRUS

Will you just do what needs be done, Everett? Shoot him! You gonna let him get us all killed?!? I don't aim to die for the likes of him.

GEORGE

"For the likes of me"??? That's funny. 'Cause I forgot what upright fellas y'all are. What, with you bein' deserters and all... At least I believed in somethin'!

CYRUS

Yeah, the Confederate Dollar!

EVERETT

Shut up! Both of y'all, just shut up, unless you've got any ideas for getting out of this.

GEORGE

...Well, I know it's not a good plan, but our only option might be shooting our way out. If those men are still spread out looking for wood, maybe we can surprise 'em, grab some of their horses, just outrun 'em?

Everett shakes his head at the hopelessness of the plan but gets up anyway, keeping his gun pointed at George, and glances out the hole in the door.

EVERETT

He's got two men right next to him, just watchin' the door. We'll be shot the instant we step out.

CYRUS

(to George)

Here's an idea. How about you give yourself up?

GEORGE

Why should I? Why should I care
what happens to any of you? You
think if you were in my place,
you'd choose any different?

Everett sits back down, gun pointing at the traitor, thinking on the truth of George's words.

INT./EXT. STONE SHACK - DAY (LATER)

Outside, a soldier finishes stacking wood and brush around the stone shack and then salutes to the Captain.

CAPTAIN SHAW

(to the shack)

Looks like you boys are out of
time! What's it gonna be? You gonna
give me what I need? Or are you
gonna die... traitors?

The men inside don't even look at one another, their faces downcast, out of ideas. Suddenly there is a growling scream as Cyrus, somehow free from his bonds, charges Josiah. It is clear he's going for the boy's gun, but not clear what he intends to do with it. Everett takes his attention off of George to intercept Cyrus' attack. Cyrus manages to strike Everett who stumbles backwards, dropping his gun. Cyrus, meanwhile, continues his efforts to get Josiah's gun.

Everett, realizing he is defenseless, looks up to see George aiming directly at him. They both hesitate, then Everett lunges for his gun and George turns and aims at Cyrus. Just as the older man forces the gun down near the boy's face, he spasms, being shot twice in the back. George immediately swings back to aim his gun at Everett as Everett raises his gun to point at George. Neither man fires. They're once more at a stalemate.

CAPTAIN SHAW (O.S.) (CONT'D)

I take it from those sounds
you're... deciding. But I'm afraid
I can't afford to wait any longer.
Light the torch, Sergeant!

Inside, Everett and George, aiming down their guns at one another, begin to circle each other very slowly.

GEORGE

Maybe you hadn't noticed, but I
just saved your little brother.

EVERETT

I noticed. What do you want, a medal?

GEORGE

I also coulda shot you... but I didn't!

EVERETT

So what? What am I supposed to do now? Lay down my gun, get comfortable, die next to my brother and a traitor?

GEORGE

Help me! We can shoot our way outta here. It's not impossible!

EVERETT

My brother will never make it.

GEORGE

Maybe that's the price we have to pay.

Everett stops completely, clenching his jaw, the gun in his hand shaking.

CAPTAIN SHAW (O.S.)

I'm sorry, boys, but it's over. I am disappointed. I hoped you fellas were smarter. Guess not. 10... 9...

The two men continue their standoff. George seems distracted, searching desperately for a way out of the situation. The gun in Everett's hand continues to tremble.

EVERETT

We can't both walk out of here alive. And neither of us deserve to.

CAPTAIN SHAW (O.S.)

8... 7... 6...

Everett lowers his gun, visibly relaxing.

EVERETT

I just hope... you'll set things right some day.

CAPTAIN SHAW (O.S.)

5... 4...

Everett turns to his brother.

EVERETT
I love you, kid.

CAPTAIN SHAW (O.S.)
3... 2...

Everett opens the door, light flooding in. The countdown stops. He steps through, the door closing behind him.

JOSIAH
No!

EVERETT (O.S.)
I'm your traitor... Now what?

After a couple seconds of silence there are 3 quick gunshots, then the sound of Everett's body hitting the ground.

EXT. STONE SHACK - DAY

Several more moments of silence pass before Captain Shaw speaks again.

CAPTAIN SHAW
The rest of you can come on out.
You're free men, I'm true to my
word.

The door of the shack opens and George slowly comes out followed by Josiah. George seems more shaken than Josiah as they stand over Everett's body. The boy looks more confident, standing tall as he looks disdainfully at the true traitor.

CAPTAIN SHAW (CONT'D)
You did what I asked. Now do one
more thing. Turn around, start
walking, and don't stop until they
speak a different language. On your
way.

Josiah turns and begins walking across the field but stops when he realizes that George hasn't moved. George stands still, staring at Everett's body.

CAPTAIN SHAW (CONT'D)
You have something to say?

At length, George looks up into the Captain's face.

GEORGE

He was... unselfish. A man of...
uncommon valor. ...I'm the traitor.

The Captain is dumbfounded. He regains his wits in a matter of seconds placing the tip of his gun barrel against George's forehead. Everyone waits to see what happens. After an interminable amount of time the Captain lowers his gun.

CAPTAIN SHAW

...There's been enough killing
today. I hope you're worth the
price he paid.

Shaw nods to one of his men who puts George in hand cuffs. Turning to the rest of them, Shaw motions to the body.

CAPTAIN SHAW (CONT'D)

Let's bury him like a Union soldier
deserves.

They do. Josiah watches for a moment, then turns and walks into the woods.

