

March 1859- Snake Bit

Geoff had been fishing with his father, Valentine. They'd walked down this same path, talking. A heavy stringer of sunfish hung on a stick between them. Then came that all too familiar rattle. Valentine pushed his son back dispatching the creature with indifference. He recalled his father picking up the critter's dismembered head and squeezing its jaws open to display its fangs.

"See `em, Geoff?"

Young Geoff nodded. He saw them, twin, glistening, ivory needles.

"Ain't much other'n a Mama bear guardin' her cubs more dangerous."

Geoff bobbed again.

Valentine held the snake's open maw out to him, turning it from side to side, then pitched it into the brush.

"You been bit before, Pa?" Geoff asked.

"Naw."

Geoff snatched up the headless snake to toss after its missing head, but Valentine stopped him.

"Hold on."

Geoff stopped.

His father took the limp thing from him and slung it over his shoulder. "'Swasteful. Snake tastes mighty good." Valentine picked up his musket, hauled up their catch and strode off toward home. Geoff scrambled to catch up.

Sometime later, he saw Valentine smile. "Naw, I ain't been bit. Seen others to it though. Some as died ..." his words trailed off, but he continued walking, leaving images just hanging there for Geoff to consider, for what he considered a very long time.

"Some didn't? " Geoff asked.

His father rubbed his neck. "Sure'n they wished they did. Point is, they weren't ... they weren't never the same after bein' bit."

A 10-year-old can think of a lot of things when it comes to 'never the 90same.' Geoff had to ask. "Never? What happened ... what happened to 'em?"

"Turned ornery." Valentine looked deep into his son's eyes to ensure that he understood. "Turned plum crazy. Such like to turn the air blue over the littlest thing. Had me a dawg 'fore you was born. Got snakebit oncet. Don't know how he survived, but he did. Weren't never the same"

Many more steps were taken in silence as Geoff waited for Valentine to continue. "Growled at the sun." He mumbled, "Snarled at the moon." He stopped to stamp his foot for emphasis. "I seen him bark his fool head off at a rock in the road oncet – a rock! Weren't no critter, no bug, no bird about. He just set to hatin' that there ... rock."

Abruptly Valentine picked up the pace again. Geoff struggled to keep up.

"'Ventually, he like to bit yore mother. That's when I put him down ... Snakebit!" He made the word a curse.

Back in the present, Geoff mused how the chatter about town didn't seem natural. Wasn't the kind of squirrel chatter that you'd expect raining down from the forest trees but an unnatural, unsettled muttering washing over the community the way a muddy creek overflows its banks.

Some of the talk told and retold the circumstances surrounding the lurid Washington D.C. murder of Philip Barton Key II, son of the famous Francis Scott Key. Word was, the New York Democrat, Daniel Sickles, done it. Shot his wife's lover in broad daylight. Outside the White House? Madness. Yet even that lurid crime had been overshadowed by the conversational infection folks called ... secession.

Geoff heard it everywhere, the market, the general store, the smithy. Seemed even God' was forced to listen to it in church. 'Secesh this – secesh that. 'People gone plum crazy over secession. For and agin, didn't much matter.' Ruminating as he trudged along the trail, Geoffrey Garret set his jaw. 'Ain't right t'be so het up over other folks' business. Valentine wouldn't like it.' Geoff's eyes welled. His mind slipped back down one of those past roads, the one leading to Valentine's dying day. He watched that giant of a man draped across the kitchen table, huge feet spilling over one end, the right one missing two toes. Was akin to a great buck waiting for the butchering. Valentine would've liked that comparison. His mind's eye transformed the scene to the great man lyin' abed, peaceful like. Times were more peaceful then.

But he was a shaver then. Now he was tall and strong, and he carried Valentine's musket. He carried a brace of conies, heading home to dinner, trying to shake away the memory cobwebs. Reverie on the trail is a dangerous thing. Had he not snapped a twig, fate would've claimed him. Geoff froze. Sunning on a flat rock not three feet away, a four-foot coil of timber rattlesnake furiously shook its rattle at him.

Fixing each other with cold unblinking eyes, both dared the other to make a mistake.

Nature paused.

Cawing crows went quiet.

Even the breeze sputtered out.

The serpent's devil-tongue slipped in, slipped out, testing the air. Seeking the aroma of fear.

In that one paralyzed moment Geoff set aside the venom currently washing over his neighbors to deal with the venom before him. "Pizen," he whispered.

Now, Geoff's reaction had little to do with courage. It was second nature. The rattler reared to strike. Geoff let go his dead rabbits. The snake head darted forward. Geoff's long gun crashed down butt first, smashing the snake's head into the dirt in mid-strike. The desperate creature, flailed and thrashed, no longer the threat, now the victim. Geoff pulled a Bowie knife with his right hand and sliced off the critter's dangerous end.

The decapitated serpent bucked a bit then gradually melted back down onto the rock.

Geoff wiped his blade on his britches, inspected it, wiped it again then sheathed it. He squatted down, picked up the severed head and tossed it, just as his father had once done. He imagined Valentine squatting beside him, the same weapon he held, resting across his thighs. He tilted his head toward him and mouthed the word Valentine used to say whenever he had trouble deciphering human nature.

'Snakebit.'

Geoff sighed. "Snakebit." he muttered himself. "This town ... this county, the state, hell, this whole -goddamned- country, it's all been snakebit."

Now a young man of 19, Geoff always had been a serious soul. Older brother, Gabriel, proved more worldly, perhaps a mite cleverer, but he was a dreamer. Gabe left the family to travel West leaving Geoff provider and protector. Granted, he relished the responsibility. Was as it should be. He was bigger, more powerfully, a better wrestler and a far better shot than Gabriel. He smiled. That's why Valentine favored him. Gabe talked crazy, stargazed. fantasized. Geoff picked up the slack. He did what needed to be done. He never shirked. Didn't mean Gabe shouldn't be here. Troubled times required vigilance.

Geoff settled back against a tree. He nudged the limp carcass with the barrel of his musket. 'Shore miss you, Valentine,' he thought. 'Times was

easier with you around. Eventually, he grabbed the snake's tail and slung it over his shoulder, snatched up the conies and his musket, straightened up, and traipsed home to Mother, Sam, Becca, Notnot and Valentine's ghost.