

Song from a Forgotten Hill

by **Glen Cook**

Glen Cook, when he is not affixing the trim to Chevrolet rear windows, writes horrifying fantasy. The economy probably cannot stand another General Motors strike; literature would be improved by it.

This story is a cautionary tale, a view of what can happen here. I hope it is fantasy, but I fear, I fear....

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We were trapped in a world where tomorrow was yesterday. The fire had come three times and gone, and now we were back where our fathers had been a hundred years ago. There were some—"Toms," I've heard them called—who went into slavery as if it were their birthright, but there were also those who fought and died rather than hoe in some redneck's field. Most of those who fought did die. But free.

"Go tell it on the mountain,
Over the hill and everywhere;
Go tell it on the mountain,
To let my people go...."

The fire came the first time when the good soldier-men in Washington and Moscow decided on mutual suicide. The Russians thought of victory in terms of population destruction. They shot at cities. Our people suffered more than Mr. Charley. We lived in the cities that were the targets. But so did the white liberals who were helping bring change.

The fire came a second time when militants burned the remnants of Whitey's cities. Mr. Charley was too busy with his war to be bothered then, but the fire came a third time when he finished and turned his attention inward. There was civil war between whites and blacks. Might may not make right, but it makes victory. White's Mate.

A Fool's Mate. Black loses, and now tomorrow is yesterday.

The war killed most all the good folks. They lived where the bombs fell. The rednecks and the militants seem to be the only survivors. And now the rednecks, who waited so long for their chance, are "puttin' 'em back in their place." There are very few of us out here in the hills. We're hunted, and running, but free.

My son Al came to me this morning, while I was at the spring getting water for breakfast coffee. He asked when we could go home. Said he's getting tired of camping in a smelly cave. He misses Jamey, the son of the white couple who lived next door in St. Louis. At five he's too young to understand a child killed in war. Nor would he understand if I told him Jamey's father was one of the vigilantes who drove us south into these hills. He wouldn't understand, and I'm afraid to try an explanation. Because I don't understand either.

Met a man while I was hunting his morning. Gave me a rabbit he had extra, for which I was thankful. Said his name was Duncan X and he was trying to round up men for a freedom raid into the Bootheel. A lot of our people working down there, he said. Have to free them. I told him I'd like to help, but I have a family. Four kids, the oldest fifteen, and no wife. He looked at me like I was a monster and traitor, then wandered off through the woods, carrying his rifle with the safety off. He was wearing old Army camouflage fatigues. I soon lost sight of him, but I heard him singing for a long time.

"Who's that yonder dressed in black?"

Let my people go,

Must be a hypocrite turning back,

Let my people go...."

What could I do? I hate the way things are as much as he, but there are the children to be cared for. I'm sick of the shooting and burning and dying. We're all Americans. Aren't we? Why do we have to hate so much? We've got a nation to rebuild.

After the wanderer left, I went up to my secret place to pray. It's a lonely, windy place atop a hill burned bald by an old fire. I usually feel close to God there, but not today. Lines from a joke I once heard one white man telling another ran through my mind. A Negro was hanging from a cliff, unable to save himself. He called for God's help and was told to have faith, to let go, and he would be saved. As he fell, a voice from the sky said, "Ah hates Nigras." I can't help thinking, sometimes, that he hates one of the races. He keeps us fighting on and on. Forever, it seems.

The hunters came while the kids and I were eating lunch. The hounds could be heard while they were still far off. I sent the children down the trail we picked when we first came, then took my rifle and went to see what was happening.

I watched from the underbrush as a dozen men with bloodhounds entered the clearing where I had spoken with Duncan X. They were hunting the organizer, but, from the hounds' behavior, they knew there had been two men in that clearing. They were trying to decide which trail to follow. I sighted on the leader's chest and prayed they wouldn't make me shoot. The Lord must have heard that one. They set off along Duncan's trail. I sighed with relief, but felt more guilty than ever. I hoped he could outrun the pack.

I watched the clearing for a long time after they left, afraid some would turn back to the second trail. Their sort didn't appreciate mine running free. In their own way, they were as afraid as I. Who could blame them? When you treat men the way they do, you have to worry about being hit back. Then everyone's afraid, and fear breeds hate. And hate leads to bloodshed.

I waited, and after a while I followed their trail. They were moving southeast, toward the Bootheel. I turned back after being satisfied of our safety. Trotting, I went after the children. They were waiting quietly in the hiding place we had chosen when we first came into these hills. Little Al thought it a marvelous game of hide and seek, but the others, who were old enough to understand what was happening, were frightened.

"Are they gone?" Lois asked, her brown eyes wide with fright. She was the oldest, and could understand something of our situation. She remembered life before the fire came, and knew the hatreds hatched in the incubator of war.

"They're gone," I sighed. "I want you to say a prayer for Duncan tonight, before you go to bed. He's a fool, but he is one of our people. Come on. Let's go have supper." As we were nearing the cave, far away, we heard the pop-pop-pop of rifles. I winced. Lois looked at me accusingly. The shooting was in the south. If it was Duncan and his pursuers, then the man was running a circle. "You kids start supper," I said. "I'm going up the mountain for a while." I looked at Lois. She stared back, still silently accusing. I turned and left. There was no point in explaining. She was a militant in her own fashion, and never understood when I did try. As well talk to a stone.

I went up the bald hill, to the little cross I've put there, and prayed. I wondered if God was listening.

He'd been terribly unresponsive the past few years. A preacher, just before the war broke, told me the millennium was at hand. I was patiently skeptical at the time, but now it looked as if the man was right. The Lord was unlocking the seven seals and I felt I was living on the Plain of Armageddon. For all I tried putting my trust in God, I felt reservations. He was no longer the loving God of the New Testament. He was the fiery deity who wreaked havoc throughout the Old.Sad.

There were shots again as I came down to the cave. Still far away, but now around to the southwest. Lois had heard them too. When I reached our home-in-exile, she silently offered the rifle. I shook my head. She bit her lip viciously and turned away, saying nothing. The silence hurt more than bitter accusation. We were drifting apart,she and I .

We had a good supper. After a stew made of the rabbitDuncan had given me, I opened a can of peaches and gave the kids a treat. It was usually a holiday when we opened canned goods. Little Al wanted to know which one. Before I could reply, Lois said, "It's the day Judas sold a good man for his own peace."

That hurt, but I didn't pick up the argument. Instead, I took out my old notebook and went outside. As the sun set, I wrote down the day's events, just as I had done since we had come to the cave. After a while, Lois came out to apologize. I said I understood, but I didn't, really, no more than she.

I wrote for an hour, until it was almost too dark to see the paper. The kids came and went, to the spring and back, to the wood pile and back, getting ready for bed and the night. I did not really notice them. I was thinking about Lois, about her growing militancy and her words of accusation. I did not want the kids to sink into the same morass of hatred which had already claimed so many. Neither did I want them to think me a "Tom." I did not think myself a "Tom," but Duncan X, and those who believed as he did, said those who went into slavery also denied it. I began to feel a great sadness. Was there no reasonable alternative to hatred and fighting? There was

slavery, of course, but that was not an alternative. It must all be a cosmic jest, or a chess game. Would the Ivory and Ebony play to the last piece? Would God, or the gods, then declare a draw?Sad.

In my preoccupation, I did not see the running man coming up the hill. He was almost on me before I noticed him. A fall of loose rock warned me when he was about twenty feet away. I jumped up and started to go after the rifle. Then I recognized him. Duncan X. Panting, staggering, his clothing torn,blood oozing from a dozen gashes. His pack was gone, and his canteen belt, but he still carried the rifle. I waited till he came close.

"Mon, you gotta hep me," he said. The fear in his voice was the same I had heard before the kids and I left the mess inSt. Louis . "Mon, they gon' kill me!" "What happened?"

"Dogs . . . dogs caught me.Killed 'em, all but one. Mon, they chewed me bad."

"Come inside. We've got a first-aid kit. Lois!" She came out, looked atDuncan 's wounds, and threw her hands to her cheeks.

"Clean up those gashes," I said. "Bandage him if we've got anything."

"Mon, they gon' kill me!" The loud, confident rebel of the morning was gone. He was a hundred and twenty years of scared nigger, running from a lynch mob.When the ropes came out, and the hounds and the guns, he was every black man who had ever run from redneck "justice." He was afraid, and running, probably a dead man, and didn't know why.

"Go ahead. Fix him up," I told Lois. "Heat up some of that stew."

She looked at me strangely, questioningly, making no move. I took the rifle from Duncan's hands, though he tried to stop me. He clung to that weapon like a drowning man to a log. It was the only salvation he knew. It was the only salvation anyone seemed to know these days. Lois watched me take the gun, then took Duncan's hand and led him into the cave. I watched her go, wondering what it was like to be an adult at fifteen.

As the moon came up, I walked back the way Duncan had come. I heard the hound baying, not more than a mile away. Hard. I didn't like things this way, but my decision had been made for me.

I chose my position carefully, behind a large log at the edge of a clearing. They were not long in coming.

The hunters had chosen to leash their remaining hound, keeping him where he could be protected. And there were only nine men. If Duncan had gotten the other three, they wanted him worse than ever. They might not quit till they were all dead, or had their "buck" swinging from a tree. I knew sadness again.

I put the first shot between the hound's eyes. He yelped once, leaping toward the moon. I emptied the clip among running men, but hit no one. They reacted quickly. Rifles and shotguns boomed, peppering the woods around me. I ran, trying to keep low. Without that hound they would have a hard time following.

The shooting stopped a moment later. They realized they were wasting ammunition, trying to murder an empty forest.

I returned to the cave. Lois had fed Duncan, and patched him, and had put him in my bed. He was sleeping, though fitfully, like a man with bad dreams.

"What'd you do?" she asked, at once frightened of and for me.

"Shot their dog. They won't be tracking Duncan or me without him."

"Oh."

"Stoke up the fire a little, will you? I want to do some writing while I'm watching. Then get to bed. It's been a bad day."

"But Duncan . . ."

"I'll look after him. You just go on to bed."

She went. I wrote for a while, then leaned back to think. Eventually, I dozed off. A couple hours must have passed.

I started awake. There were sounds outside the cave. The fire had died to coals. Carefully, I reached for the water pitcher and used it to drown the remains. A figure moved across the cave mouth, outlined by the moonlight. White man! His skin shone in the light. I took the rifle from the table and fell into a prone position. I waited while they talked it over out there. They seemed certain their quarry was inside. I didn't know how they had found the cave—blind luck, probably—but once here, they knew they had their man. I remembered having seen Duncan's fatigue jacket outside, a dead giveaway. I cursed myself for

being fool enough to expect them to stop after losing their hound.

They didn't bother with a warning or to-do about surrender. They came in the cave, trying to sneak up on

Duncan. I started shooting. The .30-.06 roared like a cannon in the confinement of the cave. The muzzle flashes splashed white faces with orange light.

I never was much good at killing, not in Vietnam, not here. They were less than twenty feet away, but I only hit one, in the arm. They got out before I could get

another.

The shooting woke the kids. Lois slipped up beside me where I lay in the cave mouth, asking what had happened.

"Never mind!" I snapped. "You get the kids out the hole in back. Go up to the hiding place. I'll meet you later."

"Aren't you coming?"

"Lois, neither Duncan nor I can get through that passage. It's too tight. Now get."

As if to punctuate my argument, the rednecks opened up. It was like a regular war, like I saw in Vietnam. They were all over the slope. Bullets whined and pinged as they bounced from one cave wall to another. Lois left, dragging the younger kids down the small tunnel which opened on the far side of the hill.

Duncan crawled up beside me. "Right side fo' me," he said. "How many?"

"Eight. Nine if you count the one I wounded. Didn't think they'd find us after I shot their dog." I "Mon, them honkies half dog themselves. One day you

gon' learn."

We shot at muzzle flashes. Funny. Of all the stuff I had in the cave, ammunition was the one thing not in short supply. And me a peaceful man.

"Hey, Duncan," someone downslope shouted, "who's that up there with you?"

"Who's that?" I asked, whispering.

"Jake Kinslow. Him an' me met befo'."

"Hey, Duncan boy," Kinslow shouted, "you better come out before you get your friend in trouble. Whoever you are, mister, this ain't none of your nevermind. We got no argument with you. We just want that rabble-rousing, baby-raping nigger in there with you."

I looked at Duncan. His teeth gleamed as he grinned. "I shacked with his daughter befo' the war. He gon' get even now."

To hide my reaction, I turned and snapped a shot in the direction of Jake's voice. There was a cry. I was surprised.

"Jake, I'm hit!" someone screamed. "God, my leg, my leg!"

Laughing, Duncan reached over and punched my shoulder. "Seven," he said.

"Mister," Jake shouted, "we're gonna hang that nigger. You don't get out, we might hang you too. We got no cause to be after you yet."

Yet. Meaning they were going to be if I didn't get out of their way. But how could I, even if I wanted to? They had put me in a position where I had no choice.

Time passed. We exchanged shots, but the firing dropped off. The moon eventually rose to where it was shining directly into the cave. I glanced at my watch, miraculously still working. Eleven. It had been a long, strange day, and still wasn't over.

A scream downslope drew my attention. I recognized it. Lois!

They dragged her into the moonlight, where I could see her. Jake shouted, "You up there! You see what we've caught hanging around, spying? Know what we're gonna do? Same thing Duncan did to my daughter, unless you come out."

I growled deep in my throat. "Let her go!" I shouted. I rose and started out, but Duncan tripped me and dragged me back.

"We'll let her go when we get Duncan!" Kinslow shouted. "Meanwhile, we're gonna have some fun."

I tried to get a clear shot at the man holding Lois, but he stayed behind her, no matter how much she struggled. Duncan dragged me back again. "They're going to rape her!" I snarled. "Let me go!"

"Mon," he said, grinning wickedly, "they gon' rape her anyway. They's honkies. Gon' kill us an' rape her anyway."

"No!" I suddenly shouted, coming to a sudden decision. He had an expression of surprise on his face when I hit him with the gunbarrel. It faded as he fell. "You!" I shouted down the hill. "Jake! Let the girl go! I'll throw Duncan out to you!"

"No! Don't do it!" Lois screamed. "They'll kill you anyway!"

"Throw him out first!" Kinslow yelled.

"Let her go!"

"Tell you what. We'll bring her up and trade you."

I thought for a moment. "All right. But just one man."

They were quiet for a while. Lois kept screaming for me to stop, till they gagged her, but I couldn't throw my daughter to them to save someone like Duncan. "All right, mister," Jake called, "I'm coming up."

You bring that nigger out. No tricks. Pretty girl gets it if there are."

I saw movement below, near the edge of the trees. Lois, being dragged by a white man. She was kicking and scratching, but he ignored her. They came up the hill. When I judged they were close enough, I lifted Duncan and went out. He was half-conscious, just enough to stand with my help, not enough to understand what was happening.

Jake stopped about five feet away. He held a pistol to the side of Lois' head. He grinned. "Okay, boy. We trade."

"Let her go."

He moved slightly behind my daughter. He grinned again. "Dumb nigger!" he whispered, then dove behind rocks toward which he had been moving.

The rifles barked all around the cave. I felt bullets hit Duncan. One caught me in the thigh, spinning me away, back into the cavern. As I fell, I saw Lois stagger and try for the cave, but Kinslow fired around the rock.

"Only one of you in there now, black boy," he laughed. "And we're gonna get you. Gonna have a real old-fashioned hanging."

I suppose they are. That was twenty minutes ago. I'm writing this by moonlight, as they creep closer. The bullets are coming in a steady rain, ricocheting throughout the cavern. One will get me any minute. The King of Ivory wins another match. Sad.

I forgot. All the good ones were dead. I trusted bad ones. If God is in a better mood later, I guess I'll have all eternity to think about it. Hatred. It's sad.

"Go tell it on the mountain,

Over the hill and everywhere;

Go tell it on the mountain,

To let my people go—"