

Bluebonnet Flowers in the Land of Fire

Frank Stroh

“The country of Tierra del Fuego would prove suitable for cattle breeding, but the only drawback to this plan is that to all appearance it would be necessary to exterminate the Fuegians ...”

He came over with the guns from America. No one asked him why he stayed; after all, that isn't a question that mercenaries like answering. Some speculated it was to find gold, others believed he wasn't allowed back into the U.S. Either way, they were happy he was there. The scars on his face reassured them that he had been in many fights and knows how to survive them, and that he knows how to deal with this unfamiliar land and its unfamiliar inhabitants.

Despite his many travels this was his first time out in the ocean. His eyes stung from the salt water mist as he watched the sea roll over itself creating surf. He bundled his arms under his serape, warming them.

A crew member walked beside him lighting a cigarette. “You must be the Texan. Name's Tom Cooley.”

“Brynce...”

“Is it true what they say about you? That you were fighting off Comanches since you were 12?”

The sound of the wind brought him back to that day in October, when he had been serving under Lieutenant Colonel Buck Barry and they were reassigned from the frontier back into the confederates lines. When they returned, only the remnants of his house lay smoldering his mother and sister lost within them.

The man exhaled his cigarette and for a moment his memory blended with the present until the smell of the sea brought him back. “No.” He said while turning his back to the sea and walking away.

“Well I'll be damned,” Tom said while flicking his cigarette overboard then chasing after Brynce. “You hear about the savages where we're going? A couple a fellars I know were raising sheep down there and they told me that all the indians eat are these small llama things called guanacos and once in a while a whale will get beached and *all* of the tribes will come down and eat the whole things! Can you imagine that; a whole whale! Any ways those guys were worried those llamas were going to keep eating up all the good land, so what they did was poison them to kill them off. But of course the savages didn't know that and ate them and a few of them died too! But the little devils caught on and began hunting their sheep! So what my friends did was when they saw a beached whale they got to it before the tribes knew about it and they filled it with poison and when the bastards finally discovered it and they all began to feast on it—well lets just say it was their last meal, the fools.” He let out a hearty laugh hardly noticing that Brynce was only partially aware of his presence.

Brynce had forgotten that the Captain wanted to talk to him after they set sail and was trying to make up for his lost time while Tom kept barraging his ears with stories of his valor in battle, experiences on the plains, and his grand victories in bed. In fact Tom would have kept following and chatting to him all the way up until he was standing in front of the Captain if Brynce had not slammed the door into his face.

The sound startled the Captain, a slightly larger man with a face that drooped down as if he carried weights inside his cheeks. “Awww, Mr. Kirker, I understand this is your first time out on the sea. Most men get a little green in the face. How are you holding up?”

“Good, Sir, but I do prefer my feet on solid ground,”

“Yes, you being a Texas Ranger—“

“Former Texas Ranger, Sir.”

“Aww, I see. Either way I asked you here to offer you a proposition. The man we are delivering these guns to is Captain Ramon List, an official of Argentina. He is going to further explore Tierra Del Fuego and asked me if I knew any exceptional men that would be interested. Knowing of your previous endeavors under Maximilian, I mentioned your name to him, and if you wish you can meet up with him when we deliver these guns and board his crew.”

“Thank you for the offer sir, but I’ll have to think it over.”

“It pays 6.20 a day...”

“...Well that will certainly have an effect on my thoughts. Thank you sir”

Brynce turned to the door and right when he was about to leave the Captain asked him, “Is it true, what they say about you—about your wife?”

Brynce let his hand fall to his side and turned back towards the Captain. “Please inform Captain List that I’ll be joining his crew. Thank you sir.” He turned back to the door and left into the hall where he was once again pestered by Tom Cooley.

In the following weeks Brynce was tormented by his thoughts. In the clouds he saw the faces of people he had killed and in the wind heard their cries. More than once he thought he saw his wife on the boat holding their baby in her arms.

He kept going over all of his memories to see what he should have done differently, running every scenario out until it would reach its end, then, left unsatisfied, he started again. The shipmates would watch him rocking himself looking out toward the sea, and catch little mumbles escape his lips like “if *only* I didn’t get a shave that day if *only*...” and “Why *why* did she wear *that* dress anyone but *that* one...”. They started a pool for when he would jump overboard, which quickly gathered a large pot.

By the time they arrived in Argentina the crew saw him only as a blabbering old fool in the appearance of a man that was considered a legend and were glad to see him leave. Even Tom Cooley did not say goodbye to him.

The first thing Captain List noticed about Brynce was his smell. Brynce was wearing the very same clothes he came over with, not feeling the need to change them the whole trip. This being the first Texan List had ever met he chose not to mention it thinking it might be the norm and bad etiquette to bring it up.

Only the campfires of Tierra del Fuego brought Brynce back to the present and he realized he was being asked a question.

“I said do you think these rifles could reach the shore where those fires are?”

“Yeah...I guess they could,”

“You hear that men? We finally get to test out these new rifles. Lock and load.”

Five men grinned at each other as they stood up and began cracking open the American made breech-loading rifles like crab legs and loading the fat .45 caliber shells into them, then each shouldering their rifle, aimed it towards the land of fire. Brynce, watching them

but not realizing what was happening, jumped when they opened fire, thinking he was in a battle.

“What’s happening!? What’s going on!?”

“Target practice Mr. Kirker, we got a report saying a few homes were burnt down and cattle killed so we might as well show these savages justice while we’re sailing past them.”

“Homes burnt down you say?” Brynce asked while going over this new information in his head trying to make sense of it.

“Yep.”

More gun shots rang out and whistled toward the beach hitting the rocks. The moon came out from behind a cloud and lit up the night showing the inhabitants of the island and their teepee homes.

“Hand me a gun,” Brynce said. First the crew did not pay any attention when Brynce started shooting but soon a crowd gathered behind him watching this Texan hit every mark he aimed at. He sat there all night shooting up the coast of fire till the sound of his gun was a lullaby to the crew as they laid their heads to rest.

They were on land in the morning walking into a small settlement, tents were strung up looking like miniature Andean mountain ranges and the people stepping out of them seemed like giants in scale. The people who migrated to Tierra del Fuego did so with only hope in their pockets. Every one of them thought they were going to find gold in the rivers and when they didn’t they stopped looking at the island as a beacon of hope. Their last chance thrown into the mud, many of them stayed simply because they couldn’t go anywhere else. They were left on their last vestige of dreams and reminded every day of their failures. Julio Popper was the exception: he came from Romania and was one of the first to find gold, and ever since he had been “protecting” his investment.

Julio Popper came running up to Captain List. “Captain, those bastards killed some of my cattle. I’m going to go with you.”

“Yes, I know, we got the report. Do you know which way they went?”

“North along the coast.”

“All right I’ll send a man to scout ahead first.” He turned his head down the line “Kirker! I want you to scout the area ahead to see where they are, then report back.”

“Understood, sir.”

“If you get into any trouble just fire off a shot.”

The thing Brynce did not understand was the terrain he was dealing with. The trees pointed back towards the town due to growing in the constantly strong winds and the ground grew to a semi-desert the farther he walked along it. He drew closer to one of the campfires he shot at the night before; their teepees were not much different from the Apaches’ except for the difference in material: theirs being made mainly from beach wood. He approached silently with his six shooter drawn and his eyes darting around constantly.

Noises came from the shrubs around the teepee, unknown birds were chirping and Brynce rushed into the dark teepee, his senses taking in everything at once. The girl on the floor wrapped in guanaco skin, the small holes that penetrated it. The sound his boots made when he stepped in the blood the dust his nostrils were inhaling and the look in the eyes of a young boy armed with a bow and arrow.

Brynce saw that look before when he raided an Apache village and saw children being gunned down. He saw that look before when his son was dying of tuberculosis and he saw it in his wife's eyes when he had to tell her she delivered a stillborn. He has seen these eyes too many times in his life; every time he looked into the mirror he has seen these eyes.

His gun fell to the floor and he backed out of the teepee with a stagger. He dropped to the floor looking out toward the coast rocking himself mumbling, "*why* that dress *why* that dress *why*..." His mumbling grew in tempo and continued to crescendo till he was screaming it, "**WHY THAT DRESS WHY THAT DRESS WHY!?**" A gunshot ripped through his chest like a cymbal ending a movement.

He fell onto his back staring at the young boy holding his gun upside down then looked up towards the blue sky. The same color blue his wife wore the first day he met her, out on the open plains picking bluebonnet flowers. He remembers her giving him some for being the first "well groomed Texan she has seen in weeks" and in the sky he can see her dancing.

Captain List and the other 28 men came charging down the field in the direction of the gunshot. Brynce heard them chasing after the young boy and dragging him back to the teepee. He saw the 56 boots make a line and raise their guns then he heard the 28 rifles fire.

A great wind blew through the field, rustling the shrubs and grass, twisting the trees gradually, making them moan, and the landscape whispered into Brynce Kirker's ears, "I am the grass. Let me work." Then all was quiet.