

The novel portrays the struggles of a remote mountain family forced to contend with an uncertain fate as the chaos of the Civil War, once confined to the lowlands, begins to creep like ominous shadows, into the hills of their highlands.


A Way Through the Shadows

By Robert Heffner

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The background of the cover is a photograph of a forest. In the foreground, a dense line of evergreen trees is partially obscured by a thick layer of white mist or fog. Above this line, the forest continues on a hillside, with several individual trees standing out against the mist. In the far distance, a mountain peak is visible, its upper portion also shrouded in mist. The overall atmosphere is quiet and ethereal.

A WAY
THROUGH THE
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ROBERT HEFFNER

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Virgil's Promise

Virgil sat at the edge of his bunk with his chin in his hand, staring into a blank page as if waiting for something to appear in a foggy window. Twice now, he had absently reached out and picked up the quill, only to stare at it for a moment before setting it back down. He knew what it was that he had to say, but he did not know how to begin it. How could he tell it to his wife? How could he explain things to her when he didn't have all the answers himself? And after all of his promises to the contrary, how was he going to assure her now? What were the right terms to use when you were breaking your word?

It was not going to be easy. But somehow he had to find a way to tell her that he wasn't coming home. Not just now anyway. Not when she was expecting him. He knew that it would make her heartsick, but there was little he could say to soften the blow. He couldn't even speculate on when he might be released. A few more months... a year? It didn't appear likely that it would be any time soon. Not with the way things were going. The only thing certain was that it was not what he had promised, not what he had been telling her ever since the day that he'd left.

That day, that assurance ... seemed all so distant now. Yet it had only been last fall. Just a matter of months. But it felt much longer than that, as if the earth in its orbit had somehow slowed down. Back then he'd thought he'd had all the answers. He'd told her that there was nothing to fret over. Told her that the months would fly by before she knew it. And when she begged him, clutching his arm with tears

welling in her eyes, he had answered her pleas with dry reason. It was his duty, he'd told her. A matter of honor. Besides, he'd argued, winter was the best time for him to be gone, what with so much less to do around the farm. And just imagine all the things that they could afford with the pay he'd bring back. But for all his coaxing she just shook her head, sobbing that she didn't care about any of that. Even then, when it was obvious that all his persuasions had failed, he had only taken her into his arms to hold her and tell her that he had to go, and that everything would be alright.

Now, as he sat alone in a musty canvas tent, all those reasons he had once seen so clearly seemed as blank as the sheet that he held in his hand. He'd been gullible, caught up in the emotion of it all. And he'd be wrong in all of his expectations. Promises he had accepted had not been kept. Things he'd been told turned out to be not quite so. And no one had tried to sugar-coat it when they had brought him this latest news. The sergeant had just walked up to him one morning and said, "You can't leave." When he asked why not, the sergeant, who was already walking away, just grunted and chuckled as if it were some sort of private joke.

So he'd gone to the captain to clear things up, and he was told that Richmond had passed something called a Conscription Act. He figured at first that it was just a way to fill the ranks with new men, that it should have no bearing on volunteers who had already served their time. He soon learned, however, that this was just another naive notion. President Davis, the captain had informed him, was calling on all men ages eighteen to thirty-five, whether they were already in the army or not, to rise to the aid of the

Confederacy. Nobody was getting any discharges and nobody was exempt.

It didn't take long though, to see that that wasn't quite true either. It turned out that some exemptions were allowed. Land owners who had twenty slaves or more did not have to enlist. People with "important jobs" did not have to serve. And if a man had enough money he could just sit back and pay someone else to be his "substitute."

As more and more details of the act became clear, the men had started to grumble. "Rich man's war, poor man's fight," they began to complain. It wasn't what they'd been sold. And as the war dragged on, most of them came to realize that there were a lot of things that weren't quite what they had been led to believe. The stirring speeches and lively songs had made no mention of lousy rations, mindless drills, or shoddy equipment. No one had told them that their "military encampment" would turn out to be little more than a sodden slough, a place that was nobody's home and showed it.

They had all laughed when the first few boys started getting the flux. Pointing and nudging one another, they had joked about "the quick step." But that didn't last for long. Eventually, as the affliction spread and more men fell ill, the latrines overflowed. Murky puddles, like sores upon the ground, began to spread, oozing their nauseous vapors. Even those not yet sick were brought low by the odor alone, and as the atmosphere about them became heavy and sour, so did their spirits. This taint however, as bad as it was, was not all that hung in the air to dampen moral. There'd been rumors as well. Things that had been overheard. Discouraging reports of distant battles and stories that did

little to lift their chins. It was said that the Confederates had suffered heavy losses at Shiloh and that recently the Union had taken New Orleans. There was talk too that Stuart and Lee had been disappointed with some of the other generals. And if the leaders were beginning to squabble, what did that say about their confidence?

Despite the deteriorating conditions though, Virgil had done his best to keep his own head up. Counting on the limits of his term, for some time now he had been marking the days, trusting that each passing one was bringing him closer, lifting him out of this valley and up into the mountains, back to the hills where he belonged and away from these lowlands where nothing felt right.

In his haste to leave he had truly believed that his term would pass quickly, but reflecting on it now, he felt himself a fool. Back then he had never stopped to consider how the war might change things. How it would distort the field that stretched out before him. But now, as he sat conflicted over a blank sheet of paper, he felt as if even time itself had been altered. As if it had somehow taken on weight. And he was slowly beginning to recognize what his mother had tried to tell him but hadn't been able to put into words. Things that he, locked in his own certainty, had been unable or unwilling to hear. She had been trying to make him understand that there were deeper allegiances than loyalty to a cause and he could see now that she'd been right. It was not that he had lost his sense of honor or belief in what a man should do for others, but he realized now that loyalty was something that should be reserved for people, not for lofty ideas that seemed to hold promise from a distance and then changed their shape in the hands of men. He had kept his word

though, even when the army had not turned out to be what he had expected. He had volunteered his service and that's what he had given them, doing all that they had asked and more.

Now, having made it to the end of his term and having endured a duty which had proven to be neither glorious nor chivalrous, they were telling him that the day he'd foreseen had never strictly been defined. Things had changed, they said, and no one was sure what might come next. That's just the way it was. Well maybe there wasn't much that he could do about the army's broken promises, but there were promises of his own that he had made, promises to his wife and family, and though he did not know at the moment exactly how he would make it happen, he knew for a certainty that he intended to keep them.

Looking up from the unwritten letter, he listened to the shouts growing louder in the yard outside. A group of enlisted men were gambling and he recognized some of the voices: Peterson, Findley, Morris. They were letting off steam, venting their frustrations out upon each other. He could hear Morris's reedy voice rising above the others, calling attention to himself and making what sounded like a complaint. That was no surprise. It seemed like the man was always carping, never shy in airing his opinions. Recently he'd been saying that he was fed up. He claimed he was just waiting on the pay that was owed him and that once he got it he would quit, and that nobody, by God, better try and stop him.

Virgil hadn't said anything to Morris about his grumbling, but he believed the man would be wiser to keep

such notions under his hat. There'd been stories of deserters being shot. Just this week, in their own camp, two men had been brought back tied across the rump of a mule like a couple of sacks of grain. Virgil hadn't known either of them very well. They were just two tobacco farmers who had been in for less than a month when they decided that they'd had enough of it. But they'd been easily caught, and when they arrived back in camp Sergeant Coyle had declared that it was time for a "little lesson." He strode right up to the mule and roughly jerked them both to the ground. Then, standing over them with his shoulders thrown back and his hands on his hips, he glared down at them as if they had somehow personally insulted him. And when he drew his revolver, it appeared as if he was planning to execute them both right there, point blank. But firing a shot up into the air, he bellowed out that he wanted everyone to assemble and for someone to stand "them sons o' bitches" up against a tree. Some of the men had objected, said it wasn't right. Someone said Coyle ought to wait for Captain Graham to get back from town to see what he said. But Coyle just smirked. Said that wouldn't be necessary. Then he made a show of checking that his gun was loaded. The deserters, still tied but standing now with their backs against a large oak, waited mutely, visibly shaken. It seemed as if the smaller of the two was working up the nerve to say something, but all that he managed was a trembling of the lip. Then, without another word, Coyle turned and cracked both their skulls with the butt of his gun, watching with a sneer as they slumped to the ground. He hadn't killed them, but by the look on his face you couldn't swear that he hadn't tried.

It disgusted Virgil that the Sergeant had seemed to take pleasure in the incident. The man had just stood there leering as the two were being dragged to the stockade, their eyes glassed over and their jaws gone slack.

Closing his lids, Virgil pushed the image away. What he wanted to see now, in his mind's eye, was Jenny. If he could just let everything go quiet, just slow this stream of jumbled thoughts, then maybe a reflection of her would float to the surface... her smile, her eyes, the fall of her hair.

He had never imagined that he would ever have to strain for that reflection, or that his memories of her could somehow become fogged. He hadn't been back home since he'd left last fall, but it had only been two months since he'd seen her. She'd gotten word to him that the family was coming to town for supplies in the spring and that they would be staying overnight at cousin Hattie's place. She hadn't told Alma and he hadn't asked his captain, but they had both snuck off to meet briefly in town, to hold each other in the dark and assure themselves that their wait would soon end. Now that moment seemed lost, as if he had only dreamed it.

And if a matter of months had blurred the edges, what could a year do? How long could a man stay away from home and still hope to rekindle what he'd left behind?

One way or another, he decided, he would have to find a way to get home. He wondered if Captain Graham might not grant him a furlough. Graham was tough, but he wasn't a snake like Coyle. It would not be unreasonable to allow a man to see his family before he was sent off to who knows where, especially if he had served his time and had been a good soldier. And no one had any complaints about Virgil's

performance. He'd kept quiet, done his duties, and had drawn little attention. So it might be possible, he speculated, if he went about it the right way.

As he pondered over his options, aimlessly thumbing the edge of his letter, he glanced back down and found the sheet still blank. He knew he could not leave it that way. He would have to tell her something. So for the third time he picked up his quill, dipped it into the ink, and finally began.

Dear Jenny,

In all my waking moments, since last we parted that night in the spring, you have been in my thoughts and in my heart. I have missed you more than I can put down in words. I pray that you, Ma, and Luke all keep safe and sound and I trust that the farm fares well in my absence. I know that you have long yearned for that absence to end Jenny, and that you have been counting the days until we are together again. Knowing your heart, I have stopped and started several times as I try to pen this letter. Much as I hate to scratch these lines though, there is news that I must now tell you. I hope that you will forgive me, dear wife, when I say that our reunion must wait a while longer. The government in Richmond has passed some kind of new draft act. I do not know all the details of this order, but for right now no soldiers are being released, even us volunteers who

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have served our time. Some say this may only be temperary. In the meantime, I have not lost all faith and am trusting that my steadfast service and an appeal to fairness will persuade the captain to at least grant me a furlough. Do not be dispirited, Jenny. I know that I have made you many promises, but I ask you again to trust that I will do all in my power to make our separation as short as possible and will let you know when I learn anything further. Keep me in your thoughts, as I keep you in mine.

Your loving husband,
Virgil

Strangers From the Lowlands

They rode west in a single file, hugging a shallow creek through the valley and winding their way up into the foothills. The camp and the town were behind them now, faded from view, and as the group pushed steadily on, moving ever deeper into the wilderness, the boundaries and barriers of civilization were fast forgotten.

Out in front, riding a big bay, was the self-appointed leader of the gang, J. W. Teague. It was unknown, among those who rode behind him, what either of these initials might stand for, but they were disinclined to ask. The remote, predatory glint in the man's pale grey eyes discouraged any familiarity, and the habit of wearing his hat pulled low cast his face in perpetual shadow, veiling unpredictable moods.

Next in line, riding a few paces back and studying the ground, came Louis Moon. Thick and balding, with close-set eyes and high cheekbones, it was said that he carried some Cherokee in his blood, though he himself neither confirmed nor denied it. Known as an excellent tracker, he had gained a reputation for capturing fugitive slaves before the war. Moving methodically from side to side as he rode along, he seldom spoke, and whenever he did he reserved his remarks for Teague, limiting his observations to the details of the trail.

Third in the file and riding a small mare came Bill Stubbs. Narrow shouldered and fidgety, he was constantly peering furtively about and brushing back strands of loose stringy hair from his eyes. Bobbing his head from side to

side, he scanned for imagined danger, keeping one eye on the woods and the other on Teague. He'd introduced himself as William, but everyone just called him Stubbs.

Behind Stubbs rode Barnaby Sanders. Oldest of the group, he was ruddy skinned and fleshy, with a face like a pie and a band of loose fat rolling out over his belt. He liked his food and he liked his whiskey, and the less he had to work to get them, so much the better, which was at least half the reason he had brought along his seventeen year old nephew, Randall.

Scrawny and sad of eye, the boy rode last, uncertain of his position. He had only a vague notion about what his uncle expected of him or how he was supposed act around the others, so he kept himself to the rear. Wearing a patched, borrowed coat that was two sizes too large, with the sleeves rolled twice and his hat pushed back, he bore the look of a scarecrow.

From the moment that they had first set out Teague had led the party directly west, moving steadily into the mountains, and they had been riding for roughly three hours when they came to a fork. Back in the camp, Captain Graham had only been able to give Teague a loose description of where he thought Morris might live, and none of the enlisted soldiers either could or would offer up anything more specific than "somewheres up beyond Little Rock Creek." Now, with the trail dividing, he would have to make a decision. To the left, it would take them somewhat south through a pass around the mountain. To the right, the path rose more steeply in a series of switchbacks toward higher elevations.

Teague paused, scanning the ground as he let his horse drink from the stream. After a moment, he turned and looked back at Moon.

“You see anything?”

Moon had been studying the ground too, but had found no clues and indicated as much with a shake of his head.

“I don’t know,” he mused, “he could’a gone either way. Depends on how scared or smart he was.”

“Meaning?” Teague prodded.

Moon stared down the left fork.

“Well, if he were gonna rabbit all the way to the border, he’d of gone this way. Or, if he were looking to hook up with a band of outliers, he would’ve likely taken this way too.”

Then, craning his neck and looking up to the right, he continued.

“But if he just wanted to git home...” he broke off, letting the point speak for itself.

Teague spat and studied the switchbacks for a moment.

“We’ll go up,” he decided. “If he has gone running, he could turn off anywhere. Be easier to find his home. And even if he ain’t there, they might know something.”

Stubbs brushed his hair back and sat up straighter in his saddle.

“You want me to go scout the pass trail a ways, Teague?”

Teague reined his horse out of the stream and headed for the upper trail, briefly staring at Stubbs as he passed.

“Did I say that?” he said, not really asking.

Stubbs mumbled “no” and looked away.

Falling in behind Teague, the posse spurred their mounts up the trail, weaving slowly back and forth through the pines

toward higher ground and the light of an afternoon sun. They had been climbing for a little over an hour when they broke through the trees onto a narrow plateau. Here Teague held his hand up, stopping the bay at the edge of the meadow. Easing back to remain sheltered among the trees, he motioned for the others to stay quiet while he surveyed the setting. At the far end of the field sat a little farm. He counted a barn, a few out buildings, and a small house. Smoke was rising from the chimney, but there was no discernible sound or movement in the surrounding grounds or clearing beyond. Twisting slightly back in his saddle, he spoke low to the others.

“Have your weapons ready but don’t pull them out. Right now all we want is information.”

Nudging the bay, he lead them out of the trees and into the meadow, approaching the house and holding his horse at a slow walk, as if they were neighbors just stopping by to say hello. Stubbs, Moon and Sanders rode a few paces behind, their guns at the ready but left holstered as Teague had ordered. Their eyes swept the field, the barn, and all along the tree line. Teague kept his focus on the house.

When they rode into the yard, the front door of the house swung open and a middle-aged man stepped out onto the porch, rifle in hand. Teague sensed the others stiffen behind him but held himself relaxed, noticing that the gun was not cocked and the barrel was pointed away. Leaning forward in his saddle, he pushed his hat back a bit so that the man could see his face.

“Afternoon,” he smiled.

“Afternoon,” the man answered, glancing briefly at the men on their mounts.

Teague read the question in the man's eyes.

"We're out of Morganton. Army's sent us up into these parts tracking deserters."

The farmer looked them over.

"You don't look much like Army," he noted.

Teague held his poise, smiling thinly.

"No, we're home guard. Army couldn't spare anyone just now so they asked us."

The man nodded, seeming to accept the explanation.

"We're looking for a man named Morris," Teague continued. "You know of anyone by that name?"

The man stroked his chin and looked off toward the south.

"I ain't for sure," he paused, "but I believe they's some Morris people a couple valleys to the south."

Teague waited, watching the man's eyes. He appeared to be growing somewhat anxious and it was unclear whether he might be lying or just uncomfortable with the presence of armed men in his yard.

"How far might that be?" Teague asked.

"Well, like I said, I ain't for sure about the place, but you might make it by dark if you pushed," he suggested.

There was a stirring in the house and the man turned to close the door just as a young girl, twelve, maybe thirteen years old, stepped out.

"Mama wants to know if these men are hungry, Daddy."

The farmer put a hand up as if to erase the thought.

"These men are on Army business Ellie. They can't afford to waste any time."

Teague knew that the man was talking to him as much as he was to his daughter and that most likely the reason he

didn't want them around was out of instinct to protect his family. But there could be other reasons.

"Oh, we're not in all that much of a hurry," he said comfortably. "And a home cooked meal is never a waste of time to men living on jerky."

The man turned from his daughter and looked back at Teague, sensing that he was trapped. If he pushed for them to leave it might look suspicious. Right now these men were after someone else and he didn't want to do anything to change that or to possibly make himself a target. His best hope, he realized, would be to keep them at a safe distance until they left of their own accord.

"Well they's some hay in the barn your horses are welcome to and you can rest them there. My wife's been feeling poorly of late or I'd invite you inside, but the barn is nice and cool and I can bring you all out some vittles as soon as they're ready."

Teague nodded his approval. He knew from the surprised look on the girl's face that the man was probably lying about his wife, but the kid had shown sense enough not to say anything. He also saw the way Stubbs was eyeballing the girl and knew that the farmer saw it too.

"We appreciate it," he drawled, reining his horse around.

Inside the barn, the men fed their horses before sitting down in a loose circle to wait for some direction from Teague. The mention of a hot meal had been enticing, but they hadn't been expecting this stop, and as they leaned back against the stalls, anticipating his briefing, they were puzzled to see him untie his bedroll and spread it out over a

patch of hay. Turning back, he noted the confusion in their eyes.

“Our farmer friend don’t know it yet,” he said slyly, “but we’re bedding down right here for the night.”

“Still a few hours of daylight left,” Moon observed.

“You see them clouds in the west?” Teague asked.

Moon nodded and waited.

“So would you rather stretch out on the ground in the rain tonight?”

Moon shrugged and let it go. He had the hunt in his blood and was keen to close in on the chase. But seeing that Teague was set, he knew better than to cross him. He would just have to wait. Removing his hat, he rose up, went over to his horse, and began to untie his own bedroll.

When the farmer walked into the barn with their food, he had come alone, awkwardly loaded down with a basket in one arm and a collection of plates and forks in the other. The Sanders boy jumped up to help. Stubbs leaned sideways a little to see if the girl might be following.

As Randall took the plates and began passing them out, the farmer scanned his property and saw the bedrolls. He kept his mouth shut, but Teague caught the objection in the man's eyes.

“We took your advice that it would be a push to make it there by dark,” Teague spoke up. “And with the storm coming, well...” he let the farmer figure the rest.

The man blinked and looked back out the door at the late afternoon sky. Rain maybe, but most likely no storm. And it certainly hadn’t been his advice that they stop. But there

seemed no way out of it now. At least they were out here, away from the house.

“We’ll be gone before first light,” Teague added.

The farmer turned back.

“All right,” he conceded. “You can just leave them plates and forks in the basket. Set it on that barrel over there and I’ll collect it in the morning.”

Teague thanked the man and then watched him as he walked back to the house, closing his door without looking back. Behind him the men had already begun dividing up the meal.

In the dim, gray hour before dawn, Teague rose and began poking the men. Outside, the air was cool and damp and the trees dripped with last night’s rain. There had been no storm, but the drizzle had been steady and puddles dotted the yard.

Inside the house, the farmer watched from behind a barred door, rifle in hand. He was relieved when he saw the barn door swing open and Teague emerge already mounted. The others followed soon after. Last out was the boy, pulling his horse behind him. After closing the barn door, he swung up into his saddle, looked briefly in the direction of the house, and then nudged his horse, trotting off to catch the others.

They rode through the morning, gaining little elevation and angling generally south in the direction that the farmer had indicated. Scarves of fog drifted up from the lower valleys and sifted through the trees, shrouding the horsemen in a soft gray mist. Moving steadily but in no particular

hurry, Teague never pushed his mount beyond a walk, as if whatever waited beyond the veil was well within his power to control.

By noon the sun's light had moved down from the ridges and the last remnants of fog were soon burned away. Rounding the far side of a hill they'd traversed, the men rode out upon a narrow bluff overlooking a clearing. There, tucked into the side of a neighboring hill, sat a small log cabin. Teague signaled for the men to stop. Reaching back into his saddle bag, he retrieved a brass spyglass and studied the layout below.

"See anything?" Moon asked.

"No," Teague answered, "but somebody lives there."

Moon looked down. There was no smoke in the chimney.

"How you know?"

Teague put the glass away.

"There's an old hound sleeping on the porch."

Cutting a path through the pines, the men zig-zagged down the slope and into the clearing. The hound sat up and began to bay. Keeping his eye on the door, Teague spoke to the men who had fanned out around him.

"Just sit back and keep quiet," he advised.

After a moment, the cabin door creaked open just far enough for a weathered old man to stick his head out. Gray maned and gaunt of face, he peered back at them, tilting his head like a wary rooster.

"Kin I hep ya?" he croaked.

"I believe you can," Teague answered.

The old man stepped out onto the porch.

"How's that?" he asked.

Teague pushed his hat back. “We’re trying to locate a Dave Morris.”

The old man eyed the group.

“What do you want with him?”

Moon mumbled something under his breath and drew a sharp, cold glance from Teague. The old man saw the exchange and shuffled back a step closer to his door. Teague could see that he had become suspicious now but doubted that he had understood Moon’s grumbling.

“He’s on a mission for the Army, but the situation’s changed and we need to get new orders to him,” Teague lied.

The old man listened but was watching Moon.

“Well I don’t know of any Morris people,” he said, feeling for the door.

Teague drew a long breath and let it out slowly. The easy way was out now. He looked levelly into the old man’s eyes.

“I believe you do,” he said.

The old man’s brows bent and his neck grew red.

“How’s that?” he stammered.

“You heard me,” Teague answered, his voice flat.

The dog, sensing the tension, began to growl.

“You all best git on out of here now,” the old man warned.

Teague leaned forward in his saddle and spat on the ground. Then, in one smooth motion, he straightened back up, pulled his revolver, and shot the hound through the chest.

The old man froze as he watched his dog kick once and then collapse. When he looked back at Teague, he saw that the gun was now pointed at him. His lip began to quiver and the anger drained from his face. Teague stayed locked on the old man’s eyes, watching the fear well up.

“That shake your memory up any?” he asked.

The old man cleared his throat, his eyes on the gun.

“I don’t get around much no more,” he began in a thin voice.

Teague raised the barrel.

“But they used to be some Morrises a few miles or so west of here,” he added quickly.

Teague waited a moment to be sure that the man was through. Then, angling his weapon a bit to the right, he fired a bullet into the post near the old man’s head.

“Appreciate your help,” he smiled, reining the bay around.

Signaling for the others to fall in behind, he crossed the yard for the trees, leaving the old man standing there holding his ears.

Moving on more westerly now, they once again assumed a single file with Sanders and his nephew at the rear. When the boy figured that Teague was far enough ahead out of ear shot, he leaned forward and whispered to his uncle.

“What did he shoot the dog for?”

Sanders looked back at the boy but only shook his head and held his silence, leaving the youth to sort it out on his own.

Once they were back up the slope and crossing level ground, Teague spurred the bay and increased the pace, though with no apparent sense of urgency. He figured they were close. The old man had flinched when he’d heard the deserter’s name. He might have been lying about the distance, but the farm couldn’t be too far off. And though no

one, neither at the camp nor anywhere since, had offered much account of the location, Graham had at least given him a fairly detailed description of the man's appearance, including the fact that he rode a horse with four white socks. If he was in the area, they would get him.

They had traveled for a mile, maybe a mile and a half, when Teague spotted the light of another clearing through the trees ahead. Holding a hand up to silence the others, he slowed the bay and checked his gun. As they drew within a hundred feet of the wood's edge, the farm came into view, and he motioned for the men to halt. Sitting quietly in his saddle he waited and watched, scanning the grounds for any movement.

They didn't have to wait long before the door of the house opened and a man fitting Morris's general description stepped out. Walking briskly, he headed for the barn. The men stirred but Teague signaled patience. After a few minutes, the door to the house opened again and a woman came out carrying a satchel. She hurried to the barn and slipped inside. As Teague remained patient, the men watched him and waited, hushing their horses when they nickered. After a few more minutes the barn door swung open and the man walked out leading a mare with four white socks. Morris.

The woman followed him out and waited as he tied down the satchel she had given him. He was packed for travel. Moon eased up alongside of Teague.

"He's fixing to leave."

Teague nodded. "Yeah, he just don't realize yet that his destination's changed."

Drawing his gun, he motioned for the others to follow as he reined the bay out into the clearing and headed for the barn at a controlled trot.

They were nearly halfway across the field when Morris looked up from his wife's embrace and saw them. Pushing the woman back toward the barn, he pulled the rifle from his saddle and turned to follow her in. But Teague had spurred his mount, rapidly closing the distance, and as he bore down on the man he quickly fired a stray shot. Morris wheeled back around then, aiming to return fire, so Teague shot again, this time hitting his mark. Morris went down, hit in the leg just above the knee.

Teague figured that was the end of it and reined the bay to a stop, preparing to dismount as he kept his eye on the man. But Morris, rising up on one elbow, grabbed the rifle and turned on him. Already out of his stirrup, Teague whirled and fired first. Morris collapsed to the ground with a hole in his neck.

Moon, Stubbs and Sanders, who had all held back at the edge of the yard, moved cautiously in now on their horses, drawing a loose circle around Morris. Teague stood directly over the man, watching his eyes flutter. It seemed for a moment, as Morris slowly opened his mouth, that he wanted to say something, but then he just fell back and died.

Teague looked to the barn and then pointed to Moon and Stubbs.

“Find the woman - make sure she don't have a weapon.”

Then he motioned to Sanders and the boy, who was still staring blankly down at the body.

“You two come with me and check the house.”

Teague stepped cautiously onto the porch, looking left and right, then once more back out into the yard before peering through the open front door and stepping in. The house was quiet. Inside, it was cool and dim, a fire still burning in the stove. Teague motioned for Sanders to check the bedroom. The nephew, still in shock, sat down at the table and waited, looking away and avoiding Teague's eyes. After a moment his uncle came back out.

“There ain’t no one in there,” Sanders reported.

Teague looked up from a chest he had found.

“Anything worth taking?”

Sanders shook his head. “Just some blankets and some clothes.”

Teague stuffed some bills and a watch into his pockets.

“Take anything that might be useful,” he ordered, still rummaging through the box.

Sanders shrugged but went back. After a few minutes he returned with an overcoat, two shirts and a wool blanket. Teague was leafing through some papers he had found and the boy was still sitting motionless, staring down into his hands. When they heard the screams, they all turned and looked out the door toward the barn.

“Guess they found her,” Teague observed.

Sanders cocked an ear, listening closely to interpret the nature of the struggle.

“Believe I’d like some of that too,” he said, stepping to the door.

“Secure the man's horse first,” Teague ordered.

The boy glanced to Teague with an unspoken question as his uncle hurried out and crossed the yard. Teague just smiled and returned to his rifling through the chest.

When Teague and the Sanders boy came back out of the house, the other three were all standing over Morris's body. Moon looked up as Teague approached.

"What do we do with him?"

Teague studied the corpse.

"Leave him."

"What about a bounty?" Moon wondered.

"They won't give nothing for him now," Teague said.

Moon seemed disappointed.

"But how we gonna prove - "

Teague cut him off. "We got the horse."

Mounting up, he nodded toward the barn.

"The woman?"

Moon grinned. "She's out cold."

The boy looked to the barn, wondering if something ought to be done, but the others were already turned.

"Let's ride," Teague ordered.

Leaving the ants to their battle, Luke cut laterally across the final hill, working his way down to the branch and heading for the clearing. He hoped that Mrs. Morris might have a meal cooked. The bread that he'd brought was long gone and the hike had made him hungry again.

As he crossed through the long cornfield and looked ahead, it seemed like there was something laying in the yard near the barn, and he thought at first that it might be an animal. He continued on, wading through the stalks, until he came to the edge of the yard where he stopped abruptly.

"Mr. Morris?" he called out uncertainly.

"Mr. Morris - are you all right?"

Cautiously he stepped closer.

Then he saw the bloody leg and the hole in the neck and he knew that the man was dead. He looked up, scanning the yard and the woods beyond. Everything else appeared to be normal. Except that the door to the house had been left wide open. He listened. Some hens were muttering in the coop. A breeze stirred the pines. Then he heard something like a whimper coming from the barn.

Crossing over to the door, he looked inside, waiting for his eyes to adjust. The sound seemed to be coming from one of the stalls. Warily, he moved closer and peered around the edge. There, sobbing in a pile of straw, her dress torn down from the neck, sat Mrs. Morris with her face in her hands.

“Mrs. Morris?”

Startled, the woman shrieked, crossing her arms above her head as if to ward him off.

“Mrs. Morris ...?” he repeated.

Through raised arms she stared back at him, and he saw the bruises on her cheeks and the bits of straw in her disheveled hair. Then her face changed and she dropped her defense.

“What happened?” Luke asked.

She looked away.

“They done me,” she whispered.

Luke stood awkwardly staring back at her as the realization of what she meant became clear. Suddenly she looked past him to the barn door, her eyes wide with alarm.

“The crows,” she pleaded, “don’t let the crows get to him!”

Luke glanced back in the direction she had pointed.

“Take him inside the house,” she pleaded.

He spread his hands as if to assure her.

“It’s all right Mrs. Morris. I’ll take care of it.”

Outside, he searched the skies but could see no circling birds. He looked down at the body. The eyes were still open and he did not really want to touch the man. Heading for the house, he went inside and found a thin cotton blanket that Sanders had ignored. Taking it with him, he went back out to the body and spread the sheet beside it. Then, rolling the corpse into the middle, he wrapped it up and dragged it back to the house.

He looked into the back room and wondered if he should try to arrange Mr. Morris on his bed. But somehow that didn’t seem right. She would have to sleep there herself and she would not want to touch him. It wouldn’t do to just leave the corpse lying there on the floor either though, so in the end he decided to prop it up on a chair in the corner of the room, out of direct sight and hidden in the sheet.

Getting it up off the floor, however, was not an easy job and he struggled awkwardly to get it into position. The weight was bulky, seeming to resist his every effort, and the head, although covered, rolled loosely with every tug, as if it were turning to look in his direction. Finally though, he managed make it stay in place. Then, satisfied with the temporary arrangement, he closed the door and headed back out to the barn.

As he rounded the last stall and looked inside, he was surprised to find it empty.

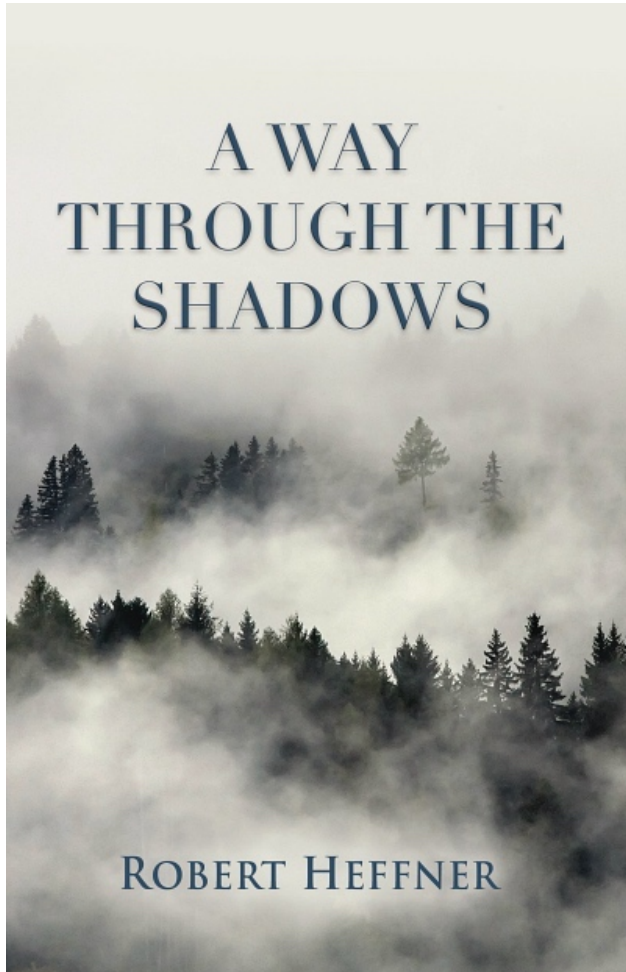
“Mrs. Morris?” he called.

The barn was silent except for a soft, rhythmic creaking, as if someone were rocking in a chair. Then he looked up,

and as he did so, he stumbled back into the side of the stall. High above him, stretched on a rope from the loft, hung Mrs. Morris, staring out lifelessly and slightly swaying.

About The Author

Robert Heffner is an author, artist, and poet living in Saint Augustine, Florida. He was born 1947 in Cincinnati, Ohio. In 1969 he graduated with a degree in English and Journalism from Miami University, Oxford Ohio. Teaching literature for most of his adult life, he retired in 2009 and now focuses on his writing and art work.



The novel portrays the struggles of a remote mountain family forced to contend with an uncertain fate as the chaos of the Civil War, once confined to the lowlands, begins to creep like ominous shadows, into the hills of their highlands.

A Way Through the Shadows

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