Requiem for Old Blue
Charles McInnis

Sally Weldon, a middle-aged widow, stood on the back porch of the frame house located in Tatumville, just off the eastern shore of Mobile Bay. She peered across the field into the woods, squinting to see the dark figures that watched the bay through the morning mist. The birds stopped singing after the men came to the thicket, and the old gray mule in the field brayed. The yard dogs that had protected Sally and her sister-in-law, Molly, had either died or wandered off to fend for themselves, and now it was just the old mule, named Blue, who warned them when strangers came.

A shot startled Sally after she saw a puff of smoke rise from under a tree in a cluster of shrubs. A young Confederate with a tired, expressionless face stood beneath the pine holding a rifle. He and Sally, separated by the field, watched the old mule die.

“Oh, Lord. They’ve killed Blue! Why?” she wondered, covering her face with trembling hands.

The soldiers, horses and mule-drawn wagons scurried away on the dirt road that ran parallel to the shoreline, and Sally hurried to the room at the front of the house. Molly lay in her sick-bed and looked through the window at the Union ships moving north through the thin fog.
“Those Rebs shot Blue dead,” Sally wailed.

“Sorry, Sally. That mule was spying for the Yankees, and spies are shot,” Molly answered.

“How can you say that, Molly? Blue protected us, and he brought me down here from Winston County after Jake died.”

“That mule did nothing but eat grass and bray when the Rebs were around. You and Jake named him Blue, the Union color. He was a Yankee sympathizer and a spy.”

“You’re loony, Molly. Blue didn’t know North, South, blue, gray, and certainly not Union or Confederate.”

A pistol shot sounded from down by the bay. Three Union sailors stood on the pier by a launch; a young officer signaled for someone from the house to come down to the bay.

“Damn Yankees! Go down there, Sally. They won’t shoot a sympathizer,” Molly croaked. “I’m afraid this flu’s gonna kill me.”

After pulling a shawl over her shoulders, a teary-eyed Sally went to meet the sailors.

“Morning, Madame. I’m Captain William Bradford. You own this property?”

“No sir. I’m Sally Weldon. It belongs to my sister-in-law, Molly Stapleton. We’re war widows. She lost her husband at Vicksburg fighting for the South, and I lost mine at Shiloh fighting
with General Grant.”

“Sorry ‘bout that. War’ll soon be over. We’ll all be the better for it.”

“Hope so. Was it Blue that brought you here?”

“Blue?”

“My old mule that the Confederates shot, did he warn you ‘bout them? Molly said he was a Union spy.”

“No, Mrs. Weldon. Can’t talk about spies. I’m here to order you to evacuate.”

“Evacuate?”

“Gonna to be some fighting. You’ll need to clear out of that house.”

“But my sister-in-law’s abed in that room,” Sally said pointing to Molly’s bedroom. ”She can’t leave. It would kill her for sure.”

“My men will move her to the south side of the house. I’ll see that nothing is fired in that direction.”

“Lord, we’ll be right in the middle of the war, but I don’t know what else we can do.”

The ragged Confederates returned the next morning at sunrise and began firing shells from a field artillery piece. Sally watched them from the back porch, cringing each time a projectile
whistled overhead.

Through the front window, Molly observed a small, Union gunboat retaliate with cannon fire. Sally winced when a projectile exploded in the garden, creating a large crater and damaging the fence of the turkey pen. Escaping turkeys scooted from the endangered coops.

A loud thud coming from the front of the house brought a scream from Molly.

“Those Yankee sailors hit my house! Come put this fire out, Sally!”

A round lay smoking on the floor near the fireplace, and a three-inch gap showed low in the wall facing the bay. Sally rushed to the kitchen, returning with a bucket of water. She doused the spent round, making it steam. The barrages stopped.

The following morning Sally and Molly awoke to men’s voices outside. Molly, her fever broken, followed Sally to the back porch where they saw a Confederate soldier and a Union soldier chasing turkeys, attempting to herd them back into the pen. A Yankee and a Rebel, dug to enlarge the crater made by the Union projectile, and a young gray mule branded with “CSA” grazed nearby.

“Morning, ladies. War’s over! We learned late yesterday
that Lee surrendered to Grant days ago,” the Captain said.

“Thank the Lord,” Sally gasped.

“Yankees won? I’ll be damned!” growled Molly.

The soldiers and sailors pushed the remains of Blue into the grave, covering him with a Union Army blanket before shoveling the dirt over his body. After a Confederate corporal played “Taps”, the troops walked to the turkey pen and took up their arms, stood in a row, and pointed their rifles into the sky.

“Ready! Fire!” shouted the officer.

Six shots cut into the air.

“Told you that mule was a spy,” Molly whispered to Sally.

“Maybe,” Sally replied, holding her hand over her heart.

“But the Rebels saluted Blue too.”

“Turncoats!” Molly retorted.

Captain Bradford handed Sally the bridle taken from the dead mule.

“This is for that hole we put in the front of your house,” he told them, showing them a brass plate. “I’ll have my men put it in place. Sorry about your house.”

“It’s all right, sir. I know you Yankees can’t shoot worth a damn,” Molly replied.
At sunup the next morning, the young mule, named “Blue and Gray” after considerable discussion and a compromise, grazed contentedly in the pasture behind Molly’s house. Old Blue slept peacefully in his fresh grave, honored for his sacrifice. At the front of the house, covering the three-inch hole was a shiny brass plate which read:

For All of Your Sacrifices, We Salute You

Rear Admiral David G. Farragut, U. S. Navy

Admiral James Buchanan, C. S. Navy