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Hell on Wheels: Season Five Episode Eight – I am Thor Gundersen (Review)

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Anyone who has watched “Hell on Wheels” since its first season will know of the odd “hate/hate” relationship between the Swede, aka Thor Gundersen, and Cullen Bohannon. In this season five opener, the two have their final confrontation and it ends with the Swede dangling at the end of a rope after proclaiming his name and that he is from Norway.

As in all their interactions, this first episode of the last half of the show's final season, titled "Two Soldiers," is one long battle of wills as Cullen struggles to get the man to Camp Douglas.

The episode starts with the thing that shaped the Swede. In his younger days Thor was a man who plays the harmonica, made jokes and was popular with his fellow soldiers. A surprise attack from a Confederate patrol lands Gundersen in a prisoner of war camp where the cruelty of his jailers warps and twists him.

After his best friend tries to eat Thor's arm, the Swede kills the man by drowning him in mud. Shakily repeating "I am your friend" Gundersen murders the desperately hungry man.

As the title of the episode indicates, the main action is between the two former soldiers. One "Yankee" and one Rebel. Cullen Bohannon (Anson Mount) fought for the South and the Swede (Christopher Heyerdahl) fought for the North and this may explain all the antagonism that Gundersen felt toward his frequent adversary in the series.

This final conflict between Cullen and the Swede is, in a word, epic. Grand on a scale that dwarfs other shows on television. Gundersen trying to murder Naomi and her family (Nearly succeeding.) and Bohannon arriving in the nick of time to keep the mother and baby from being slaughtered by the madman was a great start.

The battle at the creek (or river) where a wounded Cullen almost drowns the Swede was very nearly the ultimate in irony. Surprisingly, Bohannon decides not to kill his adversary but wants him to hang. After Naomi temporarily stitches the leg wound, she tells Bohannon that it will not hold and it does not.

Later Cullen attempts to cauterize the wound with gunpowder, while the Swede works to escape.

The two men finally reach Camp Douglas, after Cullen fires shots to get the soldier's attention, and they are brought in. Bohannon's leg is treated by Jeff Fahey, who plays the camp doctor, and the Swede put in a cell.

The animosity between the two men prevails throughout their journey and seemingly ends when they arrive at the camp. At one point, before they arrive, a snake threatens the Swede and Cullen kills the creature. As the snake dies, it writhes and Bohannon speaks of this being a sign that the soul is departing.

When the Swede is hung, the old fashioned way; no neck snap here, he writhes much longer than the snake. Before the act of hanging, the man is asked if he has any last words. "I am Thor Gundersen from Norway," he says, looking at the small crowd and Cullen.

Gundersen's death, complete with the Swede's body releasing its fluids at the point of death is a grim reminder that when one dies there is no dignity. Urine drips from Thor's shoes and onto the wooden platform. Cullen, looks away in Gundersen's final moments.

This episode has been called a character study of both men and that is pretty accurate. Gundersen getting more desperate as they get closer to the Army camp and Bohannon whimpering and crying out in agony while trying to maintain the strength required to go on.

These two men have always been polar opposites. The Swede sneaking his way around the powerful, trying to get power of his own all the while praying to his God and feeling justified with any action he deemed necessary to reach his goals. Bohannon open and following a strict code, one that changed as the season's progressed.

At the start it was all about revenge, later Cullen turns his back on this motivator and attempts to move on.

"Two Soldiers" was a fascinating character study of these men who were often in conflict. Ultimately though, we feel as Cullen does when the light finally leaves Thor Gundersen's eyes. A little sad and a little ashamed. Regardless of the apparent evil of the man our learning of his beginnings makes him more human and more tragic.

A splendid start to the second half of season five, this will be a hard act to follow. "Hell on Wheels" airs Saturdays on AMC. Tune in and see what happens to Cullen next.