

PROLOGUE

To: Historical Archives of South Carolina,
Charleston, South Carolina.
From: John Pendleton

More years than I care to count have gone by since we answered the call to fight the Northern invaders. Most of the skirmishes, battles, days and nights of marching barefoot along muddy or dusty roads and suffering from fevers and dysentery have faded into the recesses of my memory. However, one day remains as if it had only been yesterday—the afternoon of the third day of July in 18 and 63 near Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

Silence hovered over the killing field as our tattered gray ranks stepped in measured cadence toward the Yankee's line along Cemetery Ridge. The heat and a pall of impending death oppressed us on that horrible day. The sun was obscured by a veil of acrid smoke belching from cannons and dust rising from thousands of our ill-shod feet. "I reckon this is it," you said as we marched behind frayed battle flags.

All semblance of order dissolved before I could answer. Cannon shot and canister, ripping through flesh and bones, hissed like geysers of steam in the midst of our long gray line. Each exploding fireball slashed vacancies where sweating men had been only seconds before. Every sweep of these sickles of death gleaned untold numbers of our young men grown old by war into eternity.

We lunged onward, blinded by smoke, dust, and fear, into a holocaust of Miniéballs screaming from enemy rifles. Men groaned and crumpled all around us.

Time disintegrated into a void for you and me as a shell exploded overhead. Cascading tongues of fire sprayed our company with searing shards of shrapnel. The violent concussion rendered me senseless, unaware of anything.

Then pain, ascending from my mangled right leg, wrenched me from a dark abyss of nothingness. Each jolt of the litter sent new waves of agony that lodged in my gut until the sickness, bitter and sour, spewed between my clenched teeth. "Set 'im down till he's done pukin'," one of the bearers said.

“Can’t wait,” another said, “Doc’s ready t’cut off that leg.”

I continued to wretch until someone shoved a gauze mask reeking with chloroform over my mouth and nose. The pungent, sweet vapors slithered into my lungs, severed the cords of nausea, and swept away the pain. Like a velvet blanket, sleep wrapped itself around me and deafened my ears to the surgeon’s saw cutting through bone.

I felt no pain, but visions of days gone by haunted me like ghosts from the past. Once again, I experienced surviving brittle cold, searing heat, an empty belly, and marching barefoot into battles across North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. I saw my father trying to comfort my mother. In his hand was a letter informing him that my older brother, Andrew, was missing after the loss of his ship, the C.S.S. Sea Bird, in Albemarle Sound. I experienced anew the regret I felt the morning I left home, my mother being certain I would never return. I met you, Hank Johnson, in Charleston the day we both volunteered. Even though we fought side by side for two years, your features were murky as a photograph faded by time. I kept stepping closer, trying to see more clearly, but your appearance dissolved like fog on a summer morning.

The voice of a young woman awakened me. “Are you feeling better?” she said, setting a wicker basket filled with cotton lint and rolls of muslin dressings on the table.

I blinked sleep from my eyes, trying to clear my mind. “Yes, ma’am—better.”

“That’s good, it’s time to change your dressings.”

“Dressin’s?”

“Yes—your leg.”

I lifted the sheet. “My leg? Oh.”

“I’m so sorry,” she said, looking away.

I gazed beyond her at the row of injured men lying on canvas cots. Some of them were moaning and thrashing about while others lay quietly with faces blanched from bleeding wounds. “What is this place?”

“It’s the old dorm,” she said, pulled the sheet aside, and began to remove blood-soaked bandages from the stump that once was my right leg. “I’ll try not to hurt you.”

I stared at my bandaged thigh, determined to keep my composure. Anger flushed my face and clenched my fists. I was alive but wished I wasn't. "What's the old dorm?" I asked, not really caring.

Without looking up from her task, she continued to cut through bandages that were stiff and brittle from congealed blood. "It's a residence for our students here at Pennsylvania College."

My mood turned sullen as she changed the dressing. My thoughts returned to the killing ground where I was maimed. I had no idea what had happened to you or our charge against the Yankee horde. You were probably dead, torn apart by canister or exploding shells fired at point-blank range. You might be wounded and here in this same hospital, or maybe had been carried back to our line on Seminary Ridge. You possibly had completed the charge, helped overwhelm the Yankee line, and sent them scurrying back to Washington City. I pondered these possibilities only to realize that our charge had probably fallen short. "Are all these men, Yanks?" I asked, gesturing toward the long row of cots.

"Yes—they are."

"Any of my people here?"

"No, you are the only one."

She completed her task, placed all of the bloody dressings in a sack and picked up the basket of cotton lint and muslin. She smiled and placed her hand on my shoulder. For the first time, I became aware of the young woman who was attending my needs. She could have been no older than me, which was nineteen years. Long, golden ringlets falling loosely across her shoulders framed her features. Kindness reflected from her eyes that were bluer than South Carolina's bonny blue flag. Her gentle fingers squeezed my shoulder as she asked whether I needed anything before she left. I was taken aback a bit by her pleasantness. After all, I, a rifleman in General Lee's army, intended to wreak much destruction upon her people. Maybe she didn't understand why we were intent upon our pillaging foray. Was she aware of the Yankee's atrocities that were being committed daily in the South? Did she know that our army was marching barefoot or on footwear held

together by twine, thong, or wire? We heard that her town had a shoe factory—that is why we came. We needed shoes, even Yankee shoes.

“I need just a shoe—a left one,” I said, pointing at my callused left foot.

At first, she seemed surprised at my request, but a quick pat on my shoulder told me that she understood. “Of course, what size do you wear?”

“Whatever I can squeeze my foot into—a nine or ten works best.”

A wounded man lying on a cot across the room spoke up. “You can have my left shoe—won’t be needin’ it no more.”

I rose up on my elbows to look at the fellow. He was propped up on a pillow. His hair was disheveled, red as Georgia clay, and a multitude of brown freckles covered his face. He threw back the sheet and pointed at a short stump, the only remaining remnant of his left leg and thigh. “You Rebs blowed mine clean off.”

I thanked him for the offer, but knew his shoe was long gone. It probably wound up in a discard bin, thrown there by a litter bearer or surgical assistant.

As my pretty attendant walked away, seeming to be intent upon the needs of her next patient, I realized that I had failed to get her name. I called after her, “I’m John Pendleton—what’s your name?”

“Penelope Gresham—I’ll be back tomorrow, John Pendleton.” Then she smiled. “With a nine or ten shoe.”

The next day, as promised, she returned carrying a size nine shoe with plenty of wear left in it. It became not only sturdy footwear but also would gain a new friend for me, the redheaded Yankee whose leg had been blown away by my people. He asked to examine the shoe to determine whether it might be the one he had promised. Of course, it wasn’t. He tossed it back to me. “No—that’s not mine, John. I’d inked my name, Timothy O’Brien, on the underside of the tongue.”

He seemed disappointed, but chuckled when I said, “I’d give you my right shoe, Timothy, if I had one, but I haven’t had shoes for over a week. Mine became more twine, thong and wire until there wasn’t any leather that could be mended.”

“It’s Tim—only me mother calls me Timothy.”

His response caused me to pause, to remember the time you and I boarded the train in Charleston. I introduced myself after noticing Henry Johnson stenciled on your haversack. “Only my mother calls me Henry,” you said, “just call me Hank.”

Some day, within the providence of the Almighty, I pray to grip your callused hand and say, “Hank! It’s good to see you again.” But, in case that isn’t to be, I am compelled to set down my own recounting the best I can of my life after Gettysburg. Maybe, the time will come when you will have the opportunity to read it for yourself. But if that never can happen, I pray you rest in peace.

My recovery was enhanced by the care I received from Penelope over the ensuing weeks. Each day her gentle hands and effervescent smile brought healing to my wounded body and soul. Our relationship grew until I realized life spent apart from her was unthinkable. I prayed daily for God to allow us to continue to be together, but doubted it could come about. Would our love survive the terrible war that was engulfing our lives? Only God held the answer.

John Pendleton

Hank Johnson’s brother-in-arms