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*A YOUNG DOCTOR EXPERIENCES THE HORRORS
OF THE CIVIL WAR WITH THE EMERGENCE OF MODERN
WARFARE AND THE ENTRY OF MODERN MEDICINE*

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Journey Through Hell Almost to Heaven
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INTRODUCTION

According to recent reports of nations' educational systems, the United States ranks only eighteenth in the world. That's not surprising, considering that nearly one-fourth of high school graduates in our country are capable of reading only at a fifth-grade level, and that their performance in science and mathematics ranks somewhere below that of at least fifteen other nations. Although many young people can recite verbatim the words of popular songs and rap, the majority are often unfamiliar with history. Unless corrected, those deficiencies in our educational system could have disastrous effects on the future performance of our nation in an increasingly competitive and dangerous world.

Why is knowledge of history important? Since at least the mid-1500s, scholars have recognized the truth of the proverb: "History repeats itself." If people are not aware of the events of the past, if they continue to succumb to human frailties of bigotry, greed, self-interest, desire for power, and if they lack knowledge of past mistakes, then they are destined to repeat them. The aftermath of the Civil War provides us with an example of this.

Beginning with South Carolina in 1861, eleven southern states seceded from the Union and started a war with the North, primarily to preserve the evil institution of slavery. Some revisionist historians have claimed that "states' rights" was the main reason, but the following historical facts disprove this:

1. The Confederate Constitution protected slavery. Confederate Vice President Stephens and other Southern politicians referred to slavery as "the cornerstone of the Confederacy."
2. When South Carolina seceded from the Union in 1860, it declared that the "immediate cause" was the Northern States

failing to return fugitive slaves, and northern abolitionists who incited slaves to rebel.

3. The Georgia Secession Convention of 1861 declared that a separation from the North was the only thing that could prevent abolition of slavery.
4. During the War, the Confederate troops massacred surrendering black Union troops, General Lee shipped to the South free blacks his army captured in northern Virginia and Maryland, and the Confederacy treated captured blacks as ‘escaped chattel’.
5. At time of secession, the only mention of ‘states’ rights’ was made by the North, which declared that the Southern states “had no right to secede.”

Although less than one-fourth of the white residents of the Confederate states owned slaves, the vast majority of Rebel foot soldiers, who did most of the fighting and dying, were poor whites, who never owned slaves. The wealthy class made up most of the officers. Yet they convinced the poor whites that it was their patriotic duty to fight the North to preserve slavery.

After the War, some Southern historians began referring to the Confederacy as the great “Lost Cause”; revisionist historians referred to it as a war for ‘independence’, extolling the virtues, deeds and character of many Reb generals and the South’s troops in victorious battles. What they failed to emphasize was the enormous cost the South paid for starting that War: the devastation of many of its cities, towns, and villages; the death or permanent disability of hundreds of thousands of young men; the destruction of its agriculture, especially ‘King Cotton’; the impoverishment of its people. The square-shaped battle flag of General Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia, with its blue cross containing thirteen white stars, all on a background of red, became known as the Confederate Flag. Over the next hundred and fifty years, that flag was revered by hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan and white supremacists. Beginning in the mid-1950s, the Civil Rights movement advanced and the Supreme Court ordered desegregation of schools, which the South did its best to avoid. The majority of southerners, who had, from an early age, been taught to hate blacks and/or that they were an inferior race, vigorously—and often violently—opposed integration and equal rights. It was not coincidence that a number of Southern states adopted the Confederate flag as part of their state flag, or raised Lee’s battle flag in a

prominent location in their state capitols. Blacks and liberal whites unsuccessfully objected to this government display of a symbol of the era of slavery. It was not until July, 2015, after the brutal murder of nine black churchgoers by a bigoted young white man, that the governor of South Carolina signed a bill passed by its legislature ordering the removal of Lee's flag from the capitol grounds. Other Southern states followed suit.

In this novel, I have attempted to show the true cost of the Civil War to both sides, especially the South. Instead of simply praising the accomplishments of Confederate General Lee, I have depicted him 'with warts and all', relating his costly errors and callously ordering thousands of troops on a suicidal mission. I have not spared some Union Generals from similar criticism.

I have also attempted to show that the War changed medical science and treatment from a prewar condition that had changed little in many hundreds of years, to the first steps forward into modern medicine, with a recognition of the importance of sanitary conditions, the use of anesthetics during surgery, and the keeping of detailed medical records. This is revealed as the reader follows the life and deeds of a fictional character, a young medical student who joins the Union Army and experiences the horrors and successes of the War as a surgeon in the Medical Corps.

And now, on with the story.

CHAPTER 1:

THE APPROACHING CONFEDERATE DEFEAT BRINGS HOPE FOR FREEDOM TO THE PRISONERS

Henry Freeman walked outside his tent early in the morning of March 30, 1865. He stretched his arms towards the sky as the brilliant golden sun seemed to rise above the pine forests on the east side of Andersonville Prison. As he breathed in the morning air, he thought:

“What a beautiful morning if it were not for the stench of decaying dead bodies in the shallow trenches outside the stockade, and the putrid odor arising from the maggot and other vermin-infested waste covering so much of the ground in the stockade.”

He noticed the prison commandant, Capt. Heinrich Wirz, approaching him. Stroking his thick black beard and moustache with his left hand [his right hand and arm were virtually useless as a result of a wound sustained in battle], Wirz said:

“Henry, you should have much less workload today, since we completed the transfer of more than 25,000 of our prisoners to prison camps far south of here several months ago. We no longer have several hundred dying daily and thousands in need of medical treatment. We finally have almost enough food to give each prisoner one meal per day.

“You call that swill of mashed corn cobs with small pieces of fermented bacon, food? After you rebels lost the City of Atlanta, which General Sherman burned to the ground, and his troops marched about 150 miles to the sea, capturing Savannah two days before Christmas, you should have realized the war was lost, and let the prisoners go free.”

“That’s easy for you to say. But I am, for better or worse, a Captain in the Confederate Army. It was risky enough when I failed to obey the order of General Winder, my superior, to construct earthwork defenses around the stockade. When General Sherman captured Atlanta a

few days later, we began transferring most of the prisoners to a new camp farther southeast, so the additional fortifications became unnecessary. But to set the prisoners free—that would have been treason. I would have been promptly court-martialed and executed.”

“So, Captain, to save your own skin you continued to hold the remaining prisoners in deplorable conditions, where many of them were certain to die of starvation and disease”.

Wirz’s face turned a bright red as he angrily faced Henry Freeman. “Be careful what you say, you fuckin’ ingrate. Instead of treating you like all the other prisoners, I gave you a tent with a wood floor and a straw mattress to sleep on; gave you the same food as the guards; and privileges like being able to roam free outside the stockade.”

“Yeh—but not out of the goodness of your heart. I had to agree to work long hours every day, providing medical treatment—including surgery, if necessary—not only to prisoners, but to the Confederate guards and officers. My only pay was the slightly better treatment I received from you, you son of a bitch.”

“Henry, you don’t seem to understand. You were a prisoner of war, and I had a duty as a Confederate officer. I appreciate what you did. Do you recall when, several months after the fall of Atlanta the Governor of Georgia ordered the Georgia Militia to leave the Confederate Army and return home to help pick the crops so that the people of this state and the army could be provided with food? That’s when I realized that the war was lost, and shortly after that I offered to parole you so that you might return to your home in the North. Why did you refuse my offer of freedom?”

“I could not leave the poor wretches who had fought so bravely for the Union, to die without any medical aid in your stinkin’ prison.”

Wirz put his hand on Henry’s shoulder and faced him with what appeared to be an admiring glance. “You are a better man than I, Henry. I’m not sure that I would have made the same choice had I been in your shoes. Well, I guess we’ve spent enough time chatting. We both have work to do.” The Captain turned and walked towards his office, and Henry walked to the prisoners’ hospital—a large tent—to see what medical services awaited him for the day.

As he walked from one patient to the next, he had to brush off the sand fleas that kept jumping onto his shoes from the sand and dirt floor, which was infested with fleas, ants, roaches and other vermin. Except for bedpans, sanitary facilities were almost non-existent. The only

anesthetics were a gallon of chloroform, a half-gallon of alcohol, and a dozen pints of bourbon, stored in a wooden cabinet at one end of the tent. Although there was a stream with fresh water outside the prison, when Henry made his rounds of the POWs incarcerated inside the prison walls, the only source of water was a creek polluted by human waste that flowed through the middle of the stockade, which water Henry boiled for several minutes before using it for the patients. He supplemented this with rainwater collected in several open barrels during the frequent rainy days. It was no surprise that, during the 14 months the prison camp was in operation, nearly one-third of the 45,000 Union soldiers imprisoned there died of starvation, disease, and wounds sustained in battle.

As he made his rounds to the sick and wounded prisoners, he tried to encourage each with a ray of hope, saying:

“It looks like you’ll be free in a little while. Most of the Rebs in Georgia have been defeated, their army crushed. And word has it that Lee’s army in Virginia is nearly surrounded by General Grant and his troops. We expect the war will be over any day now.”

What Henry didn’t say was that he was afraid most of the POWs, including the sick and wounded in the makeshift hospital, wouldn’t survive more than a few weeks longer.

Late that night, after completing his work for the day, he retired to his tent. As he lay on his mattress, he thought of his parents, his childhood, his wife, and how he came to be at the Hell-hole called Andersonville.