

Glory for the Brave

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Published in the United States

A Pearl Editions, LLC Production

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ISBN 978-1-7325578-1-9

1.—Nineteenth Century—Fiction. 2. Social Reformers—United States—Fiction.

DEDICATION

To women who overcame discrimination and risked their lives to
serve as Civil War nurses.

*There is glory for the brave
Who lead, and nobly save* Herman Melville

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Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Joan M. Woods, Archive Assistant at the Handley Regional Library, Winchester, Virginia, for locating original materials and providing diary pages, dated 1862, from the Harriet Hollingsworth Griffith Collection. Ms. Wood's suggestion that I read *The Civil War Journal of Mary Greenhow Lee* by Eloise C. Strader also provided excellent background information. I am also indebted to docents at Belle Grove Plantation, Cedar Creek, the Museum of the Shenandoah Valley, Stonewall Jackson Headquarters Museum, and Old Courthouse Museum, who all gave generously of their time when sharing their expertise.

I also wish to thank Rosanna Klepper, author and editor, who helped polish the manuscript and gave invaluable advice.

1 Petticoat Medicine

The bottle of laudanum on the dressing table was supposed to be a cure-all. Mixing it with cinnamon and honey counteracted the bitter taste. Too much shortened her breath and increased the weight of sadness. Without it, however, her thoughts raced, and feelings whirled. The pastor of her church tried to offer condolences, but the words faded the moment he finished. Charlotte pulled out the cork. The view from her bedroom window confirmed she had no reason to venture out and every reason to withdraw. Ice crystals formed on the windowpanes overnight and now, mid-morning, freezing drizzle made walking treacherous. People scurried along, battered by a growing storm.

All except a paper boy on the corner, screaming to make himself heard. “Criminal neglect of the wounded! Get your paper here!”

The few people on the street rushed toward their destinations without stopping. The boy had no winter coat to shield him from the weather, just a tattered jacket that stopped at his waist, too small for his growing frame, too lightweight to keep him warm.

Charlotte slipped down the stairs and wrapped up in a cape.

“Casualties much larger than first reported!” The boy stomped his feet to keep them warm.

“I’ll take a paper.” Charlotte handed him a dollar.

“Lady, it’s three cents. You got no coins?”

“Keep it,” she said, “and go down the block to warm up in church.”

He didn't need to be told twice. The boy stowed the remaining newspapers under his arm and headed for St. John's.

Charlotte stoked the fire in the hearth and skimmed the columns until she found the war news.

Large numbers of the wounded arrive in Illinois every day from Fort Donelson and are distributed to various points. The whole number that reached Mound City up to last night was about four hundred and sixty. The entire loss of life is much larger than was at first supposed, being, as near as can be ascertained, not less than four hundred and fifteen. The wounded will reach a figure not greatly different from eight hundred. This is a costly sacrifice upon the altar of our country, but it will do more than any which has yet been offered toward putting to flight the devils of treason and rebellion.

Our men by superior gallantry and discipline, and inspired by patriotism, were able to overcome all the odds of position and knowledge of the ground possessed by the enemy. Yesterday a transport ship arrived here from Fort Donelson. On board were many wounded men in a most shocking condition. The boat was ordered to Cincinnati, but for some reason came by way of Cairo. There was no surgeon aboard and an insufficient number of nurses. None of the wounds had been dressed in three days; all the men were weak, filthy, and suffering beyond description. When the boat reached Mound City, two men had died, and a third was in a condition that would have resulted in death in a very short time had not some benevolent gentlemen, who had gone aboard, furnished assistance.

These facts are shocking and call for the severest reprehension upon the heads of those who have allowed such things to occur. It is bad enough to be treated like a dog while a private soldier is in good

health; it is much worse to have that treatment continued when one is wounded and helpless. Yesterday Surgeon WHITE, formerly of the First Iowa, and now acting as volunteer surgeon, went on board the "Hazel Dell" to afford some assistance to the wounded. He found a man whose arm had lately been amputated, and which needed dressing, but no bandages could be found. A search of the boat raked up nothing large enough to bind up the leg of a wren. The matter was given up in despair when feminine ingenuity came to the aid of the poor soldier. An elderly, benevolent-looking lady emerged from a stateroom with her ample form reduced, bearing in her hand a petticoat, which she presented to the Doctor. In a few minutes the opportune gift was torn into long bandages and twined about the limbs of wounded Nationals. The lady's name, bless her patriotic soul, is Mrs. LYDIA HOLMES, of Golconda, Illinois. It would be doing her, the public, and posterity injustice, not to mention her name in connection with her offering.

The paper in Charlotte's hand was dated March 1, but the battle had occurred February 2 and 3, 1862. She shuddered at the neglect of wounded men for any length of time. A month was inhuman.

Charlotte knew about Cairo from Dickens' novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Dickens depicted Cairo as a forlorn place at the junction of two rivers on ground flat, low, and marshy, a breeding-place of fever and ague. Where were Mound City and Golconda, Illinois? Certainly not far away. Charlotte's late husband had a map of the United States, but she doubted it showed details of southern Illinois. The location was less important than the people caught up in events. By giving up her petticoat, Mrs. Holmes aided a suffering soldier. The very least he deserved was a bandage. Was Mrs. Holmes a widow? The reporter described her as elderly. And benevolent. He left out all other details about the lady. Was she like others who found themselves in the theater of war? Did she just show up without status or authority? Understandable that a lady could not stand by and see boys suffer.

The casualties at Fort Donelson shocked the nation. Its capture was a major victory for General Grant and a catastrophe for the South. Controlling the fort gave the Union a way to advance along the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers. Grant received a promotion for his victories. Still, the number of casualties staggered imagination. More than 2,000 Union soldiers had been killed or wounded, and over 1,400 Confederates stricken. Was Mrs. Holmes among those who mourned? Death was all around. Cholera, typhoid, and a host of other diseases routinely robbed families of young and old alike. Frequency made grief into a constant companion, not lessening but deepening its impact.

Charlotte scanned the rest of the newspaper but could not focus. The warmth of the fire felt reassuring in sharp contrast to battlefield losses. She pushed the paper aside and thought about what needed to be done for neglected soldiers.