DARKENING OF THE LIGHT

by

Robert Hays

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“Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak
Whispers the o’er-fraught heart and bids it break.”

—William Shakespeare

To my grandson, Alex Hays

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ONE

THE HURT WAS deeper than he'd ever felt before, an anguish that flooded his body and spirit and left him with little hope of ever again seeing a brighter day. He wanted to run, to take himself far away from this evil place and try to erase it from his conscious memory. He had known his share of pain, and while he made no claim to facing his world with courage he had done so with determination. He had demanded of himself that he always try to do his best and be willing to carry the fight to his last breath. No more. There was nothing left that mattered.

It had been a little more than a year since the captain brought Jeter to Washington. The inherent excitement of the capital might help him find a path to healing, the captain said. And although neither of them carried great expectations, after the trauma of seeing war up close in the Battle of Paducah, he hoped desperately the captain was right.

Jeter's brush with the actual fighting had been brief. Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest's attack on Paducah had come as a surprise and the enemy controlled the city for a time. The small Union force, including the captain's Illinois infantry company, engaged them sporadically before retreating to safety in Fort Anderson on the city's west side and calling in fire from Union gunboats on the Ohio River. Both sides suffered heavy casualties and Jeter was splattered with blood when a Rebel marksman's shot to the head killed one of the captain's squad leaders. Jeter was not injured, but the shock of being witness to what happened to the man beside him caused a near total collapse of mind and spirit. Nothing in life had prepared him for this.

Forrest soon pulled his troops out and headed back toward Tennessee, but not until they had stolen all the Union forces' supplies and horses and mules they could get their hands on. These included the captain's horse, Queenie, and Jeter's spirited colt, which he hadn't named yet but already had become strongly attached to.

Not long after the battle, the captain received a personal message from General Ulysses S. Grant, who had recently been in Washington and conferred with President Lincoln. The captain had served under Grant in his Cairo command, of course, and apparently his name came up in the general's talks with the president. Mr. Lincoln had asked that the captain be sent to Washington to be part of his personal staff of military advisors.

The captain's enthusiastic reception of his new assignment was enhanced by General Grant's generous personal endorsement. He admired Grant tremendously and had told Jeter the Cairo commander was destined for a much higher post.

"You are a good man, Captain," General Grant told him. "You will serve the president well. Go with my best wishes, and Godspeed."

Jeter had been excited, too. He pictured the nation's capital as an exciting place, home to important people—those who set the path of the country. In his bitter torment now, he found it hard to believe he had been happy in this place. But he had. The captain's influence had paved the way, no doubt, but almost from the beginning he had found new purpose here. Before him lay the gateway to a road different from any he had walked before. He had embraced this new direction with all his being and soon slipped into a virtually carefree existence, eagerly looking forward to each new sunrise and almost giddy with anticipation. Good things lay ahead—today, tomorrow, next week, or right now, as soon as he got to the stables. He would work with good people.

Among them was Jefferson Mackey, one of the stable hands who had been here when the stables burned shortly before the captain was summoned to Washington. Jefferson told him how President Lincoln had to be forcibly restrained from entering the burning building in a fruitless attempt to save the horses and other animals inside. He said the whole Lincoln family was terribly saddened by the loss, and the president no longer had a horse of his own in Washington but still talked frequently about Old Bob, the horse he had left in Springfield.

It had been clear to Jeter early on that he was not particularly needed in his job at the stables; there was plenty of help there before he came. He asked the captain about this, and the captain said the position was Mr. Lincoln's idea. His normal activities as the captain's orderly would have been out of place at best and maybe impossible in the White House.

Jefferson had picked up on this, too. He said the captain must be very important to the president. It was well known that Mrs. Lincoln was a tyrant when it came to added spending on staff or other things that drew on her household budget.

Jeter had seen Mr. Lincoln on horseback only a couple of times. Since his own horse had been lost in the fire, the president rode an Army horse the soldiers called "Old Abe." They pretended this was out of respect for Old Bob, but Jefferson believed it actually was in fun because the horse was somewhat long-legged and gangly, much like their commander in chief. No one disparaged the president's riding skills, though. He was known to be an excellent horseman who had been in the saddle countless hours over many miles of Illinois prairie as a circuit-riding lawyer.

Probably because there was no other great need, Jeter had been given principal responsibility for the care of Tad Lincoln's pony, Jack. He had come to love this gentle animal, which would be waiting and would know him when he arrived. Tad didn't ride often, but on occasion his father brought him to the stables and personally hoisted him into the saddle.

"That Tad's a rounder," Jefferson told him. "I think he names everything 'Jack' for some reason. He even had a turkey he called that."

"Are you serious? He had a pet turkey?"

"Naw, not a real pet. He saved it from the oven last year, after the president proclaimed a National Day of Thanksgiving and somebody brought it to the White House for the Lincolns' dinner. Tad begged his daddy not to let it get its head chopped off and Mr. Lincoln was such a softie he gave in."

Jeter expressed surprise at how much Jefferson knew about the Lincoln family.

"Well, see, I used to take care of the ponies before the stable fire," Jefferson explained. "Willie used to ride every day. Sometimes Tad rode Willie's pony and sometimes Mr. Lincoln came along to watch them ride."

"Willie?"

"You don't know about Willie? He was Tad's older brother who died a couple of years ago. Everybody said Mr. Lincoln just about didn't recover from his loss."

Every morning, on his way to the stables, Jeter would hope this might be a day the president would come. He would have Tad's pony ready, meticulously groomed, exercised, and fed on a careful schedule. Jack would make him proud.

On those occasions when the president did come, the narrow alley behind the stables was flooded with people. He was accompanied by an entourage of serious men bent on helping their commander manage all those things he had to look after. And a small but swelling crowd of

onlookers came, hoping merely to be caught up in the excitement of being near the nation's leader. Even without his imposing physical stature, Mr. Lincoln could never go unnoticed. There was something about him, an aura of benevolence, a resplendent presence such as emanated from few other men.

But now the streets of Washington were filled with mourners. Its citizens milled about, aimlessly, as if dazed and unbelieving. Jeter was among them. He was in the midst of an immense crowd of other men and women, but he felt very much alone.

He wondered who among all the others had been spectators a mere five weeks ago when Mr. Lincoln had been inaugurated for his second term, as he had. In the confusion created by the inaugural commencing indoors because of bad weather and then being moved outside after the sun appeared, he had been able to get ahead of much of the throng. Climbing high on the Capitol steps, he'd managed a standing spot where he could both see and hear Mr. Lincoln as he spoke.

Addressing the anger and frustration naturally felt by those before him and millions of other Americans after the costly and divisive war, Mr. Lincoln had called for "malice toward none and charity for all" in the binding of the nation's wounds. He had offered hope to the masses who surely had become hopeless.

Jeter was passionately optimistic the vision Mr. Lincoln shared with the citizens would come about, and he sensed that all those within hearing of this great man gained confidence that brighter days would come. These included a surprising number of Negro men and women, who had consistently murmured "Bless the Lord" throughout the address. Their voices became a virtual chorus as the president proclaimed it strange that "any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces" and suggested that slavery was an offense worthy of God's wrath.

Struggling to hold his place on the Capitol steps, Jeter had to remind himself that the eloquent speaker—the President of the United States about to start a second term in office—was the same man who came to the stables from time to time, who obviously had great affection for and missed Old Bob, his horse, and who never failed to show his appreciation to Jeter and the other stable hands for their good work in caring for Tad's pony.

In the coming week Jeter would hear talk about the president meeting with Frederick Douglas in the White House the day after his inauguration. He didn't know who Frederick Douglas was, but it seemed important to many people.

One day Mr. Lincoln had singled him out personally as Jack's primary caretaker and praised him for the high standard he obviously set for himself and perhaps expected of others. And as they stood face to face he had seen in the president's countenance the weariness of carrying his terrible burden. There was kindness in his eyes, deep-set and penetrating beneath the rugged brow. And that far-away look, giving away a fervent but fading hope that one day peace and unity would come to his war-torn and divided homeland and perhaps an unspoken longing for a time he would know his job was done and he could return to his beloved Illinois prairieland and live out his years in tranquil honor. He still was a young man.

Might there be visible relief in that homely yet striking face now that the battlefields lay quiet and the Union had survived? Jeter had hoped there would be.

But he would never know. The assassin's bullet had ripped the life from this man he had come to admire and respect almost as a deity. He had cried out to the captain, who brought the unbearable

word of the shooting at Ford's Theater, that surely a merciful God above would not let this happen. With so much evil in the world, how could God allow the life of this good man to be stolen away?

"I'm sorry, boy," the captain said. "I guess there are mysteries we mere mortals were never meant to understand. It doesn't matter. The president is dead. As Shakespeare said, 'hung be the heavens with black.'"

"But what will we do?"

The captain shook his head sadly. "I hope time will point the way," he said. "But for now the city, and I suppose the whole country, is in mourning. Until our grief is spent there's little point in trying to look ahead."

The captain's personal sorrow was palpable. Jeter remembered that he had been a friend of Mr. Lincoln's for a good many years, since the two served at the same time in the Illinois legislature. The captain had told him many times how he admired the future president even then, and how proud he was to think he might merit the friendship. He had commented once that few things in life were certain, but among those he was sure of was the trustworthiness of Abraham Lincoln. This was a man who never would betray a friend.

Given the depth of his own remorse, Jeter could hardly conceive of the hurt the captain must feel. He had come to admire the president from the distance, primarily, while the captain had had a close personal relationship.

"There will be ceremonies, of course," the captain said, "and then the president's mortal remains will be returned to Springfield. I know I will be among those who comprise an Honor Guard for that sad journey. And I want you to come, too."

"Yes, please, Captain. I only need somebody to tell me what to do."

Now, as he wandered about the city with no real notion where he was going, Jeter noticed things he had been oblivious to before. He was struck by all the work that needed to be done. The new, higher dome on the Capitol was barely finished, and there was a veritable thicket of construction workers' shacks and empty wagons. Tall, brown weeds—last fall's goldenrod, once so beautiful—lined the dirt streets. The fetid odor of the City Canal, with its raw sewage and decaying animal carcasses, filled the still night air.

"Why does anyone who has a choice stay in this rotten place?" he said aloud, almost as if he were angry with himself.

He walked past such as there was of the Washington Monument, a project that seemed to have been abandoned soon after it was begun. It was no more than a large stone column protruding from the earth with no obvious purpose. He tried to remember what it was supposed to look like and how tall it would be when it was finished. So far as he could tell, no one seemed to know when that might be.

Might there someday be a monument to Mr. Lincoln? He believed the people would demand one. Mr. Lincoln was a man of the people, elected by the people. He had held fast to preserving the Union, even at the ultimate sacrifice. He would not be forgotten.

It seemed sadly appropriate that so many things had commenced while Mr. Lincoln was president but now, with his passing, waited for a new leader to get them back on track. The nation's capital had an air almost of non-permanence, like an outpost in the wilderness that would be abandoned as people moved on to new frontiers. This might go unnoticed somewhere west of the Mississippi, but it couldn't be allowed to happen here.

Jeter tried to remember the president's words about "finishing the work we are in," but realized this referred to the war and reuniting the country. The city would endure, of course, but he didn't care. This place that once had been the seat of everything good in his life had become abhorrent to him, a place he hated beyond his own rational understanding. This was the place where Mr. Lincoln was murdered; he never would be able to separate the place from the deed.

There was an eerie silence. No night owls called from the trees and no barking dogs were to be heard. As he neared the Potomac Flats, he saw that things were not as usual. The pastured cattle herd, beef for the Army, was bunched together as if seeking safety in closeness. There were neither visible campfires nor the sounds of voices. Surely the usual collection of homeless war veterans and vagrants of various sort had not gone away. They should be here, in their camps, keeping warm beside their fires. It felt as if the whole world had come to a halt and all life had been put on hold to await the dawning of another age.

Jeter had an urge to just keep walking. He might gain some measure of relief if he could find himself miles away at sunrise. Direction made no difference. He walked until he was tired and nearly breathless, although even as he neared complete exhaustion he still was fully alert. He had to force himself to stop and rest, sitting on the cold ground with his back against the rough bark of an ancient cottonwood tree. He closed his eyes. He knew he wouldn't sleep, but he imagined there was something to gain if he could shut out all images of the putrid world around him.

He sat for what may have been a full hour. While he rested, his mind raced with a sense of urgency until he reluctantly acknowledged he was not in control of his own destiny. "I have to go back," he said to himself, speaking out loud. "I still have responsibilities and the captain deserves a lot better than to have me just disappear." One thing that had not changed was his loyalty to the captain.

He finally stood and, though still not enthusiastic about the choice he'd made, started the long trudge through the dark night back to the stables. After losing his way twice, he eventually reached his destination and felt a small sense of relief. There was comfort in the smell of the animal waste, the hay, the living creatures themselves. This was the single place he might find even limited peace of mind. He would spend the night here and hope to lose himself in sleep.

Jack stood head-down in his stall, as if in mourning. Some way, Jeter believed, the pony surely sensed the loss. He went in beside the animal. Jack always had reacted physically when he came close, but not this time. The pony didn't move. Jeter put an arm around the pony's warm neck and began to cry, softly at first and then in forceful sobs.