

THE THIRD ACOLYTE READER

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Leonard Taft will be a new name to many readers. He writes, and engagingly, on many themes: historical events, growing up in a Catholic boarding school, the conversations of Chicano teenagers and 19th Century chimney sweeps. Here he provides a bit of revisionist history about the American Civil War. For our non-American readers it should perhaps be mentioned that the great battle at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, not too far from the nation's capital, was probably the turning point in the military struggle between the Union (or northern and "abolitionist") forces and the armies of the slave-owning Confederate states of the south.

A Different Drummer Boy

Leonard Taft

I am a bad lad, it is widely known. At least my family are of that opinion. Lazy, disobedient and stupid, I am also a sinner. My father found me in carnal contact with Sarah Pennyrose when I was thirteen and in similar throes this past April with her brother under the Borning Bridge.

We live in a timber clearing on the edge of the Gettysburg Road in a house made of logs that my father cut with his own hands. My brother Daniel and I affixed the temporary bark roof last summer and were just clearing a site by the creek for a new mill and water wheel when this war broke out.

Or rather the war reached us then: others had been fighting it far away before that time. We used to hear stories about the terrible deeds of Johnny Reb and his southern generals and how the Union would never let them come north of Virginia, ever, ever.

But then I saw my father talking down by the shed with a man from the village. I was up the ridge tending to Rachel our cow and I could see that it was mighty serious talk. Then two men in Union grey rode up and joined the talk. Our Daniel was called and I knew it was about the war. I knew that Daniel was going to join up.

My mama, she knew it too. All that night, though she was engaged in feeding us, she kept most silent, standing there over the stove as each grit cake came ready on the fire. She broke down only later as she laid a plate down before my brother.

“Naw, don't do that now, Mother,” he said. “You should be happy.”

He meant that it was a proud thing to be a member of the Army and that he would be defending our people in a heroic way. He was the best of us. He was ambitious and righteous, considerate and skilled with an axe. I felt like a pale shadow in his presence. He was never a sinner like me. Who was there who didn't admire our Daniel? I missed him terribly when he went away.

By May his letters stopped coming. A dispatch from his regiment listed him as missing and presumed dead. My parents paced a lot at

night and argued but there were no tears this time. My father sent off a special inquiry by a swift pony rider along the route of Army encampments and hospitals, but no word came back. Thousands were killed every day as the war increased. There was no good reason that Daniel should be spared, except I had this crazy notion that he was so well liked by everyone even the enemy might pull up their rifles and join him in a friendly way to have a chew before resuming battle. Sometimes I could actually picture that, he was so perfect.

And here was I, fully fourteen years of age, waiting around the homestead for some news, patching the roofs, cleaning the sod floor of our shed, hardly ever spoken to by my mother or father. On one hot night I even sinned once with Rachel the cow. It meant nothing to her, but to be me it signaled an end. I decided to leave. I wrote a letter for my parents and explained that I was going off to the war to find my brother and to bring him back.

I left under a full moon which shone on our creek like the big lantern that hangs in our loft and makes the bed Daniel and I slept in glow. I stopped on the bridge and looked back on our homestead and I thought I might never see the place again. But then I thought, what if I could bring my brother home - me a hero, him safe and grateful, my parents sure of me at last.

That very night I got as far as Gettysburg. There in the morning three old timers said, "Don't go any further out that side of town, boy. There's Rebel troops there just come down the line."

It was true. The famous general himself from the south, Robert E. Lee, was camped now five miles south of where I stood at that moment, he and, hear tell, seventy-five thousand of his men, while our own Union leader General George Meade was holed up somewhere east of town with his ninety thousand. People said there would be a battle, right there in Gettysburg, and I must confess the idea excited me. One man said to me, as I guess my face brightened, "You ought to join up, child."

"Join how? For what?" I asked.

"Become a drummer boy," they said. "There are lots of lads younger than you and helping the Union cause."

"I'm looking for my brother. He's nineteen and a soldier." "Well, join up by all means, then. There's no better way of finding him than

being in the thick of the action. Go talk to the General himself.” They laughed at that with a sniggering kind of tease and I realized they were probably funning me.

“I don't know how to play,” I told them, but they only laughed again and said that the army would teach me.

I left them, then, with no great want to join the army but, still, I did think that if I found the Union army I could put some questions to people about my brother and perhaps get a lead. That was the last day of June and I didn't reach the Union campground until early on the first of July, but by then the battle had begun.

It started as a chance meeting between Union cavalry pickets and Confederate foragers in the woods, then it grew and grew as reinforcements were rushed to the spot.

I had time for just one word with a minor captain.

“I'm trying to find my brother Daniel Waud. He's nineteen and he joined up three months ago.”

He was a young officer and seemed to be in an awful hurry.

“It's impossible now, son. Go home. You can't find anyone out here. If he can, he 'll come back to you when this is over, or you 'll hear about him.”

“But we aren't hearing from him.” “There's shots!” he said suddenly, listening off.

“I came out to find him on my own,” I revoiced myself. There was activity in the camp how. The captain turned to me: “Boy, go home. Save yourself. Don't make your mama grieve twice.” Then he went off.

What he said made me stop. It was the first time I had seriously considered Daniel's fate. It was all too possible that he might not even exist any longer. I might have come out in search of a ghost.

A cannon shell landed very near to me, knocking me over by the very wind of it and the force of its sound. Men were up and out of their tents, horses were loose and looking for a clearing of the smoke, orders were being shouted everywhere.

I ran down into the ravine, right into the midst of a hundred troops

huddled low against their rifles ready to charge. A shout came, they rose like a herd, all at once, and dashed over the ridge with a hundred mighty yells. But thunder met them in the face and a few dozen fell back into the ravine, limp as scarecrows, bloody, muddy and twisted. One of their rifles clattered backwards and fell on me. I stared at it, instead of at the dead man, for most of a full minute, but did not pick it up in the end.

I climbed out and ran into the wood, along a ridge towards a hill where I might get a wider view. We call these two mounds Big Round Top and Little Round Top. I could remember picnicking there when I was very little. Right now, there was a Union line all across the back of Little Round Top, hunkered down behind the natural rock wall there and aiming down the slope, getting off shots into the gully below we used to call Devil's Den and which now contained about fifty Confederate snipe-shooters who were trying to advance.

It was into this Union line that I ran as soon as I broke out of the woods. I drew up fast, seeing soldiers in front of me. One of them spun around where he sat, screamed and fired at me. He was not much older than our Daniel and had a wild look on his face. I saw it as I fell. Of course, it was my fault for spooking him. The air was full of blue smoke from the gun powder and the steaming wounds on people, so he could not see me in time to stop his trigger finger. And anyway, the rule in war is to defend yourself first and ask questions later. So I got it in the side, right below my ribs.

I was lying there in the dry leaves, stunned at the pain and gasping a little, when two infantrymen, the one who shot me and one other older guy who as a doc, came up and turned me over, like you nudge a shot squirrel. The one said, "It's a kid."

"Where'd he come from?" said the other, and leaned down to me. "Which side you on?"

"The left, sir," I answered, thinking he meant my wound.

The other guy smiled in a kind of way at that and, I guess because I didn't talk southern, figured I was with the north. "You a drummer boy, boy?" he asked, and, to make things simple, I just nodded.

Shots were coming nearer to us and some one yelled, "Keep down!" and, seeing me, added, "Clear him off!"

“Come on, boy,” the older man said close to my ear as he leaned down and took me up in his arms. Ducking a new Confederate barrage, he carried me down the line like a saddle, then turned into a path where a clearing was made.

He laid me out by a campsite. “You’re go an t’be fine,” he said.

The worst of the pain and shock was over by then - it was just a grazing bullet anyway. The only thing was the blood which made it look bad and the terrible stinging which was harsh as a hundred wasps. The doc grabbed my shirt front and tore it open so that all the buttons my mama had sewed on so carefully last year went flying.

Then I felt his hands on my stomach and a cool liquid washing my side. He poured moonshine on the wound and then smoothed it all out over my front with his hand. He tore a whole strip of my shirttail off to be used as a bandage and tied a length of hemp around my middle to hold it on.

“You all right now?” he said low and close to my face, and I smiled up at him, trying to say things because he was being so fatherly.

“Just rest now,” he said. “And drink you down some of this.”

He held a jug of rye whiskey to my lips and lifted my head.

I choked getting it down, so that it dribbled down my chin and breast. It burned in my throat at first, then it felt wonderful warm.

“Can I have some more?” I asked.

But he wouldn’t give it. I lay back. He put his hand on my forehead as though to comfort, then took it away and stood up and disappeared off into the battle again.

I lay there with my shirt ripped apart, the alcohol drying like dew on my chest, and my side wound tingling. I touched the bandage with my hand and fell asleep.

I awoke to the violence of the earth being blown apart. I was in midair, falling with the sticks of the campsite, surrounded by flying dirt and pine needles and feathers from a forest crow. When I hit the ground I rolled down a slope some ten yards more before I came to a stop.

The air kept blasting at me. I saw troops running past. I saw men

drop all around me. I cried out but no one, not the doc nor the captain nor my mother nor my brother came for me. I was, of course, alone.

I dragged my body up and made my feet support it. For a while I was running down a woods path, stepping over guys that hadn't made it out of the woods - some dropped so perfect that they looked only mildly asleep; others were blown to bits. I saw one young officer crouched down hiding behind a tree and crying like a kid. I felt like crying myself but I was still so muddle-headed that I just kept running.

The path widened. There was a far fence up ahead and a field on the other side of it. I figured that across that cornfield was the town and that I could rest there. I should have gone around but, as I said, my thinking was unclear. I made it to the fence but then slowly realized that soldiers were massing behind me. They were preparing a charge across the cornfield - horses and artillery and troops in the hundreds preparing to my rear.

Hands were on me, touching my bare shoulder past my shredded shirt. I thought it was a friendly gesture but it was some young soldiers turning me around.

"Are you the drummer boy?" they asked. Everybody seemed to think so. "Are you in for Benjy?"

"Where's Benjy?" I asked mindlessly.

"He fell. He's a goner. This here's his drum. You know what to do?"

Before I could answer they were strapping me into the thing.

One of them leaned down and was fingering my trousers. "Where'd you get these? You can't wear grey!"

"They're just farm duds."

"Johnny Reb is grey. Our own guns'll shoot you if they see them leggings. They'll think you're a spy."

"C'mon, Will," one of them said over the increase of noise, "the charge is commencing."

"Wait!" - and he took out his bayonet and cut clear through my pant legs with the blade and attempted to rip them off into knee britches. The fabric tore uneven through, so that my one leg was half

dressed and my other was bare clear up to the hip bone.

This made me fairly shy, since I felt all unmanned and was always a little embarrassed about not being hairy-legged and grown up like our Daniel. But there I was: I had only half a shirt on and a drum slung around my neck which leveled out at my waist, and now these tore up pants.

Someone pushed me forward over the fence and with a great effort of mass, men and animals we were out on the field. We could hear a Rebel yell coming at us and the crazy random firing began.

Someone shouted at me, "Like this - ra-ta-tatter-a," demonstrating with his own drum. And so I beat out something like the same sound with my drumsticks and plunged into the din. A horse reared, wheezed and dropped in front of me but I just stepped over it, keeping time. Waves of our men, rushed on ahead yelling obscenities, thrusting their weapons into the cloud wall in front of them, sometimes pulling their rifles back with a body stuck on the end of it, other times falling in place, sliced through by some unseen sword. Many swipes were taken at me by dim figures coming out of the smoke, but I just kept soldiering between them, holding to my drum. One Rebel dagger cut through my drum top but I still kept on playing.

I figured I was somewhere in the middle of the field by now. I fell only twice, tripping over powder barrels or bodies or boulders, I never knew which.

I never heard our retreat, and wouldn't have known the drum signal which declared it. My own drum was now smashed and couldn't be heard beyond the length of my own arms anyway. Still I kept hitting it and stumbling forward, until I was clear at the other side of the field, out of breath, out of my mind, the only live Union representative who had got that far (someone told me later) . I hadn't seen my brother out there yet, I didn't know what direction I was facing, and I could not get the drum strap off.

Then someone rushed over and slammed a rifle butt into my skull.

During the dusk and early evening Rebel drummer boys crept out among the enemy dead and robbed their valuables and boots. They stole my boots and cotton stockings, they cut off what was left of my pants and under garments in order to get at my belt buckle which was fine metal and my garters which were new.

When I woke up I groaned first and that alerted a southern sentry nearby. He drew his gun on me as I climbed up onto my wobbly feet. Then he saw I was just a fourteen-year-old kid and that I was naked except for two parts of my shirt which draped down one shoulder and my back.

“Who goes there?” he said anyway.

“Drummer boy,” I answered, hoping not to give away my Pennsylvania accent.

“You hurt?”

“Yesterday.” I fingered my old wound from which the bandage had fallen away. “But someone stole my boots.”

“And everything else,” he said. “Come on over here in case there's firing.”

I went over to him sore and ashamed.

“It's all right, boy,” he said, but with a much harder edge than the doc's. I began to wish I was on the other side of that cornfield again.

“I hurt,” I said.

“Here.” He sat me down behind a rock and put his rifle off. “Let me look at that wound.”

He had a lantern and put it so close to my side that I could feel the warmth. He redressed the bandage for me in a crude way but I thanked him anyhow. I wanted to curl up somewhere, I wanted to rest, I wanted to rub my member in the grass until the trouble and the tightness and the scare of the last few hours was all out of me.

“You're a mighty big boy,” the sentry said to me with a grin, pointing to my sex. I turned red because I could not stop it growing when I was feeling this way insides. “I know a general who would be real happy to see you. Surely give you a good time, too. Probably give me a medal for introducing you. He's so tarnished with those fat hog boys they usually bring him. You're good and lean. Good flesh. And already unwrapped.” He meant my nakedness and laughed hard. Then he heard a noise in the brush and snatched up his rifle again.

A fellow Reb spy presented himself. He looked me over before , he spoke. “Got information for the general,” he said then.

“What is it?” “Union strike plans for day-break. Heard with me own ears.

We can bat them to the punch if we mass along the right road.”

“Well, hold on there,” the sentry said. I figured he was seeing his own opportunity with the general slipping away.

“No, this is vital. Take me too him.”

“I will, I will,” the sentry stalled, “But he’ s got a piece of business to tend to first. Won’t take but a second. You wait here and I’ll be right back.”

That other fellow acted real puzzled and impatient, but the sentry led me anyhow. The gift of me would earn him the favor of his general, and next to that the war plans could wait. What difference would half an hour make, anyway?

He knocked on the general’s tent pole and the flap slowly opened. “Well,” said the tall, grand general. “Who is this and what’s he doing like that?” It was not General Lee but he was in the same strong uniform.

“Well, sir,” the sentry explained, “I guess some jacks stole his clothes and I got to thinking you might want to deal with him alone.”

“Ah.” The general looked at my face, my bandage, and my build. “Leave him to me,” he said.

“I’ll be back in an hour, sir,” the sentry said. “There’s some news brewing.”

“Yes,” the general told him half-heartedly and pulled me inside. “Keep me informed.”

I don’t want to say too much about what happened in the general’s tent because, as I described before, I am a bad enough lad already. Because I was tired and hurt and alone, because I was in a sinner’s frame of mind, and because I had an idea that might save my Union army friends, I let the general put me on his cot and undress himself and lie with me .

His hands were dry and scarred, but I let him pet me. Then I whispered at him what I wanted him to do.

“Corn hole you?” he repeated. “You want it?”

I got down on my stomach on the floor to prove it to him and urged him on top of me. He was reluctant a first; the rest of his drummer boys always hollered and fled. It hurt me, too, it tore at my wound, but I let him finish off. When he finally rolled over exhausted, I climbed on top and fed him liquor until he went out cold as a turkey. Then I rubbed myself off on the mud-made floor.

When the sentry entered after an hour he found us in disarray, the general lumped in a pile, his head swimming and his loins spent, and me smeared with mud and cotton weed and guilt. He inspected the general first, then turned on me with a roar. I leapt up and ran out into the night, out of camp, down to the fence, still buck naked, hurtled across the field of the dead at a good gallop.

It was a clear run, except for the pricklers which bothered my legs and nipped at my bare rump. Folks on the other side who saw me first said they thought I was a spirit. But they took me in and I told my story and they sent me up to the captain again. He gave me a Union blanket to wrap myself in and then sent me on all the way up to General Meade himself. I got to see him.

“You've actually been in the Confederate camp, son?” he said in a big voice through cigar smoke.

“Not an hour ago,” I said, scared of his rank but finding my courage. “They got hold of your plans for battle in the morning. Spies did, but I was able to... stall them some.”

“Were you, now? And lost your clothes in the bargain. Are you all right, though?”

“Fairly so, sir. I think.” I was not so sure if he knew I was a sinner.

”Let me seen, then.”

The general took my blanket and opened it and looked me up and down real good and made me turn around. Then, as red-faced as I, he cleared his throat a few times. “Because of you, boy, we can change our tactics for the morning. We 'II mass on the left flank with a charge through the valley.”

“Yes, sir.” Several of his assistants snapped to attention and went out to pass his orders.

“Good lad,” the general said and patted my head as though I was twelve. “What's your name?”

“Walker Waud, sir.”

He went over across the tent and sat down at his writing table and labored over some official note paper for a few minutes. Then he called me to come. It was a Commendation, he said, and it had my name on it. It told how I had performed valuable reconnaissance for the Union army and that the whole Union was indebted to me. I could not answer this kindness properly and so he merely folded the paper and handed it to me. I had no pockets, of course.

“Well done,” was all he said to me, then, “I'll think of you tomorrow when we win this thing.” Then he called for the doc who had cared for me before.

Still speechless, I was led away again. All around us preparations were being made for the Union change in plans but behind it all the doc filled a tub with water and dipped me into it. I submitted and he carefully washed me all over and then dressed me in soft cotton long-johns and found a pair of trousers that could be adjusted for me and got for me the best drummer boy boots in camp.

It took two more days, in fact, and fifty thousand men, but we did finally win the battle of Gettysburg - our side, I mean. It was that battle that turned the war and some say it was the planning that went on that first day's night that won the battle. It's quite possible, you know, that I did that.

It was odd to stand on the bridge again and look at the homestead. Our Daniel had returned in my absence, all shot up and so weak about all he could do at first was sit in the sun. But our house was jubilant anyway - and twice so when I showed them my Commendation. My brother actually cried over me and hugged me.

After I helped Daniel into our loft that night, I turned down the lamp and cast us into darkness. I wanted to ask him if my father and mother were really proud of me now, but I knew that he had his own concerns. And how could I tell him what had really happened to me? What I really had done was more worthy of a sermon than a commendation.

But, being home again, in our own bed again, and having Daniel

there breathing quietly beside me, all that made me so happy I actually started to cry.

I couldn't help it, and my brother, of course, heard me snuffling. He took me in his wounded embrace, and - wouldn't you know it? - my member started to sin again, which made my crying worse, but all Daniel did, when he felt that part of me pushing on his leg, was check it out with his hand and sort of chuckle into my ear and say, "Looks like I can't call you my little brother any more."

I tried to pull away, but he held me close against him, and finally he said, guessing my shame somehow, "It doesn't matter. Let it stay there, if that's what it wants."

"But often that's not all it does."

"I know. We'll talk about it sometime. It's not as bad as Preacher Trumbull makes it out. Maybe, in a few weeks, when I get my strength back..."

He left the thought unfinished.

A little later, when I figured he'd gone to sleep, he whispered in my ear, "You're the best of us, Walker. You always were."