

Chapter Ten

from *Settling Accounts*, by Jack J. Seville, Jr.

She said her name was Sylvia Longstreet. She claimed to have grown up in Harrisonburg in the Shenandoah Valley to the West but came most recently from the Northeast, to care for the wounded of the Army of Virginia who needed medical attention here at Robertson Hospital in Richmond. It was the early winter of 1864. The hospitals of the Confederacy were notoriously understaffed and lacked supplies. Even here in the capital of the Confederate States of America, nurses were in short supply. Most nurses in both the North and South were males in service to their country, serving in tents, railroad stations, and barns near the lines of battle. As the Confederacy found itself limping toward ultimate defeat and ruin, it relied on females, mostly untrained volunteers, more than chivalry might have allowed in earlier years.

Richmond promised, with its one hundred fifty plus hospitals, many of which created since the war began, a new beginning and an ultimate passage home for Sylvia and her grandmother. She came fully expecting to find ways to employ her skills, and she was eagerly accepted on the staff of this little private hospital.

She was wiry, with dusky complexion, a woman of medium stature in her early twenties who possessed enormous experience in working with wounded and dying men. Her hands and arms were very strong for a woman of her size. Her hair was dark and

tightly woven. Her eyes were nearly hazel but possessed a depth of brown that in certain lights all but disappeared as her irises expanded in the darkness of dimly lighted hospital wards in the slowly dying Confederacy.

Each night she came to the bedside of Franck Coutre, a young Confederate soldier who had lost a hand in a battle near Monocacy, according to his record. Something about his stillness as he lay there night after night attracted her, and so she simply sat by his bed and spoke softly to him, hoping to get him to respond to her verbally and thereby begin to come back to life.

One night, as Sylvia had finished speaking and was getting up to leave his bedside, Franck spoke to her.

“What day is it?” he asked her.

“It is December 23,” Sylvia said, trying not to reveal her excitement that this young man had finally spoken to someone in the hospital.

“My Lord, it’s almost Christmas,” he said, as though to himself.

“Yes,” Sylvia said, “it’s almost the day of our dear Savior’s birth.”

Franck stared at her now and looked deeply into her eyes. “You are very pretty,” he said quietly.

Sylvia felt flushed but responded quickly, “Thank you, sir.”

“You are very good to me,” he went on, now seemingly eager to speak at last. “Why?”

“I can’t say,” was all she could muster at the moment.

Actually, she had been attracted to him from her very first day in this ward. She saw him as a young, frightened and defenseless boy amid a room full of suffering and dying older men. Her heart went out to him for she could not envision the rest of his life having only one hand. What could he do? Where would he work? What would be his role in rebuilding a nation?

Franck stared at her continually as she spoke. It was as if he was seeing her for the very first time although she had been at his bedside every night for a month.

“Thank you,” he said as he smiled at her. “You are most kind.”

“Do you need anything before I leave this evening?” She wanted to listen to his voice and to engage him in conversation. His voice was soft, almost boyishly shy as he spoke to her, and this trait only endeared him to her the more as she listened and waited for him to speak.

“Some water would be enough,” he said as he smiled.

“Thank you, kindly.”

“I’ll fetch some and bring it directly,” Sylvia said as she turned to retrieve a glass of water for this man who had suddenly come from whatever depth of emotion in which he had resided. His smile warmed her heart and at this moment she would fetch whatever he wanted.

When she returned, he reached out to her with his left hand and took a sip from the glass of water and then handed it back to

her, smiling again as she grasped it. His eyes now seemed more alive than before, and his body eased onto the bed in a more relaxed posture.

“Is the war nearly ended?”

The question revealed that though he had not responded to her before this very hour, he had been listening to her as she recounted night after night whatever she had heard of how the war was going.

“Yes,” Sylvia responded. “Only weeks ago General Sherman left Atlanta in ruins, and he is this very night marching his army all the way to the sea. The stories that are coming back from there are horrible. Everywhere there are houses burned to the ground, livestock slaughtered and left rotting in the fields, bridges and important parts of towns destroyed, rail lines blown up, cotton gins in ruin, in fact anything that could make money for people and bring comfort to them is gone. Even churches are burned to the ground. The stories are ones of terror from Atlanta to Savannah. I don’t know if they’re all true or not, but it sounds absolutely awful to me.”

He looked at her and seemed to nearly grimace as she spoke of the horror of Sherman’s march across Georgia.

“Where are you hearing this?”

“From people on the streets, and some of the soldiers who have been brought here from Georgia. The newspapers are silent. But, everyone is talking about it.”

“What about Petersburg?” he asked. How did he know about this she wondered? Word on the street was that if Petersburg fell,

the Confederacy would abandon Richmond. It mattered little to her for she was bound to move on some day in the future.

“It’s surrounded,” she said. “I read about it in the Whig newspaper.”

“Then,” Franck hesitated, “it’s true that we are losing.” He began to cry as he looked down at his right arm.

“Yes, that’s what folk are saying now,” Sylvia said quietly as she kept a wary eye on Franck’s demeanor. With the handkerchief she kept in her sleeve she wiped the tears from his face as he turned his head away from her.

“We never had a chance,” Franck said, now seeming to slip away from the present world once more. “It was all for naught.” He heaved a deep and resolute breath and closed his eyes as if capable of shutting out this news forever.

Sylvia sat still and waited for Franck to speak again. He did not. His eyes closed, all emotion left his countenance. Where there had been interaction between them, now there was only the slow but steady sound of Franck’s breathing. He was gone once more to that place of refuge deep within himself that had sustained him until now.

Within moments Sylvia gathered her wrap, scarf, and gloves and prepared to leave the hospital for the evening. Before leaving his bedside, she bent and kissed him on the forehead as she had done every night from her first day at work.

As she stepped down onto the street into the Richmond winter night, she heard distant carolers, singing a Christmas song. It was new to her. She listened intently for the message. Their voices, strongly crossing whatever distance lay between them, carried a word of hope in what at that time appeared to be a hopeless landscape.

And ye, beneath life's crushing load,

Whose forms are bending low,

Who toil along the climbing way

With painful steps and slow,

Look now, for glad and golden hours

Come swiftly on the wing:

O rest beside the weary road,

And hear the angels sing.

Sylvia stopped walking and lifted her eyes heavenward. The night was clear and stars filled the darkened sky. Her spirit lifted as she looked up into the spangled darkness where preachers throughout her brief lifetime had said God resided. As she listened to the singers, she imagined God, smiling as He surveyed the world this night. Franck had spoken. The people of this city were making preparations to celebrate Christ's birth. The carolers were making their rounds, calling to anyone who would listen with a vision of a world far different than that in which most found themselves on this winter's night in 1864 Virginia.

Soon, she was strolling once more, and as she rounded a corner, she saw the carolers, six or so persons, standing beneath a gas street lamp, singing at the tops of their voices of peace on earth in a time of desolation and suffering the likes of which this young nation had never witnessed. She stopped and listened as they sang.

*For lo, the days are hastening on,
By prophet bards foretold,
When with the ever-circling years
Comes round the age of gold;
When peace shall over all the earth
Its ancient splendors fling,
And the whole world give back the song
Which now the angels sing.*

Slowly, she walked to the little house where her grandmother awaited her for the evening, just another dark figure moving along the empty sidewalks of Richmond. It was good to be going home to family, what was left of it. So many were lost. Brothers, father and mother, grandfather were all gone now. Only Sylvia and her grandmother were left to find a way to live in this land which now faced the daunting task of rebuilding itself once the shooting and looting and dying stopped.

As she crossed the threshold she heard her grandmother call from the dimly lighted kitchen, "Is that you daughter?"

“Yes, Ma’am,” Sylvia said as she placed her wraps upon the hallway hook beside the dingy mirror.

“Well, c’mon out here and sit a spell before you take your rest, honey child. I needs some company tonight.”

Sylvia walked through the short hallway past the sitting room and empty dining room into the kitchen that was equipped with a wood-burning stove. It was roaring with flame that supplied the only heat available to their house. A wooden table with two worn chairs, and her grandmother’s rocking chair by the only window looking out onto the alley that ran between her house and the neighbor’s residence, completed the kitchen furniture.

Sylvia’s grandmother sat in the rocking chair wrapped in blankets for warmth, holding a cup of steaming coffee in her gloved hands. Sylvia pulled one of the chairs away from the table and sat down beside her.

“He spoke to me tonight,” she said.

“You don’t say,” her grandmother replied, sensing in the tone of the young woman’s voice a sincerity that the ravages of the present conflict had not removed from her.

“He’s so fragile,” Sylvia confided to her grandmother once more. “He’s so afraid to come back. It’s as though he died at Monocacy.”

“Honey,” Sylvia’s grandmother put her cup down onto the windowsill and took her granddaughter’s hands in hers, “you just keep giving that boy your loving attention and the Good Lord’ll bring him back if that’s His will.”

“I don’t know if he ought to come back. He doesn’t have much future, and he knows it.”

“What you sayin’, daughter?” Her grandmother squeezed her hands as if to get her full attention. “Is you sayin’ that the Good Lord can’t use a one-handed man?”

“No, Ma’am,” Sylvia managed to say before her grandmother proceeded to speak.

“Da Bible tells us there ain’t a person on this earth that the Good Lord can’t use or doesn’t love, honey. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes, Ma’am, I do, but...”

“But, what? Listen, honey child, you aren’t helpin’ that young man if you’re a doubtin’ the promises of the Lord.” Her grandmother shook her head slowly from side to side as she spoke, and she peered deeply at Sylvia in order to perceive that what she was saying to her granddaughter was being heard.

“I just can’t see how going through this world without your right hand is going to be easy for him,” Sylvia said as she tried to glance away from her grandmother’s intense stare.

“You’ve got to see it, honey,” her grandmother now patted her hands and spoke more softly but with deep conviction. “You are his eyes for seeing a new world daughter. When you see it, he’ll see it.”

Her grandmother sat back in her rocker and began to rock slowly as she hummed some hymn which at first was indistinct but eventually sounded like a tune she often sang as she worked around her kitchen. As

she hummed, Sylvia recalled some of the words, and she began to hum the mournful tune with her grandmother as the words infused her mind.

In my trials, O comfort me;

In my trials, O comfort me;

When my heart is almost breaking,

O I want Jesus to comfort me.

When I'm in trouble, O stay with me;

When I'm in trouble, O stay with me;

When my head is bowed in sorrow,

O I want Jesus to stay with me

As the humming ceased, the two women sat in silence, each alone in the growing darkness, as the fire within the cook stove began to ebb, and their individual deepening thoughts consumed them.

