

THE LIFE AND REDEMPTION OF TEDDY MILLER

Book I: THE CAUSE OF DARKNESS
Book II: THE LIGHT FROM DARKNESS

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BOOK I
THE CAUSE OF DARKNESS



Image Credit: Kate Warne, Chicago History Museum

If the soul is left in darkness, sins will be committed. The guilty one is not he who commits the sin, but the one who causes the darkness.

*-Monseigneur Bienvenu in *Les Misérables**

PROLOGUE

There are few places more beautiful than the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia. Those of us who lived there called it simply 'the Valley,' as if there were no other valleys in the world worthy of more than a passing interest. As children, the Valley helped shape our aesthetic sense and many of us came to recognize the hand of a higher power in its physical perfection. The Valley was more than just the setting for the story of our lives: it was a major character.

Mark Twain wrote that “When ill luck begins, it does not come in sprinkles, but in showers.” That was certainly true for the Shenandoah Valley during the Civil War. But the Valley was always fated to suffer great destruction during the War. It was located less than 100 miles from Washington City at its closest point and it trended from southwest to northeast, making it resemble what many called ‘a lance pointed directly at the very heart of the Union.’ On more than one occasion, Union advances on the Confederate capital of Richmond—which may have greatly shortened the War—were stalled by Confederate actions in the Valley.

As late in the War as July 1864, Confederate General Jubal Early marched north up the Valley and crossed the Potomac River into Maryland. There he defeated a Union force at Monocacy before reaching the very defenses of Washington City itself. Early's raid stunned Northerners. It was ‘the old story over again,’ editorialized the *New York Times*. ‘The backdoor, by way of the Shenandoah Valley, has been left invitingly open.’

President Lincoln had tried to end the Confederate threat in the Valley. From 1862 to 1864, he had ordered Union troops into the Valley on numerous occasions. But as in so many other arenas of the War, he was hobbled by incompetent military leadership and he was unsuccessful in driving the Confederates out. About all he accomplished was to make legends out of Confederate generals such as Stonewall Jackson and Jubal Early for their exploits there. But the tides of war were changing. In 1864, President Lincoln issued orders for what would be the last major military campaign in the Shenandoah Valley. They were succinct and unambiguous: his generals were to close off the northern invasion route used by Early and deny the Valley as a productive agricultural region to the Confederacy. As General U. S. Grant explained it to his soldiers, ‘The people should be informed that so long as an army can subsist among them, recurrences of these raids must be expected, and we are determined to stop them at all hazards... Give the enemy no rest... Do all the damage to railroads and crops you can. Carry off stock of all descriptions, and Negroes, so as to prevent further planting. If the war is to last another year, we want the Shenandoah Valley to remain a barren waste.’

Grant's soldiers did their job well. When the War finally ended in the Valley, it ended in a conflagration that present-day residents still refer to as ‘the burning.’

CHAPTER 1
*The Battle of New Market, May 15, 1864;
The Shenandoah Valley, Virginia*

We take comfort in the sameness of our lives. For the most part, our good days, our bad days, even our very worst days all begin much the same way: we leave our warm beds, do our ablutions and prepare to undertake the ordinary and often mundane tasks required of us. But sometimes fate steps in and events wash over us like a rogue wave, tossing us in directions we could never have imagined. Sometimes, we would give all we own to return to the life we had known no more than 24 hours before.

I was awakened from a fitful sleep filled with dreams red-tinged and violent. I rolled over on my back and listened to the night sounds, searching for what had disturbed me. But I heard only my younger brother Jed's rhythmic breathing as he lay asleep beside me and the sound of chirping peepers that drifted in through my open bedroom window.

I had nearly fallen back asleep again when I noticed it: a slight vibration that moved up from the floor and through the bed frame. Alarmed, I jumped out of bed and ran to the window. There was only the merest sliver of a moon, but it was enough to see as far as the Valley Pike some 200 yards in front of our farmhouse. The road was unpaved and ran from Winchester in the north to Roanoke in the south, perhaps 180 miles. Normally desolate at night, it was alive with a long column of men, horses and wagons. I could see no beginning or end to the line. There was surprisingly little noise beyond an occasional muffled curse at some recalcitrant animal and the snuffling of the horses. The men marched silently. There was no clanking of canteens or mess kits, no talking or singing; there was just the rhythmic drumming of feet and hooves on the packed ground that had the earth vibrating like a guitar string.

Jed startled me as he moved up beside me at the window. I hadn't heard him get out of bed. "Are they our boys?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I cannot tell." The moon-lit scene was all shades of grey. I could make out no color at all. And the men, the animals, the wagons: they were all covered with a layer of dust from the road. More dust swirled around their feet as they walked. From this distance, they gave the illusion of floating just above the surface of the road, an army of ghosts.

Jed began to turn away from the window. "Let us go see who they are," he said, but I grabbed his arm and held him in place. "Wait," I said. I knew that if they were Union troops, they'd think that anyone out this late at night was up to no good. I didn't want to be shot or hanged as a guerrilla. "Best go wake up Daddy," I said. Jed nodded and left the room.

My father and Jed walked into the room a few minutes later. My father's white nightshirt seemed to glow in the feeble light coming in through the window. His dark hair was slick and wet, and I reckoned he had splashed some water on his face to wake up. The three of us stood staring out the window for a long time as column after column of men and wagons continued to pass. After a while, I repeated Jed's question: "Are they our boys, Daddy?"

My father shook his head. "No, Teddy, they are not our boys." He crouched down and rested his forearms on the windowsill. Then, in a soft, sad voice he recited "'...the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'" My father turned and looked at me. It took me a moment to realize that

he was challenging me to cite the chapter and verse of the scripture he had just quoted. I searched my memory. "Matthew 24:29," I finally said. My father nodded, rose to his feet, and turned to leave the room. "Get some sleep, boys," he said as he left. "There's nothing to be done tonight."

When my father was gone, Jed said to me "I do not remember that verse. What does it mean?"

"It tells of the end of the world," I answered. I looked back out the window at the columns of Union troops marching down the road. At that moment, a cloud passed in front of the sliver of moon and all became dark. 'And the moon will not give its light,' I thought. I was suddenly very frightened.

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By morning, the columns of troops had passed.

Our breakfast that day was a normal one for our womanless household: my father, brother and I devoured our food as we discussed the chores that lay ahead for the day, each of us talking over the other. None of us mentioned the Union troops we had seen the night before, but I could tell that my father was distracted, and I saw him check his pocket watch several times when he thought no one was looking. After we finished breakfast, he addressed Jed and me: "I'm going up to New Market today, boys. I need some nails to repair the outbuildings and I may as well lay in some other supplies while I am at it."

I felt a stab of apprehension. I knew instinctively that it was unsafe for a civilian to be on the roads while the Union Army was massing in the Valley. I tried to talk my father out of it, to try to get him to postpone his errands until a later time, but he dismissed my pleas with an impatient shake of his head. "I will not have the Yankees dictate when I can run my errands," he said. Then he turned to Jed and said in a softer tone, "And you do what your brother says. Teddy is in charge while I am gone." Jed gave him a sour look but did not backtalk. I had recently turned 16 years old, 2 years older than my brother, and I was the presumptive boss when my father was away.

I cleaned and put away the breakfast dishes while my father and Jed walked out to the barn to hitch our old plow horse to the wagon. When I was finished, I stepped off the front porch and walked through the morning dew towards the barn. The spring sun was warm on my back and the sweet smell of honeysuckle enveloped me. I stopped and looked back at the front porch and I could imagine a better, happier world with my mother sitting there in the rocker, knitting. She would look up, smile at me, and say "You be careful today, Teddy. And watch out for your little brother." A great sense of melancholy settled over me and I ached for the mother I had barely known.

I don't know how long I had stood staring at the front porch, but by the time I got to the barn, my father was already gone.

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My brother and I were standing just inside our barn, discussing our chores, when the battle began. We had no warning; there was no sound of marching troops or muskets firing, no distant cannonade. There were just the normal sounds of a spring morning in rural Virginia: birds singing, the sound of bees in the honeysuckle and animals shuffling in their stalls.

A single artillery shell arched overhead and then, its momentum exhausted, fell to earth. It exploded just outside our barn and only the heavy oak door saved us from instant death. The

door, riddled with shrapnel, was blown in on us and trapped us against the floor. The concussion had pounded the breath from our chests.

When I came to my senses, I saw dust dancing in the sunlight streaming in through the shattered doorway. I threw the remains of the door aside and found my brother lying beside me, covered in dust and wood splinters. He wasn't moving. I took his arm and shook it. "Jed," I yelled, "Jed!" After a time, he opened his eyes and began to sit up. I saw his lips moving but I heard nothing. "Are you hurt?" I asked. I frantically checked him for blood but found none. He shook his head and his lips formed words I could not hear.

I half pushed, half dragged my brother out of the exposed doorway as the sounds of battle began to grow around us. Soon the ground was shaking beneath us as we huddled in a corner of the barn. There were so many cannons firing near and far that it sounded like one long, continuous roar. Dust, shaken from the rafters by the cannonade, rained down on us like flour through a sifter. Jed put his face next to my right ear and yelled something. When I shook my head, he turned my face with his hands and yelled into my other ear: "Can you hear me, Teddy?" I nodded. He touched my right ear and showed me his fingers, bright with blood. The explosion of the artillery shell had ruptured my right eardrum.

The sounds of battle rose to an unbearable level that assaulted all our senses. It was a mad symphony of bangs and whirs and crashes accompanied by the deep percussion of the cannons. Terrified, Jed and I sat with our knees pulled up to our chests with our arms over our heads until the constant roar of cannons eventually became more sporadic, interspersed with the pop-pop-pop of muskets off in the distance. When I finally dared to look up, it was an astonishing sight: light streamed into the barn through what must have been a thousand holes. Although the barn had not sustained a direct hit, nearby explosions had riddled the walls and roof with shrapnel. That Jed and I were alive and untouched was nothing short of a miracle.

"We need to get out of the barn," I told Jed. Our sense that it provided protection was clearly an illusion. I took his arm and began to lead him out of the barn. "Wait," he said. "What about Gus? We cannot just leave him here."

Gus was our mule, 30-years old and long retired from any real work. But Jed and I would occasionally ride him bareback around the farm to give him a little exercise and he was the closest thing we had to a pet. Reluctantly, I reversed direction and we headed for Gus's stall. Jed ran ahead and I heard him gasp when he got there. Coming up behind him, I saw Gus lying dead on the stall floor.

Blood, made black by dust, was everywhere. Hair and gore covered the stall floor and walls and the stall door had been kicked nearly off its hinges. I reckoned that Gus had been terrified by the cannonade and had tried to kick his way out of his stall until the shrapnel finally found him. I was grateful that I had not been able to hear his struggle to escape above the sounds of battle.

I stared down at Gus until the smell of blood, dung and raw meat overwhelmed me and I felt my legs begin to buckle. I had to grab onto the stall wall to support myself.

Up until that moment, I thought I understood death. Death was a natural part of life on a farm. We slaughtered animals for food, and we killed with mercy those that were sick, injured or no longer able to do their work. There always seemed to be a natural order to things; death, when it came, came for a reason. There were accidents, of course, and tragedies like my mother's death. But death was mostly tempered, doled out in small doses and often a blessing. I raised my eyes to the shattered roof of the barn and listened to the artillery shells exploding off in the distance. I

knew that with every explosion I heard, more men and animals were dying. Death seemed to be on a rampage, like a starving animal finally let out of its cage.

Jed began to sob. I pulled him close, wanting to console him, but anxious at the same time to get us away from the barn. Jed turned and buried his face in my shoulder. "What's happening to us, Teddy?" he cried. Then he suddenly became very still and looked up at me with wide eyes. "Where is Daddy?" he asked. "Oh, Teddy, where is Daddy?"

I held him close, aware of the sounds of battle once again beginning to build around us. "He will be back soon, Jed. As soon as the fighting stops, he will come back to find us. Right now, we have to find somewhere safe to hide."

The only safe place I could think of was the cellar under our house. We used it to store potatoes and other root vegetables, as well as preserves and salted meat. It was dark and musty, but fairly large and safely underground.

We peered cautiously out of the shattered barn doorway. We saw no soldiers. Smoke filled every depression in the ground like a layer of noxious fog. It was impossible to see how damaged the house might be through the haze, but I could see it was still standing. Choking on the acrid smoke, we ran around behind the house to the cellar entrance and threw the door open. Once inside, we closed the door, but we couldn't bolt it. There was no lock on the inside. It only took me a few moments to find a candle and some matches we kept near the door. I soon had the candle burning and the light threw long, flickering shadows against the whitewashed walls of the cellar.

Jed and I sat down wearily against the back wall, our hips and shoulders touching. We sat quietly for a long time listening to the ebb and flow of the battle outside our cellar. There was a terrible regularity to it: the sounds of fighting would rise to a crescendo, abate for a time, and then rise again. It was the devil's heartbeat, I thought. Exhausted by fear and comforted by the thick walls around us, Jed and I eventually fell asleep.

CHAPTER 2

The Yankees

Soldiers are often shocked the first time they lay eyes upon their enemies. They expect monsters with red eyes and clawed fingers. Instead, they see men much like themselves: young, scared and homesick. This revelation rarely reduces their willingness to fight, but it often diminishes their ability to hate.

I was awakened by a crash on the floor above our heads. Heavy footsteps followed and I could hear muffled voices. The sounds of battle outside had stopped. I nudged Jed awake and motioned for him to be quiet. There was another crash, and another, and the sounds of laughter.

“What are they doing?” Jed whispered. I shook my head, but I suspected that they were ransacking our house, looking for valuables. I figured they were Yankees because I didn’t believe any Confederate soldiers would violate southern property like that. Then it occurred to me that they might find the door to the cellar. I looked around for something with which to brace the door, but it was already too late. The door was suddenly thrown open with a crash.

Accustomed to the dim candlelight in the cellar, we were blinded by the light suddenly streaming in through the open door. A high, nasal voice in an accent I had never heard before said “Well lookee heah! It appears this cellar has rats.”

I shaded my eyes trying to make out the figure standing in front of me, but all I could see was a vague outline in a flare of bright light. A second voice came from behind the first: “Too big for rats, Kevin me boy. I think maybe we caught ourselves a couple of guerrillas.”

The first figure moved out of the light and came into focus. I could feel Jed stiffen by my side at the sight of him. He was a Yankee soldier all right, I could see patches of blue peeking out through a uniform caked with dirt. He was rail thin, his hair sticking out like sheaves of greasy wheat from under his slouch hat and his face was blackened with burnt gunpowder. He seemed always to be moving. Even when he stood still, he swayed slightly from side to side. The barrel of his musket was mere inches from my face.

The second man moved out of the light and stood beside the first. He too was caked in grime and burnt gunpowder. His beard was streaked with grey, and he appeared much older than the first soldier. His eyes were wide and white against his blackened face. He crouched down and looked at me curiously. “What is yer name, boy? What are ye doing here?”

“My name is Miller,” I said. “This is our house.”

“Oh, yer house!” He turned to the other soldier. “Ye hear that Kevin? This is young Miller’s house.” He stood up and scratched at his beard. “Where is yer Daddy and Momma?”

“Momma’s dead. Daddy was out getting supplies when the fighting started. He’ll be back for us soon.”

“Yer Daddy a soldier?”

“No, Sir. He is a farmer.”

The old soldier threw his head back and laughed, startling me, the sound bouncing around in the small cellar. “Of course he is! Everyone in this damned valley is a farmer, to hear them tell it. But I am sure ye all do your part to help the war effort, do ye not?”

I wasn’t sure what he meant. “We give a share of our wheat crop to help the Confederacy...”

The old soldier shook his head. “No, no, I mean fight. Even a farmer can pick up a rifle and kill some Yankees, can he not?”

I suddenly realized what he was saying. “My Daddy is no guerrilla!” I said, feeling a panic rising inside me. “He would never hurt anyone, Yankee or not. He is a farmer!”

The old soldier seemed to be appraising me. “Yer a big one, ain’t ye?” He stepped backwards to give himself more space to maneuver. “Ye ever kill a Yankee, boy?”

I was too terrified to speak. I just shook my head no.

The old soldier turned slightly towards the other soldier, never taking his eyes off me. “Not so brave in the light of day, is he Kevin? These guerrillas like to scurry around in the dark, ye see, like cockroaches in a tenement.”

The old soldier turned back towards me and I watched his eyes sweep the cellar. When he saw the shelves of preserves we kept there, he leaned his musket against the wall next to the young soldier and said, “Keep yer eyes on them, Kevin.” Then he walked over and picked up a jar of strawberry jam, ripped the wax plug out and began to eat it with his fingers. I watched him roll his eyes with pleasure. When he was half-finished, he threw the jar against the wall and reached for another. Apparently not finding something to his liking, he threw that one against the wall too, and the next.

I was shocked at the old soldier’s wanton destruction. Food was life to us; we had no more than we could raise or harvest.

The old soldier turned and saw me glaring at him. He stood facing me, watching my eyes as he reached behind his back and swept several more jars off the shelves. “Do ye have something you wish to say, young Miller?”

But before I could say anything, Jed spoke up: “I got something to say, you old sum bitch! Why do you not go find a store up in Winchester to attack as all you seem good for is fighting jars of preserves!”

The old Yankee eyes widened and he took a step towards Jed but I quickly stepped between them. The old Yankee and I stood face-to-face, only inches apart. I could smell the burnt gunpowder that had blackened his face. “Get out of my way,” he said.

I said nothing, not trusting what might come out of my mouth, but I did not move. The old Yankee and I stared at each other for several more moments until he turned and walked over to the younger soldier and retrieved his musket.

The two Yankee soldiers stood side-by-side, exchanging glances but seemingly unsure what to do next. Tension filled the room like a black cloud and Jed and I did not dare to move, not even to shift our weight or change the position of our arms.

“We need to get back to our unit, Alfie,” the young soldier finally said. The old soldier nodded. “Aye, Kevin, we will as soon as I take care of this guerrilla.”

The younger soldier began to sway even more. “I do not know, Alfie, he looks awfully young to be a guerrilla.”

The old soldier snorted. “Hell, Kevin, how old do ye have to be to pull a trigger? Do ye not remember the good Union soldier we found murdered up around Winchester? He were hardly older than these two.”

“I remember, Alfie, but maybe we should take them to the captain...” But the older soldier was already raising his musket. He was muttering something unintelligible as he leveled it

between my eyes and cocked the hammer. I watched as his finger tightened on the trigger, too terrified to move or call out. I knew I was about to die.

