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# Rebecca Harding Davis's Human Stories of the Civil War

by Mark Canada



*As an author who lived with the Civil War at close hand, Rebecca Harding Davis not only “saw both sides” but also saw the sordidness of the war and of the men—and women—involved in it. A parlor window on Bollingbrook Street, Petersburg, Virginia, 1865, where a shell from the Union batteries struck, courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

**N**he decades leading up to the Civil War were fabulously rich ones for American literature—an “American Renaissance” in the words of literary scholar F. O. Matthiessen. During this era, some of the nation’s writers—notably Harriet Beecher Stowe, but also Henry David Thoreau and John Greenleaf Whittier—weighed in on the wedge that was driving North and South apart in works such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and “Slavery in Massachusetts.” The war itself, however, inspired no *Iliad* or *Aeneid*, at least not at the time it was going on. The closest thing to a classic literary account of the American Civil War is *The Red Badge of Courage*, written decades later by Stephen Crane, who had not even been born when the war occurred. A few other notable responses include *Drum-Taps*, inspired by Walt Whitman’s experience working as a nurse in Washington, D.C., and Mark Twain’s account of his short stint as a Confederate soldier in “The Private History of a Campaign That Failed.” Where were the rest of America’s great writers when this grand subject was calling for literary treatment? Some, such as Thoreau and Edgar Allan Poe, did not live to see much or any of the war. Others—Stowe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville—were simply someplace else, hundreds of miles away from the fighting, in Massachusetts or New York. One American writer, however, had an intimate acquaintance with the war, and she did not have to leave home to acquire it.<sup>1</sup>

When the war began in 1861, Rebecca Harding was living in the city of Wheeling, then still a part of Virginia. Known today by her married name, Rebecca Harding Davis, she was at the beginning of a long literary career, one that would produce a dozen novels, as well as hundreds of stories, including the classic “Life in the Iron-Mills.” Ignoring the war or viewing it at arm’s length was not an option in Wheeling. In an 1899 reminiscence called “The Mean Face of War,” Davis describes Wheeling as “A sleepy old Southern town of which I knew was made by the Government, at an early date, the headquarters of a military department,” in which she witnessed military patrols of the city, bugles and flags, a bodyguard that “galloped madly up and down,” a hall that was converted into a prison, and the appearance on one occasion of wounded prisoners of war. “The sight of these limping, bloody men produced a strange effect upon the townspeople, who hitherto had really regarded the war as a passing disaster, the work of politicians which might come to an end any day,” she explains. She goes on to portray “a sudden passion of rage and malignancy” in the city. The “life-long mask of education or manners” came off the town’s residents, who ran and screamed and yelled.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, Wheeling lay in a border region. A month after the decision by the Virginia Convention of 1861 to secede, the city played host to a convention where some Virginians opposed secession. The ultimate result was a new state, West Virginia, admitted to the Union in 1863. People in this part of the country had an uncommon perspective on the conflict, as Davis explains in her memoir

*Bits of Gossip*. “Sectional pride or feeling never was so distinct or strong there as in the New England or lower Southern States,” she wrote. “We occupied the place of Hawthorne’s unfortunate man who saw both sides.” Davis’s location proved auspicious for her career—and for modern readers seeking complex pictures of the conflict—for she wrote a handful of stories that treat the war’s effects on soldiers, their families, and other Americans. In her novel *David Gaunt* and her short stories “John Lamar” and “Ellen,” Davis exposed the conflicting allegiances, the selfish interests, and the physical and emotional destruction of the Civil War, providing her readers past and present with an intimate look at the human side of what she called “the great tragedy.”<sup>3</sup>

#### STORIES OF TODAY

It was perhaps inevitable that Davis would use her fiction to report on the biggest story of the century. For one thing, as a resident of Wheeling during the first two years of the war, she was closer to the conflict than writers such as Emerson and Bronson Alcott, whom she met during a trip to Boston in 1862. In fact, these writers struck her as out of touch. “Whether Alcott, Emerson, and their disciples discussed pears or the war,” she remarks in *Bits of Gossip*, “their views gave you the same sense of unreality, of having been taken, as Hawthorne said, at too long a range.” This intimacy with the war naturally led to a great deal of knowledge about its incidents and participants, as well as some serious reflection about motivations and consequences. Some of her knowledge and reflection made its way into *Bits of Gossip*, which contains an entire chapter called “The Civil War.” Here, in fact, Davis makes a point of filling out the story of “the great tragedy,” noting that historical accounts “give no idea of the general wretchedness, the squalid misery, which entered into every individual life in the region given up to the war.” She adds:

Even on the border, your farm was a waste, all your horses or cows were seized by one army or the other, or your shop or manufactory was closed, your trade ruined. You had no money; you drank coffee made of roasted parsnips for breakfast, and ate only potatoes for dinner. Your nearest kinsfolk and friends passed you on the street silent and scowling; if you said what you thought you were liable to be dragged to the county jail and left there for months. The subject of the war was never broached in your home, where opinions differed; but, one morning, the boys were missing. No one said a word, but one gray head was bent, and the happy light died out of the old eyes and never came to them again. Below all the squalor and discomfort was the agony of suspense or the certainty of death. But the parsnip coffee and the empty purse certainly did give a sting to the great overwhelming misery, like gnats tormenting a wounded man.<sup>4</sup>

Elsewhere in her memoir, Davis points to other details that “never have been painted for posterity”—the fact, for example, that the soldiers “were not all fervid, chivalric Robert Shaws or Robert Lees,” that in fact many were desperate for military pay. Some were convicts, who “raged like wild beasts through the mountains of the border States,” who “murdered men, women, and children,” who “cut out the tongues of old men who would not answer their questions.” Ignorance of “sordid facts” about the war, Davis says, has caused the nation’s youth “to look upon war as a kind of beneficent deity.” She acknowledges that war could have positive effects. “But it is only fair, too,” she adds, “to let them know that the garments of the deity are filthy and that some of her influences debase and befoul a people.”<sup>5</sup>

Reporting the “sordid facts” that many Americans never saw was a point of focus for Davis from the beginning of her career as a professional author and pioneer realist. In “Life in the Iron-Mills,” the first story she published in a national magazine and still the best known of all her fiction, her narrator invites readers to “come right down” with her and see a world unknown to them, a world of poverty and misery liable to disturb those unfamiliar with it. In 1862, the year after “Life in the Iron-Mills” appeared in James T. Fields’s *Atlantic Monthly*, she delivered more disturbing pictures of working-class Americans in her first novel, *The Story of Today*, later published in book form under the title *Margret Howth*. Over the next four decades, she produced many more stories and novels, a number of which show the same drive to expose readers to something hidden—to “make it a real thing” to them, as she put it in “Life in the Iron-Mills.” Indeed, Davis, who had worked for the *Wheeling Intelligencer* in the 1850s and later served as a contributing editor to the *New York Tribune*, often acted like a kind of alternative journalist, reporting news to her readers through fiction. As Sharon Harris has suggested, the title of her first novel points to an approach that Davis would use throughout her career, which featured many stories of today. Unlike Crane, who drew on others’ accounts of the conflict, Davis covered the Civil War from the position of a reporter on the ground, one who saw the devastation as it occurred; but rather than cover the battles themselves, as newspapers were doing, she chose to explore the human stories behind and around the war. Because she lived in a border region, furthermore, she knew the war in a way even the reporters did not, for she and her neighbors felt its impact. Critical of stereotypes, as well as simplified and romanticized images of war, Davis doggedly strove to capture its realities and complexities in her fiction.<sup>6</sup>

#### THE “HUMANITY DEEPER THAN PATRIOTISM”

Davis’s first substantial fictional treatment of the war came in the form of a short story. “John Lamar,” published in the April 1862 issue of the *Atlantic*, tells



*Davis was closer to the Civil War than writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Bronson Alcott, both of whom struck her as out of touch. Davis, ca. 1865, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.*

the story of a Confederate prisoner of war and his slave, along with a few Union soldiers who are his captors. Like Twain's "The Private History of a Campaign That Failed," published some two decades after the war's end, Davis's story features a setting and action that challenge romantic notions of war. Lamar, the lone captive in a makeshift prison, engages in no glorious triumphs or noble sacrifices, only conversations, reminiscences, and plans of escape. Some conflict has preceded the story's action, but it was far from noble: a house has been burned by Confederate-favoring "Bush-whackers." Davis notes that these "Bush-whackers" and the Union-favoring "Snake-hunters" are "armies used in Virginia as tools for rapine and murder." At least two people have died: Lamar's grandfather and a neighbor girl, whose dead body has been exposed for days. One of the Snake-hunters takes some of the girl's hair "as a trophy," and Lamar "wondered for which flag *she* died."<sup>7</sup>

Early in the story, the sentry Dave Hall, "a raw boat-hand from Illinois," sees the war in simple terms, aided by images from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Hall, Davis writes, "had enlisted to free the Uncle Toms, and carry God's vengeance to the Legrees." Davis further suggests that Hall, faced with Lamar and his slave, forces them into this mold: "Here they were, a pair of them." Hall

also delivers a pro-Union, abolitionist speech in which he reduces the war to God's judgment on the wicked:

"The day of the Lord cometh; it is nigh at hand. Who can abide it? What saith the prophet Jeremiah? 'Take up a burden against the South. Cry aloud, spare not. Woe unto Babylon, for the day of her vengeance is come, the day of her visitation! . . . I will render unto her the evil she hath done in my sight, saith the Lord.'"

Hall himself is the victim of a different stereotype; as Lamar's slave Ben asks, "How many wells hev *yer* poisoned since yer set out?"<sup>8</sup>

Contrasted with these simplistic pictures of the war and its participants is Davis's own complex portrait, which challenges both romanticized views of the war and appearances in general, ultimately casting doubt on Americans' ability to read the war or the people involved in it, particularly the enslaved — or at least their ability to read such things clearly from the sources of information they had at their disposal. From its first sentence, "John Lamar" peels the veneer of language and ideation from the objective realities that lay beneath them. "The guard-house was, in fact, nothing but a shed in the middle of a stubblefield," the story begins. Davis goes on to reveal that the "sentry" is actually "a raw boat-hand" who wears ragged trousers like the ones Ben wears. The story's message, however, is not merely that things are not what they seem, but that people and things are complex, multilayered. Observers may detect a shed and a boat-hand, but discriminating eyes see that the one is also a guardhouse and the other is indeed a sentry. Other features and characters in the story have two or more sides as well. Lamar can look around at the icy hills and "dreary flats" surrounding him now, but he also can recall a more pleasant appearance, one apparently bearing an "outlook of joy" and "worship." Union captain Charley Dorr is a "puny little man, with thin womanish hair, and womanish face: but not the less the hero of his men." Lamar is "coarse, arrogant, of dogged courage, keen palate at the table, as keen eye on the turf" when he is with his fellow officers, but his younger sister, Floy, "knew the way to something below all this." The characters' allegiances are likewise complex. Lamar is held captive on Virginia land once owned by his own grandfather, land now owned by Captain Dorr. He and Dorr had known each other, loved the same woman, and even planned the shed in which Lamar was now a prisoner. Davis writes, "Dorr had no near relations; Lamar—they had played marbles together—stood to him where a younger brother might have stood."

A central figure in the story is the ambiguous, ambivalent Ben, Lamar's slave. Physically, he is "a gigantic fellow, with a gladiator's muscles." Like the real gladiators of old, however, he must yield to another. Along with this irony, mystery surrounds him. Davis's introduction of him in the story's first paragraph alludes to both the act of reading him and the difficulty in doing so: "A negro was crouching

outside, his knees cuddled in his arms to keep warm: a field-hand, you could be sure from the face, a grisly patch of flabby black, with a dull eluding word of something, you could not tell what, in the points of eyes, — treachery or gloom.” Here is reference after reference to mystery, not only in the descriptors “dull” and “eluding,” but also in the indefinite pronoun “something,” in the comment “you could not tell what,” and in the twin possibilities of “treachery” and “gloom.” Even his stance is indistinct and ambiguous — to crouch is neither to sit nor to stand, and it may suggest subservience or poise preceding an attack. Later, he presents an exterior that hides what may be burning inside: “Yet if any savage longing, smouldering for years, was heating to madness now in his brain, there was no sign of it in his face. Vapid, with sordid content, the huge jaws munching tobacco slowly, only now and then the beady eyes shot a sharp glance after Dorr.” It is significant, too, that Ben is, at various points in the story, “hid back in the shade” or “in the shadow of the shed.” Ben himself cannot easily reconcile or even read his own emotions. Like Lamar, he is ambivalent toward the sentry. “He had a contempt for Dave and his like,” Davis explains. “Lamar would have told you Dave’s words were true, but despised the man as a crude, unlicked bigot. Ben did the same, with no words for the idea.” Likewise, Ben feels “affection” for Lamar and “tenderness and awe” when he thinks of Lamar’s little sister, but his “simple, kindly nature” also struggles “madly with something beneath, new and horrible.” After agreeing to help Lamar escape from the guardhouse, he finds himself adrift:

A vague fear beset him — of the vast, white cold, — the glowering mountains, — of himself; he clung to the familiar face, like a man drifting out into an unknown sea, clutching some relic of the shore. When Lamar fell asleep, he wandered uncertainly towards the tents. The world had grown new, strange; was he Ben, picking cotton in the swamp-edge? — plunging his fingers with a shudder in the icy drifts.

Eventually, the sentry’s preaching goads Ben to act on impulses that are anything but affectionate or tender, and here, too, lies an ironic duality. Christianity, often a force for peace, has driven a man to violence, thanks at least in part to the sentry’s reading of Jeremiah’s prophecy against Babylon, which the sentry likens to the South. Davis alludes to the contrasts in the adherents and effects of religion in at least two points in the story. Near the beginning, we see the sentry “choking down an oath into a grim Methodist psalm,” and Davis notes, “Our men of the Northwest have enough brawny Covenanter muscle in their religion to make them good haters for opinion’s sake.” Later, when a psalm takes hold of Ben’s emotions, Davis says, “In old times David’s harp charmed away the demon from a human heart. It roused one now, never to be laid again.”<sup>10</sup>

By the story’s end, even the sentry Hall, an outsider, finds it difficult to hold on to his simplistic notions of the war. He has seen Lamar, stabbed by his own slave



with a dagger Hall has given him, recall his beloved sister Floy and quote scripture on his deathbed. Hall calls this Rebel's faith a "strange delusion" and tries to cling to the notion of "vengeance of the Lord against Babylon." "Yet he could not forget the murdered man sitting there in the calm moonlight, the dead face turned towards the North,—the dead face, whereon little Floy's tears should never fall," Davis writes. "The grave, unmoving eyes seemed to the boatman to turn to him with the same awful question. 'Was this well-done?' they said." Hall heard this same question come from Lamar's lips as he was dying. No one—not Lamar, not Hall, not even the narrator—reveals what "this" is. A note in a recent collection of Davis's fiction points to a biblical verse, Matthew 25:21. In the King James Version, the line reads, "His lord said unto him, Well done, *thou* good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord." Lamar, as death approached, perhaps wondered whether "this"—his life? his role in the war?—would meet with the approval of the Lord, but the question also haunts his enemy, who is playing his own role.<sup>11</sup> Once confident in the righteousness of the war, Hall is now beset with doubt:

God, he thought, had met in judgment with His people. Yet he uttered no cry of vengeance against the doomed city. With the dead face before him, he bent his eyes to the ground, humble, uncertain,—speaking out of the ignorance of his own weak, human soul.

"The day of the Lord is nigh," he said; "it is at hand; and who can abide it?"<sup>12</sup>

Hall's partial epiphany deprives him of a belief that had once provided security, but does not replace it with anything that will provide a clear direction. The final question, which had figured in Hall's own sermon on the righteousness of the war on the South, now, in this new context, has implications for this man and his fellow Union soldiers as well. It is a question for Davis's readers as well, for they—unlike the readers of *The Red Badge of Courage*, Twain's "Private History," or other belated treatments of the war—were living with the war, its immediate effects, and, perhaps most pertinent for Davis, the decisions to be made about it. As one who lived with the war at close hand, Davis could not see it in simple terms of good versus evil. She not only "saw both sides," but also saw the sordidness of the war and of the men—and women—involved in it. "These are sad lonesome days for us here," she wrote to her friend Annie Fields, who lived in Boston. "The war is surging up close about us.—O Annie if I could put into your and every true woman's heart the inexpressible loathing I have for it! If you could only see the other side enough to see the wrong the tyranny on both!" Later in the letter, Davis adds, "I am glad you are so far away from it—I could tell you things *I know* that would make your heart sick." Davis's proximity to the people and the action allowed her to see the full complexity of the Civil War, which she renders in "John Lamar" through a blend of diction, imagery, characterization, and plot.<sup>13</sup>



*Much of Davis's later work concerned other topics. In Put Out of the Way (1870), for instance, she calls attention to the practice of committing sane people to insane asylums. John Andross (1874) exposes the human side of the Whiskey Ring, and other stories examine the interior lives of women. Frontispiece portrait from John Andross, published by Orange Judd Company.*

*David Gaunt*, published shortly after “John Lamar” in the *Atlantic*, reported just the sort of news that would have sickened the hearts of Annie and many other Americans in the North and South alike: news of a woman who “found her boy’s half-charred body left tied to a tree by Rebel scouts,” of a mass burning of homes by Union troops, and of “women and children flying half-naked and homeless through the snow.” Most of the novella portrays life—and, significantly, thought—on the margins of the war, where Virginians with allegiances to one another are taking opposite sides. Joe Scofield, whose son has died at Manassas, is “a Rebel in every bitter drop of his heart’s blood,” whereas David Gaunt, a minister with whom he has a strong bond, plans to enlist in the Union Army, believing that it is doing God’s work and that “through its success the golden year of the world would begin on earth.” Meanwhile, Scofield’s daughter, Theodora, is in love with a Union man named Douglas Palmer, once a close friend of her dead brother. “She don’t take sides sharp in this war,” her father says, adding that “she isn’t keen till put her soul intill anythin’ but lovin’.” Davis considers the perspectives and motivations of others as well, presenting a panorama of patriotism, self-interest, duty, and naked emotion. A Union lieutenant, who himself “had quit the hog-killing for the man-killing business, with no other motive than the percentage,” remarks that some people are siding with the Confederates, “’T depends on who burned their barns fust.” Later, Palmer reflects on the women he sees, as well as his own beloved Theodora, also known as “Dode”:

Theodora, he thought, angrily, looked at the war as these women did, had no poetic enthusiasm about it, did not grasp the grand abstract theory on either side. She would not accept it as a fiery, chivalric cause, as the Abolitionist did, nor as a stern necessity, like the Union-saver. The sickly Louisianian, following her son from Pickens to Richmond, besieging God for vengeance, with the mad impatience of her blood, or the Puritan mother praying beside her dead hero-boy, would have called Dode cowardly and dull. So would those blue-eyed, gushing girls who lift the cup of blood to their lips with as fervid an *abandon* as ever did French *bacchante*. Palmer despised them. Their sleazy lives had wanted color and substance, and they found it in a cant of patriotism, in illuminating their windows after slaughter, in dressing their tables with helmets of sugar, (after the fashion of the White House,)—delicate *souvenirs de la guerre*.

It is not difficult to recognize Davis herself in this portrait of Dode. Neither clings to a principle or exploits the war as an opportunity to give “color” to her life. For neither is there any intellectual or emotional means to rationalize or absorb the war’s baseness and devastation. Dode, Davis writes, “talked plain Saxon of it, and what it made of men; said no cause could sanctify a deed so vile,—nothing could be holy which turned honest men into thieves and assassins.” Palmer, who “accepted it, in all its horror, as a savage necessity,” regrets this woman’s condemna-

tion of the war, perhaps in an attempt to distance himself from feelings that also trouble him. Davis writes that he considered Dode's "notions" of the war "low to degradation," but that she "thought they struck bottom on some eternal truth, a humanity broader than patriotism."<sup>14</sup>

*David Gaunt* pits personal allegiances against political ones with both tender and tragic results. Palmer asks his "Uncle Scofield" whether the conflict will divide them and tells him that he and Scofield's son, George, remained friends even after they took opposite sides in the conflict. For his part, Scofield offers his hand to Palmer and later places it on his shoulder: "He had been used to walk so with George. This was his boy's friend: that thought filled and warmed his heart so utterly that he forgot his hand rested on a Federal uniform." Scofield and Gaunt engage in a similar communion. On the night before a planned Union attack on a Confederate camp at Blue's Gap in Virginia, they visit Gaunt's church, where Gaunt re-reads an inscription Scofield had written in a Bible, a gift to him after the minister had cared for George when he was suffering from cholera: "To my Dear friend, David Gaunt. May 1860, the Lord be Betwien mee And thee. J. Scofield." Although they are taking opposing sides in the conflict, there is only affection between them. There is a twist, however. Scofield reveals to Gaunt that he is going to warn the Confederates of the Union attack. In the dramatic scene that ensues, Scofield tries to get to the Confederate camp before their attackers surprise and slaughter them, while Gaunt follows with the Union troops. In a climactic moment, Gaunt is in a position to fire—or not to fire—on his friend.<sup>15</sup>

Shooting a close friend, of course, is ordinarily an unnatural notion counter to reason, but the war has changed everything, corrupting nature. Indeed, inversions appear throughout the story, painting a picture of a world turned upside down, twisted unnaturally by the demon of war. Perhaps no one feels the irony more intensely than Gaunt, who is torn between his peaceful inclination and a sense of obligation to participate in the war:

To-night his whole nature rebelled against this carnage before him, — his duty; scorned it as brutal; cried out for a life as peaceful and meek as that of Jesus, (as if that were not an absurdity in a time like this,) for happiness, for this woman's love; demanded it, as though these things were its right!<sup>16</sup>

The diction here is significant: the war runs counter to Gaunt's own internal "nature" and thus is a corruption of God's creation. Even a drive to emulate Jesus—ordinarily a true and righteous feeling for a minister and indeed any Christian—is an "absurdity" in a time of war. In time, Gaunt gives himself over to war, enlisting in the Union army, but continues to struggle with the righteousness of it. As he marches to battle, he contemplates what is supposed to be his Christian mission. "He was sent of Jesus," Davis writes, "To do what? Preach peace by murder?" Scofield is similarly conflicted, wanting to be close to Jesus while strug-

gling against “revenge and blood-thirstiness” brought about, at least partly, by the death of his son in the war. Davis writes that “sometimes he felt as if a devil possessed him, since George died.” War, it seems, has created or loosed this “devil” within him, turning him against his better nature. There are more things wrong here. War is often seen as a masculine endeavor—“True work for a man,” Davis calls it in her dramatization of Gaunt’s psychic conflict—and yet it has the opposite effect on Scofield, who “had a dull foreboding of the end of the night’s battle” and “clung with a womanish affection to anything belonging to his home.” There is something unnatural, too, in the impact—or, rather, lack of impact—of a beautiful morning scene on the soldiers:

Dawn was coming. The gray sky heated and glowed into inner deeps of rose; the fresh morning air sprang from its warm nest somewhere, and came to meet them, like some one singing a heartsome song under his breath. The faces of the columns looked more rigid, paler, in the glow: men facing death have no time for fresh morning thoughts.<sup>17</sup>

A similar incongruity can be seen in Davis’s description of the opening of a battle:

For a moment the silence was unbroken. The winter’s dawn, with pink blushes, and restless soft sighs, was yet wakening into day. The next, the air was shattered with the thunder of the guns among the hills, shouts, curses, death-cries.

The war even threatens Dode’s all but unshakable faith, as the fighting has seemingly left her without loved ones to serve: “How wide and vacant the world looked to her! What could she do there? Why was she born? She must show her Master to others,—of course; but—she was alone: everybody she loved had been taken from her.” Such is the effect of the war on feelings, on fellowship, on faith. War, in this story, runs counter to both reason and emotion, counter even to nature.<sup>18</sup>

Still, there is room for a positive outcome. Enduring the trauma of killing a friend in war, Gaunt goes on to work in a hospital, where he brings joy to patients and where he himself experiences strength, health, and peace. “A busy life, not one moment idle; but the man grows strong in it,—a healthy servant, doing a healthy work,” Davis writes. “The patients are glad when he comes to their ward in turn. How the windows open, and the fresh air comes in! . . . how full of innermost life he is! how real his God seems to him!”<sup>19</sup>

As *David Gaunt* shows, the effects of the war extended well beyond the battlefields, affecting families of soldiers and other Americans. One of these victims of the conflict is the subject of a story published a year after “John Lamar” and *David Gaunt*. In “Ellen,” the title character has just lost her mother. Upon learning that her twin, Joe, unaware of their mother’s death, has enlisted in the Union Army, she leaves her home in Michigan in search of him, traveling all the way to a camp

# *Bits of Gossip*

By

*Rebecca Harding Davis*

*Author of "Silhouettes of American Life"*

*"Doctor Warrick's Daughters"*



*Boston and New York*

*Houghton, Mifflin & Company*

*The Riverside Press, Cambridge*

*1904*

*In Bits of Gossip, Davis recounted a scene she witnessed when she was traveling by train to Philadelphia. Men unloaded a coffin, and a woman on the platform wrapped her arms around it and put her head down on it: "When we hear of thousands of men killed in battle it means nothing to us. We forget it in an hour. It is these little things that come home to us. When we remember them we say: — "That is war!"* Bits of Gossip, title page, published by Houghton, Mifflin & Company, 1904.

in Virginia. The victim of a mysterious condition that leaves her childlike and subject to catatonic episodes, Ellen needs her twin even more than ordinary siblings would; her situation points to the impact of a war that deprives families of their young men. Although the narrative focuses on Ellen and not on Joe or his experience at the front, it does feature some brief references to the crudeness of the soldiers in camp. When Ellen enters camp, she is accosted by men who "crowded to her with their drunken jeers, trying to kiss her, pelting her with stones, the mud from the camps." Accused of being a spy, she then endures an interrogation and even a blow from a sutler, who has her confined in a guardhouse. Joe finally appears, although he has lost part of his leg. Davis describes some personal attention from a medic and notes:

There had been but few battles then, wounded men were few in number; surgeons had time to be wondering, and speculative, and kind. Every woman in the town, where this hospital was located, knew the particulars of every case, discussed at their tea-tables whether Lieutenant More could bear ice-cream yet, and whether young Jones ought to have beef-tea or panada to-morrow.

By foreshadowing the events to come, this aside points to the physical destruction that the war will wreak on America's youth.<sup>20</sup>

Neither "Ellen" the story nor Ellen the character ends there, however. Like *David Gaunt*, "Ellen" is, in the end, a story not of evil and destruction, but of goodness and endurance. Even in time of war, virtually every man and woman Ellen encounters, unlike the crude soldiers and abusive sutler, treat her with kindness. There are, for example, the soldiers charged with ushering her to Columbus on a train. "There was a good deal of drinking and hard oaths in the train that night—our armies swear terribly as that in Flanders—but there was neither drinking nor loud talking in the car with Ellen." After she arrives and asks various strangers in the city for information, the "answer was always gentle." A kindly Quaker woman takes Ellen into her home, and soldiers camped nearby, "having heard the sorrowful story," send her gifts they have received from their own families. Later, a stranger who encounters her on the road gives her a ride in his wagon, and an army captain takes her to his home, where his wife comforts her. Thanks to all of this goodness, Ellen eventually finds her brother. Although he has been maimed by the war and is now without part of his leg, the two twins together make a whole. Back in their hometown in Michigan, where they live together far from the war, "there is not a more cheery heartsome cottage than Ellen's." Here, where we see a table set and a lamp burning, Ellen is at home—a home, one suspects, that she has helped to make, similar to the ones where she found comfort and love while still on her journey. This brief but suggestive conclusion resembles the end of the final paragraphs of *David Gaunt*. These two stories of war survivors, one a man and the other a woman, while not shrinking from the horrors of war, ultimately affirm the human spirit, which soars above them.<sup>21</sup>

After her marriage in 1863, Davis moved to Philadelphia, putting some distance between herself and the border region. Much of her later work concerned other stories of the day. In *Put Out of the Way* (1870), for instance, she calls attention to the practice of committing sane people to insane asylums. *John Andross* (1874) exposes the human side of the Whiskey Ring, and other stories examine the interior lives of women. Thanks to her contemporary fictional reports of the war as it was lived by her and her neighbors in western Virginia, however, even those who were separated from it by space or time could understand some of its realities and complexities. Reminiscing on the conflict in *Bits of Gossip* some forty years later, Davis recounted a scene she witnessed in the hills when she was traveling by train to Philadelphia. Men unloaded a coffin, and a woman on the platform wrapped her arms around it and put her head down on it. Davis wrote:

When we hear of thousands of men killed in battle it means nothing to us. We forget it in an hour. It is these little things that come home to us. When we remember them we say:—"That is war!"<sup>22</sup>

In the stories she wrote in the border region during the Civil War, Davis gave Americans past and present her own set of people and scenes, ones that might cause us to say, “*That is war!*”

#### NOTES

1. F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (Oxford University Press, 1941).

2. For the sake of consistency and clarity, I hereafter refer to the author by her married name, although she published some of the works discussed here before her 1863 marriage to Clarke Davis; Rebecca Harding Davis, “The Mean Face of War,” in *A Rebecca Harding Davis Reader*, ed. Jean Pfaelzer (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), 430–431.

3. Rebecca Harding Davis, *Bits of Gossip* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1904), 109, 116.

4. *Ibid.*, 36.

5. *Ibid.*, 36; *Ibid.*, 116–117, 123, 124–125.

6. For an extended treatment of Davis’s pioneering work in realism, see Sharon M. Harris, *Rebecca Harding Davis and American Realism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); Rebecca Harding Davis, “Life in the Iron-Mills,” in *A Rebecca Harding Davis Reader*, 4; *Ibid.*, 4; Harris, *Rebecca Harding Davis and American Realism*, 9. For discussions of Davis’s use of fiction as a form of journalism, see Mark Canada, “Stories of Today: Rebecca Harding Davis’s Investigative Fiction,” *Journalism History* 38, no. 2 and Mark Canada, *Literature and Journalism in Antebellum America* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 141–148. For newspaper accounts of the war, see “The Important Victory in Tennessee,” *New York Herald*, February 8, 1862; “Important War News. The Great Battle of Antietam Valley,” *New York Herald*, September 19, 1862; “The Fighting of Wednesday. The Fiercest Battle of the War,” *Albany Evening Journal*, September 18, 1862; and “Surrender of Harper’s Ferry. Battle in Maryland,” *Daily Richmond Enquirer*, September 20, 1862.

7. Rebecca Harding Davis, “John Lamar,” in *A Rebecca Harding Davis Reader*, 37–38. Emphasis in the original.

8. Davis, “John Lamar,” in *A Rebecca Harding Davis Reader*, 36, 49, 36.

9. *Ibid.*, 35, 36, 38, 39.

10. *Ibid.*, 35, 41, 43, 44, 47, 49.

11. *Ibid.*, 40, 52–53; Sharon M. Harris and Robin L. Cadwallader, *Stories of the Civil War Era* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 23n.

12. Davis, “John Lamar,” 53.

13. Davis to Annie Fields, August 22, [1862], Richard Harding Davis Papers, Barrett Library, University of Virginia. Emphasis in the original.

14. Rebecca Harding Davis, *David Gaunt*, in *Stories of the Civil War Era*, 53, 65, 27, 32, 30, 51, 52–53, 53, 54, 53.

15. *Ibid.*, 57–58, 60.

16. *Ibid.*, 33–34.

17. *Ibid.*, 64, 35, 63, 59, 64.

18. *Ibid.*, 65, 69.

19. *Ibid.*, 84.

20. Davis, “Ellen,” in *Stories of the Civil War Era*, 229, 233.

21. *Ibid.*, 221–222, 234; Davis, *David Gaunt*, 84.

22. Davis, *Bits of Gossip*, 120.