

Uncle Tom's Cabin

It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain.

From Abraham Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address"

Upon falling asleep on the night of the next full moon, Robbie was visited by Red Hawk.

"Hi, Robbie."

"Hi."

"Well, have you had any thoughts since we spoke last time? Is there anything you want to see now?"

"Would it be possible to learn anything about Mr. Turnbull's relationship with the previous custodian?"

"Sure. Let's take a look."

Red Hawk took Robbie for another trip through time. "This is Gettysburg National Military Park in May, 1913. The man you see there," Red Hawk pointed, "is General Joshua 'Lawrence' Chamberlain, who led the Twentieth Maine in an historic Civil War battle here in 1863."

Red Hawk quietly narrated the solemn scene as Robbie watched the old man, who sat on a large rock that held a granite monument just off a trail at the bottom of Little Round Top. Robbie immediately identified the figure on the monument next to Chamberlain as the one on the shaft of the stick. He broke his silence, asking Red Hawk in an excited whisper, "Is that the same cross that's on the stick?"

"Yes it is, Robbie. It's called the Maltese Cross—it's the symbol used to represent the Union troops. Chamberlain carved it into the shaft on his visit here on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the battle. I watched him do it. It took him most of the day to get it how he wanted it."

Another part of the puzzle solved, Robbie mused. They continued to watch.

Chamberlain sat lost in thought, whispering quietly to himself with a canteen lying by his side and holding the stickball stick gently in his now-feeble hands. He had performed this same ritual many times before. The general had just completed an extensive walk of the sacred grounds of the Battlefield, pondering the momentous battle that took place between the Army of Northern Virginia and the Army of the Potomac on July 2, 1863. He had visited the cemetery where, four months after

the battle, President Lincoln delivered the "Gettysburg Address." He had also just visited the famous stone wall where the desperate Pickett's Charge ultimately withered, inches short of a possible Confederate victory—a victory that might well have earned the South secession in the War Between the States. Chamberlain had finally arrived here at the foot of Little Round Top, the true purpose of his trip.

Robbie and Red Hawk stood within hearing distance of the general and listened as he spoke to himself.

Chamberlain closed his eyes and replayed in his mind the heroics of his men—the 20th Maine Infantry Regiment—reliving the tremendous horror and ultimate triumph of that pivotal day nearly fifty years before. He thought of the men who had given their lives for a greater good—the unification of their country. Chamberlain's memory at age eighty-three recalled the events with all of the sights, sounds, smells, and emotions as fresh as if it were yesterday. The general fought back tears as he recalled the names and faces of every Maine man he had lost on that fateful day. As he conducted his heartbreaking roll call, he reminded himself of how fortunate he had been to lead those brave souls. He sat—in his earlier years he had knelt—for some 90 minutes, individually honoring each man with a

personal eulogy. It was the least he could do, he pined. They deserved so much more.

Red Hawk turned to his left, looking a few hundred yards toward the top of the narrow path, and briefed Robbie on the scene unfolding in that sector.

Doug Turnbull, Sr., and his son, ten-year-old Doug, Jr., had arrived at Gettysburg that spring day at about 10 a.m. The elder Turnbull was a well-read Civil War buff and the boy, like so many his age, was greatly intrigued by all things military. So the father and son had set off that morning from their home just north of Baltimore for a forty-five-mile day trip to the Battlefield.

That morning the senior Turnbull had observed Chamberlain making his rounds of the park. He told his son that the man looked like General Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, the hero of Little Round Top. He had seen pictures of Chamberlain in newspapers and magazines. Doug, Sr. chose to honor the privacy of the general and simply walked the grounds with his son, admonishing the boy that they should keep their distance and allow the gentleman to have his time. The father shared some pertinent biographical information on the general with his son. He noted that during the war the general had been shot six

times. The boy was overwhelmed by the presence of the general and begged his father to talk to him. Finally, the general rose from his pew among the rocks and boulders at the flank of Little Round Top. The Turnbull father and son stood nearly one hundred yards away, allowing the general all the privacy they felt he needed.

The senior Turnbull was particularly sensitive to what Chamberlain must have been feeling that day. As they observed the general from afar, Turnbull pondered the gloomy notion that Chamberlain might be suffering from the all-too-common melancholy that befell so many other men and women as they approached major anniversaries in their lives. He knew that Chamberlain was three months short of the fiftieth anniversary of the battle. Turnbull couldn't help but consider the uncanny coincidence that called Thomas Jefferson and John Adams to their eternal rest fifty years to the day after they signed the Declaration of Independence. He thought of the countless others who had suffered a similar fate, family members who had died on or near such anniversary dates of their spouses, siblings, parents, and children. He knew Chamberlain must have been vulnerable to such melancholy feelings at this point. Turnbull hoped his fears were unfounded, but he had lived too long

and seen too many such occurrences. He feared for the general.

To the astonishment and joy of the Turnbells, Chamberlain began to walk slowly toward them. The visitors from Baltimore made eye contact with the hero, and the general said softly, "Good afternoon, gentlemen. What a great day for a walk."

"Yes, sir," Doug, Sr., replied.

"I am Lawrence Chamberlain," the general offered in a remarkably unassuming manner. Then with a little more voice, "And who do I have the honor of meeting this fine afternoon?" He looked directly at Doug, junior.

"Douglas Turnbull, senior and junior, General, and the honor is ours," replied the senior Turnbull.

Chamberlain caught the title General in the father's introduction, though he had carefully not offered that information. The father had obviously read at some length and depth on the Civil War, Chamberlain thought to himself, for he knew that he was surely not a household name—or face—anywhere outside Maine, if even there.

"And what brings you fine gentlemen here today?" the general asked.

“Just taking the boy on a trip to experience some history, sir”

“Are you an historian, my good man?”

“No, sir, but I’ve been greatly intrigued by the Civil War for as long as I can remember. My grandfather fought in this battle as part of the 44th New York Infantry. He survived the war but died suddenly shortly after my father was born in 1873. My father and the rest of his family have very little first-hand knowledge of the Civil War. They were far too busy just meeting their daily needs back then to think much about preserving or studying anything my grandfather had kept from that period. So I’ve tried to follow up on his service some. My boy is quite taken with it as well.”

Turnbull’s remark about his grandfather immediately stirred in Chamberlain the feeling that through the brotherhood of arms he was kin to these strangers.

“God bless your grandfather,” Chamberlain proclaimed. “Was he a soldier or an officer?”

Conventional wisdom would have placed higher esteem in being able to respond ‘officer,’ but Turnbull had read enough to know how Chamberlain felt about his soldiers and he proudly replied, “Soldier, sir, an infantryman who advanced to sergeant by the end of the war.”

“Magnificent! Ah, the soldiers, what great men. They never get near the credit they deserve. My compliments to your grandfather, my boy,” Chamberlain beamed, still addressing the elder Turnbull.

“When we saw you this morning, sir, it struck me that you were perhaps General Chamberlain from the Twentieth Maine. Is that correct?” Turnbull posed, one-hundred percent sure that it was, else he would not dare be so bold.

“I am that man, sir. May I ask how you would know?”

“As I said, I’ve tried to study the war some, and I have seen your essays and articles as well as pictures of you in magazines and newspapers.” Young Doug, who had been standing close by his father as still as a post, staring at the great hero, finally stirred.

“Is that a l-l-lacrosse stick that you are holding, sir?” the boy asked timidly.

“Well, I believe it is, young man! The man who gave me this stick called its game ‘stickball’ from the Cherokee, but I’ve heard the game referred to as lacrosse. Are you familiar with the game?”

“Yes, sir, I have a stick of my own at home!”

“Well, then there is a good chance that you know a lot more about the game than I do. A Confederate officer gave this stick to me very near to where we are right now.”

The Turnbulls presented inquisitive looks, so Chamberlain continued, “It’s quite a long story with which I will not burden you, but the officer was wounded and I saw to him. Later at the field hospital, he presented me with this stick. It was a noble gesture that I thought myself unworthy of at the time, nor am I sure that I am worthy today. I carry it with me every time I come here. It helps me regain the vision of that day.”

The father asked about the upcoming fiftieth anniversary reunion. Chamberlain shared that the objective of his present trip was to represent his state of Maine at the conference to plan the reunion. Most of the officials were to arrive the next day, he explained. He had arrived early to enjoy peace on the field alone. Tomorrow would be far too hectic. For the next hour or so, the general was most gracious, fielding and asking questions of the man and boy.

“I plan to be here for the big event on July 1,” Chamberlain announced. “I would very much like to meet you here at that time, but I fear that there will be as many as 50,000 veterans, camped

all around. I would not recommend this event for the public. It will be a solemn occasion for the veterans and of little use to the general population. Oh, I'm sure there will be many others here for it, including the newspapers, but it really is for the soldiers. However, if you'd like to attend, I'll be sure to have some time with you. I'll allow you to decide.

"I make a trip here most years, or at least I did until my wife passed away in 1905, the 18th of October to be exact. Since then this is my first return. Before that, we visited every year or two. Perhaps I could meet you here again next summer and, in the meantime, if you wish we can continue our acquaintance through the mail. Here is my address. If you will forgive me, my good men, I should be leaving for my lodging now. These old legs aren't what they used to be." The father and son excused the general and stood spellbound as Chamberlain slowly departed.

Red Hawk then conveyed to Robbie the nature of the correspondence between the Turnbells and the general over the next several months.

"The first letter was to Chamberlain from the elder Turnbull, thanking him for his graciousness and informing him of his incredible impact upon the boy," Red Hawk explained.

“A few weeks later Chamberlain sent a telegram to the family announcing his regret that his ill health would prevent him from attending the fiftieth anniversary celebration, after all. This news caused the senior Turnbull to rekindle his grave concerns for the general’s health.

“Chamberlain’s old wound from Petersburg finally betrayed him in the fall of 1913, causing him to be bedridden for most of the winter. He passed away on the morning of February 24, 1914. Doug Turnbull senior read of the general’s death in the Washington Post the following day and broke the sad news to the boy. Fortunately, since the telegram of the previous summer the father had been preparing the boy. He knew that several historians believed that Chamberlain was the only soldier still suffering from his war wounds. Fifty years later all of the others had succumbed. He had beaten the odds, Turnbull reasoned, and the infinite satisfaction of having survived the fifty years made Chamberlain particularly vulnerable. Turnbull had begun to prepare the boy.”

Red Hawk then took Robbie to the Turnbull home in Baltimore on the morning of February 28, 1914. Just as Robbie and Red Hawk arrived at their station, a package arrived at the door addressed to the elder Turnbull. The return address was “J.L. Chamberlain, Brunswick, Maine.” The father was

quite alarmed to see such a return address and quickly opened the letter on the outside of the box. It read:

February 12, 1914

Dear Mr. Turnbull,

I have asked my daughter Daisy to prepare this letter and box for shipment upon the arrival of my imminent death. It is a gift from me to your fine son. I would ask you to speak with him before he opens the box, with the hope that you might be able to explain the nature of death to him...

With Warmest Regards and Thanks,

J.L. Chamberlain

The elder Turnbull obliged Chamberlain's request by speaking to the boy about the death of the general and sharing his views on life, death, and heaven. He then handed the boy the box.

*The boy opened the box and found inside it a letter from the general, an old leather bag containing the stick he had carried with him at Gettysburg with a small ball tucked away at the bottom, and in a wooden jewelry box a copy of the book *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. In the hand of Chamberlain's daughter, the letter read:*

February 12, 1914

Dear Doug,

Please accept these gifts as a token of my esteem for you and your father. The afternoon that we spent at Gettysburg was most splendid.

I send you these two gifts—both of which have meant so much to me over these many years—to help you understand some of the ways of the world at your young age. You may have read the magnificent work by Mrs. Stowe. If you have not, I commend its reading at your earliest convenience. You will note the message inside the front cover. Mrs. Stowe was the wife of one of my professors at Bowdoin. The Stowes would frequently entertain students in their home on Saturday evenings for scholarly discussion and readings. I was fortunate to have been included in those gatherings. She was a most brilliant, devout, passionate, and compassionate woman.

Doug quickly opened the front cover and saw the message:

Lawrence,

What a delight to get to know you during this unforgettable year. My gratitude for your warm reception of this story.

May the Good Lord find a way to make use of your unbounded Intellect, Spirit, and Character in easing the plight of these desperate people.

Congratulations on your Commencement from Bowdoin College.

Godspeed,

Harriet Beecher Stowe

June 12, 1852

Doug marveled at the book, not realizing the significance of a sixty-year-old signed first edition. He would read it in short order, he told himself. He continued on with the letter:

The stick I send as well, mostly because it represents so much that is good in man, even at the worst of times. As I told you last year, this stick was presented to me at the field hospital behind the Union lines at Gettysburg. I shall not dwell on my own actions during the fray, nor will I subject my daughter to recording the incident.

I can speak to the stick itself, however. Since the stick was presented to me as an act of kindness between two combatants, I have held it in the highest regard for the last fifty years. It is sufficient to say that the Confederate officer, Col. Casey, asked me to pass the stick along to a worthy young man of my choosing in the name of honor and compassion. I believe you will find the stick will aid you in learning about the proud people whence it came.

I trust you will treat this gift with the respect it has earned over the last one-hundred-plus years. At a place and time of your choosing, please pass it along to another worthy young man.

May God Bless You,

J.L. Chamberlain

Robbie looked in amazement at Chamberlain's pained signature. He turned to Red Hawk, "So that's how the stick and book were passed down?"

"Yes. A pretty remarkable story, isn't it?"

Robbie shared the details of his dream with his parents who asked him to record it in his journal.