

CONFEDERATE

HEROES

DAY

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Oh, stranger, tread lightly, 'tis holy ground here,--"The Soldier's Grave"

The man stood there straight and stern as he stared at the camera, his eyes bright and clear, immaculate in his dress uniform with his highly polished boots, his sword at his side, his right hand tucked into his tunic.

His photograph hung high on a wall in the home and the young toddler who saw it bent his head way, way back to try to look at it, but it was difficult for him to see for he was so small. His father seeing this took the photo down from where it hung and sitting down on the floor next to his son, put his arm around him, and held the photo in front of him. He spoke to his son in a soft almost reverential tone.

"Do you know who that is, Arjay?" His father asked, whispering to the one-year old. "Do you know who that is? Why, that's your ancestor. That's your Great-Granddad Bannon." Though his father had referred to the figure in the picture as the boy's great-grandfather, in actuality the man was Arjay's great-great-great-grandfather.

The toddler put his hand on the glass over the figure's face, running it across the long dark beard as if to stroke it. "Yep, Arjay, that's your Great-Granddad Bannon." The child's mother quietly came into the living room and watching her husband sitting there on the floor with their son, felt a tear come to her eye as she heard him whisper. "You're going to be a fine young man one day, Arjay," his father said softly. "Just like your Great-Granddad. You're going to be a fine young man."

As Arjay grew from a toddler to a child, he would listen intently to the stories his parents and their families had to tell about all his relations, but he took particular note of those about the man in the picture. Shortly after Arjay turned four, his parents told him of their plans to visit his ancestor. As that Saturday dawned, the father went to his son's bedroom to wake the young boy as the mother in the kitchen made a picnic lunch for the day ahead.

"Arjay, wake up. Time to get ready to visit Great-Granddad." The boy sat upright in his bed and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. His father pulled some clothes from a dresser and put them at the foot of the bed. "Come on, now. Get dressed. Your Mother's fixing breakfast." The father left the room and entered the kitchen to start the coffee as the young boy got up and began to change from his pajamas into his clothes.

After a few minutes, his mother called to him. "Arjay, are you dressed? Time for breakfast."

Arjay came into the kitchen, tucking his shirt into his pants. He'd put on his socks and his shoes which were unlaced. "Tie my shoes for me, please?" He asked.

"Arjay," his mother said as she bent down. "You're a big boy. You can do it, I know you can. I'll get this one, while you tie the other. All right?" She tied the right shoe while Arjay attempted the left one.

"Great-Granddad Bannon didn't tie his shoes," Arjay said.

"He didn't?" His mother said surprised. "Why, Arjay, now how do you know that?"

"Look at his picture," Arjay said. "He's wearing boots. He didn't need to tie them. He just pulled them on."

His mother began to laugh loudly and his father chuckled and gave him a broad grin. "He's got you there, Thelma," his father said.

"Oh, Arjay, you are so funny, and yet so wise beyond your years," his mother said as she continued to giggle at what her son had said. "He doesn't tie his shoes because he wears boots he pulls on instead."

Arjay finished attempting to tie his shoe. "How's that?" Arjay asked.

His mother inspected it and smiled at him. "That's pretty good, let me just tighten it for you. We wouldn't want you to lose your shoe, now would we?"

"No, Ma'am," Arjay said as he watched his mother redo his shoelace.

"How's that? Not too tight?"

"No, Ma'am. Just right," Arjay said. "Thank you."

She bent down and kissed him on his forehead. "You're welcome, Arjay. You're such a polite little gentleman," she said. "You just keep working those laces. You're getting the hang of it. Let me get you your cereal." She got a bowl from a cabinet and set it in front of him, then poured Arjay his cereal, sprinkled it with sugar, then poured milk over it. Arjay's mother placed sausage and fried eggs on two plates for herself and her husband as Arjay's father poured two cups of coffee. The family then sat down to breakfast at the table.

"Let's say Grace," his mother said. The family bowed their heads and offered their thanks for their meal. Then, "Amen," Arjay's mother said, and Arjay began to eat his cereal as his parents ate their sausage and eggs and drank their coffee.

When the family finished their breakfast, the mother cleaned the table and washed the dishes while the father loaded their Buick with the picnic basket and other necessities for the trip. He came back into the house, took a dishcloth, and began to dry the dishes.

"Don't worry about that," his wife said. "They can air dry. Let me just make sure I'm presentable and we can go." She went to their bedroom, leaned towards the mirror above the dresser and applied her lipstick, checked the rest of her appearance, and snapped the catch on her purse. "Ready to go, Arjay?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

She took his hand and walked with him out to the car as her husband locked the house. She set him in the backseat and buckled him secure, then climbed in beside her husband and they began the trip to their destination. They drove through their small Texas town till they came to the business district that the highway went through. Then Arjay's father turned west onto Highway 90.

"You anxious to visit your Great-Granddad Bannon, Arjay?" His mother asked him.

"Yes, Ma'am. It's a special day, isn't it?"

"That's right, Arjay. It's a memorial day for him and the other soldiers with him."

Arjay gave her a puzzled look. "I thought Memorial Day was in May."

"It is," his mother said. "But this is another one, a special one. Most soldiers have only one. But, your Great-Granddad Bannon has two. The one in May is a national holiday. But today, January 19, is a state holiday in Texas. This one is called Confederate Heroes Day."

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During the 1880s, Arjay's ancestor along with others who fought for Texas during the Civil War, proposed that a home be built for those Confederate veterans unable to care for themselves due to being either disabled or indigent. Those more fortunate offered monetary contributions to help establish and support what became the Texas Confederate Men's Home in Austin. Other former officers and enlisted men who became successful and prosperous ranchers, bankers, and businessmen in the years after the war were canvassed and they, too, were only too glad to help their less fortunate brothers in arms. They offered their private donations to support the home until 1891 when the state of Texas assumed oversight for the care and support of its Confederate veterans.

More than a few of those that Arjay's ancestor served with lived out their years after the war in the home. They were not just comrades-in-arms, they had been friends, and even more than that, brothers in service to the cause, to Texas, and to one another.

It was not infrequent that business would take him to Austin, and when it did, he would take time to stop by the Home to visit those he knew. They would sit and talk of their time in uniform, not of battle, but of the times they spent with one another; the funny occurrences, some of the sad, and how at night, when the enemy was far away, they would have their campfires going and they would sit about them. Someone would have a fiddle or a harmonica and the man would begin to play, and the men, their day done, would sing along to the melody.

Now, too, while Arjay's ancestor visited, the memory would come to one of them, and the five or six of them gathered there sitting on the veranda, would begin to sing their old camp songs. Their bodies weak, but their voices strong, they would sing at first softly amongst themselves, then more loudly for the benefit of the other men who lived at the home, some of whom would join in as best they could, too.

After a while a nurse would come and inform Arjay's ancestor that she regretted to inform him that visiting hours were coming to a close for the day. He would take his gold pocket watch and look at the time and nod his head. "So it is. So it is," he would softly say.

"Thank you for coming, sir," one of the men would say.

"No, thank you for allowing me to spend time with each of you," Great-Granddad Bannon would say. "It is an honor to be in the presence of such brave men that I have had the pleasure and the privilege to serve with." He would stand up and salute them. Those who were able to, who were not missing a limb, an arm or a leg, would stand, too, and return the salute. Then Arjay's ancestor would shake each man's hand, slipping a \$5 gold piece into it.

"Spoils of war," he explained. "Captured Yankee gold. For an extra ration of tobacco," he would say, and the men would laugh and thank him. "I will see you all next time I am in Austin." And he would leave.

Over the years, there would be fewer and fewer men for him to visit. Then the day came when he would visit them no longer.

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"Did Great-Granddad Bannon die near here?" Arjay asked.

"No," Arjay's father said. "He died in town. Near where we live."

"Was it in battle?"

"No, Arjay, he survived the war and lived to be 85-years old," Arjay's father said. "After the war, he swore an oath of allegiance. Then he went back to his wife to raise their family, including a long line of soldiers. One son fought the Spanish in the Philippines. Two grandsons fought against the Kaiser. Then a great-grandson fought the Japanese, two others Hitler. Other family later fought the Communists in Korea and Vietnam, then Grenada. I was in Afghanistan and Iraq fighting the Taliban and other radical Islamic terrorists."

"You remember what unit your Father was in, Arjay?" His mother asked.

"Yep," Arjay said. "Third Division. Rock of the Marne."

Arjay's parents laughed. "That's right, Son." His father said. "'Rock of the Marne.'"

"Your Daddy and all of your relatives were very, very lucky," Arjay's mother said. "They all came back home, like your Great-Granddad Bannon, without a physical scratch from battle."

"Not everyone is that lucky," Arjay's father said, thinking of some of the men he had served with. "No, not everyone is that lucky." He paused in silence for a few moments before continuing. "Great-Granddad Bannon served under Col. 'Rip' Ford and had a horse shot out from under him at Palmito Ranch. It was the last battle of the Civil War and the Texas forces won it, but they'd already lost the war. It was a month after Appomattox."

Arjay looked out his window at the countryside as the car drove along Highway 90, imagining the men marching off to fight for what they believed in. At their head astride his mount, Arjay envisioned his Great-Granddad Bannon. The motion of the car began to slowly rock him, and his eyes grew heavy, and soon he fell asleep in the backseat.

After a while, Arjay's father turned off Highway 90 onto a paved county road. His mother turned around and softly called to him. "Arjay, wake up. We're almost there." She looked down the road towards the cemetery's entrance and saw several flashing lights. "Henry, what's that?" She asked as they pulled up.

Outside the entrance were several cars of the county sheriff, the deputies in their Stetsons looking stern and serious. They were not there for ceremony, but for acts of a criminal nature.

SLAVEHOLDERS

The word was spray painted about the columns at the cemetery's entrance and inside on its gazebo. In a section reserved for those who had fought for Texas and the Confederacy, several gravestones were also spray painted before they were turned over and knocked down.

The sheriff and his deputies had gathered as much evidence as they could and were collecting and rolling up the yellow crime scene tape they had originally cordoned off the area

with. There was not any more that they could do of an investigative nature, and they finished their work with enough time for the scheduled ceremony to begin on time at noon. They would remain on the scene to discourage any other lawlessness.

Arjay noticed the word at the entrance. "What's that say?"

"Slaveholders," his father said.

"What's a slaveholder?" Arjay asked.

"A slaveholder is someone who owns another man as a piece of property, and makes him work for him against his will. Like the Egyptians did with the Israelites. Slavery is a great wrong."

Arjay was silent in thought for a moment. "Was Great-Granddad Bannon a slaveholder?" He asked quietly.

His father paused for a moment. "Arjay, I truthfully don't know," he said softly. "I wish I did so I could give you an honest answer. Before the war, he lived in town and owned and ran a blacksmith shop. He was married and had children. Did he have slaves working around the house or in the kitchen or helping with the children? I don't know. Did he have slaves working with him in his shop? I don't know. Would it surprise me? No. But, I just don't know.

"What I do know is that for four years of his life, Arjay, he was on the wrong side of history. He fought against the Union. But after the war, he swore an oath of allegiance to the Union and he was welcomed back as a citizen."

While Arjay's family drove through the cemetery, they could see gray-clad Civil War reenactors move about, several working together to make the gravestones of the Texas Confederate

dead upright and secure where they had once stood. The caretaker moved from one group to another, thanking them, but telling them that he would have his men take care of that, that the re-enactors purpose for being there was of another nature. Most thanked him, but kept to their task, telling him that they were happy to do the heavy lifting if his men could correct any errors found in their work.

The father parked the car and he, his wife, and son got out. "Wait here," he said, and he hurriedly walked towards the Confederate section of the cemetery.

"Come on, Arjay," his mother said. "Let's go with your Father." They walked after him.

The father found the tombstone of the ancestor he had never met, only heard about; it was knocked down and lay flat on the ground. He knelt down, tried to get his hands underneath it to push it back up into place, with no luck, when three gray-clad re-enactors came up to him.

"Here, don't hurt yourself. Let us help," one said. Two got down on either side of him, the third beside them, waiting to get into position. "We ready? Okay, on the count of three. One--two--three. LIFT!" Slowly, they were able to get the stone up, and the third re-enactor got down on his knees, braced himself next to one of the others, and helped as they pushed the headstone back into an upright position. "There we go. That should do, till the experts here can go about critiquing and correcting our work."

"Thank you," the father said. "Thank you very much. I appreciate it."

"No need to thank us," one of the re-enactors said. "You're welcome all the same, though. It's a shame something like this has to happen, so we or others have to do this. Life's hard enough on a man as it is that you'd think that after he's gone and buried, people'd leave him alone. After

living his life, he's earned enough peace he doesn't need someone to come along and do a thing like this to his grave. There's no need to make his family suffer more than necessary long after he's gone. Well, have a good day." Arjay watched as his father went off with other groups of men and helped them raise other tombstones that had been knocked down.

When these men were done, they rejoined their families at the chairs set up near the section of the cemetery for the ceremony to honor the Confederate war dead. Arjay's father came back to him and his mother and they found two empty chairs to sit in. Arjay's mother set him down on her lap and protectively put her arms around him and held him close to her. She kissed him tenderly on his cheek.

"Arjay, watch and remember everything you see here today," his mother whispered into his ear. "Be my brave little soldier today. Just like your Daddy. Just like your Great-Granddad Bannon."

The caretaker went up to the three re-enactors as they went to one last fallen tombstone and looking at his watch, showed them it was almost time for them to take their places for the program to soon begin. They raised this last tombstone back into place, then went to join the rest of their group.

The chirping of the birds and the rustle of the wind through the trees were the only sounds to be heard as the people sat reverential and silent. Arjay quietly watched the re-enactors form up in front of a monument dedicated to the honored dead of the Confederacy. Unlike the graves, the monument had somehow escaped any acts of defacement or vandalism.

Off in the distance, a church bell tolled the hour of noon and a gray-clad drummer beat cadence as the re-enactors marched from the monument towards where those in attendance sat.

Three flag bearers led three columns of seven men deep each bearing a single-shot rifle. The flag of the United States was held highest by the man in the middle, flanked on either side by one man with the Confederate Battle Flag, the other with the flag of Texas, each of these held at an angle below that of the flag of the US. The drummer stood on one side of the flag bearers and a bugler on the other. The commander in charge of the re-enactors called them to a halt.

A woman, the choir director at a nearby church, went to the lectern and all in attendance rose from their seats as she asked them to stand and sing the National Anthem. Arjay watched his father and mother and like them put his hand over his heart as he stood and watched the flags flap in the breeze as the people sang. Following the Star-Spangled Banner, the people sat, and Arjay watched as the cemetery's caretaker approached the lectern to speak.

"History is a harsh critic and history has judged those who are buried here. History will not diminish what they did.

"Yet why are we here today? Is it to honor the cause for which these men fought, since they felt at the time right in doing so? Do we come here to promote and advocate slavery? Do we come to support secession or nullification as they were viewed at that time in our history as reasons to divide our country into two--half slave and half free? No, we do not come to support the causes that contributed to that most horrible of wars when brother fought brother and father fought son for what each thought was a just cause. No, we come not to honor the cause of those buried here. We come to honor them as men.

"These men were our ancestors; those whom we know and love. They are of our family, who through their descendents, our parents, have made us what we are; good and true and brave members and citizens of a great land. Just as we share this common heritage with our ancestors,

we also share it with all our countrymen no matter their race, religion, color, creed, or sex. We are all, in this way, family; members of the United States of America.

"We do not condone our ancestors' actions in taking up arms against the Union. But we can forgive them, as our nation forgave them. Such as when President Abraham Lincoln and General Ulysses S. Grant said to men like these who wore the gray of the Confederacy, that if they would swear not to raise arms again against our great nation, and if they would swear an oath of allegiance to the Union, that they would be forgiven, that they would be welcomed back into the fold as citizens, as Americans. And these men, these sons of Texas, these former Confederates, did so. And the divisions that had torn us apart were allowed to heal and we were brought back together, not as two nations, the Confederate States of America and the Union. But, as one, the United States of America.

"Yet though there has been healing, there is still division. There are those who commit vile acts to divide us. They are those who come in the dead of night to commit criminal acts of vandalism upon the hallowed ground of a cemetery in an effort to condemn slavery. They are those who would wish to wipe this all away, this chapter of our history, and cleanse it of those who were on the wrong side of it. But instead, it is those individuals who seek to divide us who are in the wrong and by their actions they do their cause no good. It is they who attempt to shame us into silence, so that over time they hope to make us forget. But they shall fail.

"And so, this is a lesson to all of us. It would be wrong for us to forget. We must remember. For as the philosopher, George Santayana said, 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.' Thus, we cannot ever forget the lessons of the past. For to do so

could mean that at some time in the future, our nation could again be at war with itself. And that we cannot abide. God bless all of you, and God bless the United States of America."

Arjay watched as the caretaker stepped down from the lectern. Escorted by the re-enactor honor guard, he carried a wreath to the monument, laid it there, then stood silently for several minutes before the honor guard escorted him back.

The re-enactor in his officer's uniform who commanded the others reminded Arjay of Great-Granddad Bannon's picture with his long dark beard and the sword at his side. Arjay watched as he ordered the twenty-one re-enactors with their single-shot rifles to execute a right face, then to march forward. On their officer's command, they formed up into a single line facing the gravestones and halted. Then, on command, each group of seven men fired off a single volley until three volleys had been fired. Their commander then ordered his men to present arms. Arjay watched as the re-enactor dressed in the officer's uniform faced the graves, snapped to attention, and saluted the fallen as the audience rose to their feet.

The gray-clad bugler brought his horn to his lips and played "Taps" and when he finished and the sound of the notes carried and faded out over the countryside, the re-enactor in the officer's uniform dropped his salute. He ordered his men to reform up into three columns of seven and marched them each in line behind the flag bearers, then he countermarched his men back towards the monument where they were halted and dismissed.

The ceremony over, the people present went to visit the graves of those who had fallen and to lay flowers upon them. The young boy with his mother and father went to his ancestor's grave and each of them silently looked at it.

The young boy stood at the foot of the grave and saluted. Then he took his father's and his mother's hands and walked with them back to their car.

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Schreiner, Hermann L., and D. Ottolengui. *The Soldier's Grave*. John C. Schreiner & Son, Macon, Ga., 1861. Notated Music. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200002541/>.