

The General & The Lady

A True Story of Civil Love and War

Prologue

Gettysburg, Pennsylvania
July 1, 1863

Major General John Fulton Reynolds sits high in the saddle, “like a Centaur,” as described by one of his subordinates, “tall, straight and graceful” astride his horse Fancy, a powerful, black stallion. The day is hot and very humid. The moisture in the air is thick. He can see in the distance soft, wispy clouds, fog-like and hanging low over the tree-covered verdant forests of the foothills surrounding Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The clouds are so low, they are massaging the tops of the trees. They remind Reynolds of cotton balls, suspended in mid-air. Far off to the southeast he can see dark, ominous storm clouds over Washington, DC, a portent, he thinks, of the dangerous political firestorm besieging his country.

As he surveys the scene in front of him, the Union officer is not happy. He can see, through a forest of trees known as Herbst Woods, a large brigade of Confederate soldiers advancing on the position held by the unit he commands.

He is about a mile northwest of Gettysburg. The seventy-five-thousand-strong Confederate Army, under the leadership of General Robert E. Lee, is making a move to invade Pennsylvania on multiple fronts. Gettysburg is one of Lee’s key targets. Over the next three days, this is fated to be one of the most decisive battles of the Civil War.

Reynolds has command of the left wing of the Army of the Potomac meant to defend Gettysburg. He has, under his command, three corps of Union soldiers. The general has been awake on this hot first day of July since four in the morning. He had spent the night near Emmitsburg, Maryland, just over the border from Pennsylvania. Reynolds had been ordered to move his men north toward Gettysburg to relieve the First Cavalry Division led by fellow West Point graduate, General John Buford.

All during his move north on the Emmitsburg Road toward Gettysburg, Reynolds had done his best to determine the strength and exact whereabouts of the Confederate enemy. It was difficult because this area of Pennsylvania is marked by ridges and valleys and areas of heavily forested land, giving the invading Southern soldiers plenty of cover.

But now that he finally sees the gray uniforms of the Confederacy advancing through the trees of Herbst Woods, Reynolds moves quickly to fortify his position. Reynolds knows Robert E. Lee, another West Pointer, well enough that he suspects what the wily Confederate general is up to. The enemy soldiers Reynolds sees are only the tip of the spear. He knows Lee always keeps large numbers of troops in reserve. *This is going to be a very big problem*, he thinks, nodding to himself.

Looking around, he can see a Union infantry brigade off in the distance about a mile away. He orders messengers to ride out and tell the unit to hurry forward. Reynolds, himself, then rides off in another direction where he finds the Second Wisconsin Brigade.

“Forward, forward, men!” he shouts. “Drive those fellows out of that woods!”

General Reynolds is frantic with urgency.

“Forward! For God’s sake, forward!” he shouts again.

The brigade surges forward with Reynolds in the vanguard. Massive musket fire bursts forth from the trees as the Confederates take aim at the advancing Northerners. The scene is all smoke and noise from the rifle and artillery fire mixed with men yelling as they charge forward, others screaming in pain as they fall, wounded and killed by Confederate minié balls and bullets striking them down.

Knowing that his men are vastly outnumbered, General Reynolds looks around to see if he can find other reinforcements. Among the Confederate riflemen is one who had taken up a position in a nearby tree. He has a clear view of the Union general, sitting high atop that black stallion. The Southern soldier takes aim and fires. As Reynolds turns his head, searching for more troops, the round fired by the Confederate soldier smashes into the back of his neck behind the right ear.

The black stallion bolts in panic. Reynolds falls hard to the ground. His right foot is caught in a stirrup, and he is dragged about ten yards as his horse flees. Then his foot lets loose. He lies still on his left side. His orderly, Sergeant Charles Veil, sees him fall. He jumps from his horse and runs to help his commander. Veil has great admiration for his boss. He would later say that “wherever the fight raged the fiercest, there the General was sure to be found, his undaunted courage always inspired the men with more energy and courage.”

With rebels shooting at them from less than a hundred paces away, Veil quickly grabs the stricken general’s body by its arms and, with help of two

officers, drags it from the line of fire. As they do, Reynolds lets out what seems like a deep sigh and breathes no more. He is dead.

As the men struggle with the lifeless body, Confederates yell at them from the tree line.

“Drop him! Drop him!”

They ignore the taunts and continue to move their commander to a safer spot.

Later, as his aides are examining the general’s body, they discover a Catholic medallion hung around his neck. That is strange to them because they know he was not Catholic. Why was he wearing it? They also see a gold ring hanging from another chain. It is inscribed with the words *Dear Kate*. They had never heard him mention anyone named Kate. Stranger still, they notice that his West Point ring is missing. West Point officers traditionally never remove those rings. Where could it be, they wonder?

The answers to those questions would lead to one of the best kept secrets of the Civil War.