



Chapter I

AN INDIAN AT APPOMATTOX

Appomattox 1865

IT COMES BACK TO ME NOW WITH THE PONDEROUS clarity of a dream, the figures larger than life, big and grainy as they loom and fade, now close, now far, their actions determined and purposeful as gods, as if they had conned by rote the parts they would play in American history's most perfect moment. They ride slowly out of the noontime haze of a Virginia Palm Sunday in solemn procession, five uniformed men, two blue, three gray.

First comes Tucker the sergeant, his cap in tatters, the crown flapping like a chimney-lid, his gray coat buttonless, a white handkerchief nodding before him on an apple branch, his hands easy on the reins of Champ, his dead commander A.P. Hill's dappled gray – stragglers killed Hill a week ago today. “Tell Hill to come up *now!*” shouted Stonewall Jackson as he died two years ago, and Lee would cry the same before his order to “Strike the tent” on his own deathbed five years hence. Then comes Lee's aide Marshall in borrowed gloves and clean paper collar, a brave stab at gentility *in extremis*. Then our own Babcock in full federal fig, from his fresh-trimmed beard down to his bright and jingling spurs, his dress kit somehow salvaged while the rest of us had abandoned ours in the pell-mell week-long mad pursuit from Richmond. Beside Babcock rides Lee, in a fresh uniform unpacked from thin paper this very morning, complete with red sash, snowy linen, and a magnificent dress sword with a lion's-

head hilt, wrapped in gold wire and sheathed in a gold-filigreed English-leather scabbard – the gray fox brought to bay and sitting Traveller as grave and massive as a cathedral. At a discreet distance in the rear rides Lieutenant William Dunn, Babcock’s orderly, soft and unobtrusive, head down, wrists crossed over the pommel, so silent and workmanlike that history will soon forget he was there.

The group pauses at the bridge, and after a brief conference Tucker and Marshall spur forward into the little town. Lee urges Traveller down to the stream to drink. Babcock and Dunn sit fidgeting and silent, until Tucker returns and leads them clopping over the bridge and up to the porch of the two-story brick farmhouse Marshall has found for the meeting with General Grant.

History droops an eyelid. The house’s owner is Wilmer McLean, who moved here after shells crashed through the windows of his previous house at Bull Run during the war’s first battle four years ago. He moved west and managed to ride out the rest of the war unmolested, hunkering down in the remote Virginny hills while the thing runs its course. But history must have its symmetry. The war, begun in Wilmer McLean’s old back yard, has sniffed him out to finish in his new parlor.

Lee enters, removes his gloves, sits at a small table and waits. Colonel Marshall shifts from foot to foot. Babcock tries to make conversation, moving furniture around so the room is how he thinks Grant will want it. Tucker and Dunn wait outside with the horses, showing the white handkerchief. The clock ticks a slow half hour, the loudest sound in the room, as history awaits General Grant.

Oh, did I want to eat Lee’s brain that day, as we used to say, to get into his head and look around. One thing I wanted to know was where his surrender uniform came from, that beautiful dress gray with all the brass and the dress sword with all that gold. We, after all, had been pelting after him so fast we just had the clothes on our backs, and he’d been in even direr straits. I’ve thought about it often, sitting here thirty years later at my desk and shuffling my papers, and I’ve begun to think maybe he had it with him the whole war, packed away in his traveling trunk, waiting for just such an inevitability as this.

Sometimes in an antic reverie I imagine the outfit, empty, following him, its legs and sleeves flapping, up from Richmond after the Seven Days, to Manassas and Antietam, where he would have needed it if our

Burnside hadn't wasted the afternoon trying to fight his way across a bridge over a river that he could have waded, and if McClellan had figured out he was winning and renewed the attack next day. I see it trekking back with him down to Fredericksburg, where maybe it was in his saddlebags that December day while he sat astride Traveller on Marye's Heights and watched his riflemen make windrows of Burnside's troops and history has him muttering to Longstreet, "It is well that war is so terrible. We should grow too fond of it." Did it then battle with him through Chancellorsville, where Jackson lost his way, his arm, and his life, and up to Gettysburg, where it would have had to be aired and ironed double-quick if Meade had dared to come down off Cemetery Ridge? Did it then fight backwards, shadowing Lee through the Wilderness and Spotsylvania and Cold Harbor, staggering back over all those rivers all the way to Richmond, where it got unpacked and hung up for the long siege, then packed up again for the final dash west which brought it to rest, finally with Lee's elusive body in it, here in Wilmer McLean's parlor, sitting, one elegant, creased knee crossed over the other, boots polished, brass buttons tapping on the little marble table-top?

Grant didn't have a surrender uniform. He barely had a uniform at all. When he met General Lee that day he was wearing what he always wore, a private's blues with three stars on the shoulders so you'd see he was a general if you looked hard enough. His coat was misbuttoned and his boots were muddy. "In my rough traveling suit, the uniform of a private with the straps of a lieutenant-general," he later wrote, "I must have contrasted very strangely with a man so handsomely dressed, six feet high and of faultless form."

It was all an ingenuous accident, of course. "When I had left camp that morning I had not expected so soon the result that was then taking place, and was consequently in rough garb." Me? General Lee wants to surrender to me? Why, I haven't a *thing* to wear! Grant had been in touch with Lee for two days. Lee's army was surrounded, cut off from rations, deserting and yielding in droves. What other "result" could there be?

It's true, those two West Pointers could go on and on about proprieties, sending white-flagged couriers through the lines all day, trying to get the right twist on things. For three days at Cold Harbor, they argued long-distance about whether to call a "truce" or a "pause," while five thousand boys bled and puked their destinies into the mud. Maybe, Grant figured,

if it took him and Lee three days to work out a simple truce, a full-blown surrender might take a month.

Don't believe it. Grant told us last night if once he got Lee face to face, Lee wouldn't get away without surrendering. Despite that, he lit out early this morning, rode overland through streams and mud when he didn't have to, crossed the river twice, almost as if he was teasing Lee's messengers to catch him, so that when they finally found him at noon he had neither time to change nor fresh clothes to change into. There were accidents at Appomattox that day, but this wasn't one of them. Sam Grant, frank, scruffy, and muddy, arrived at the McLean house looking just the way he wanted to, just like Lee did.

Grant is in the room, shaking hands with Lee. He doesn't make an entrance, send in orderlies or aides. One minute, just Babcock, Marshall, and Lee are there, and then there's Grant, cigar lit, gravely shaking Lee's hand and pulling up a chair. It is *echt* Grant. All his life he's had a way of just *showing up*, of just *being there* without anybody noticing how he got there. His non-entrances were the stuff of legend, and this was one of his best. A year ago, arriving in Washington to take charge of the army, he slouched up to the desk at the Willard with his son Fred, registered as "U.S. Grant and son, Galena, Illinois," and got shunted off to an alcove under the eaves. That night he walked alone over to a White House reception, stepped in the front door, and waited for Lincoln to notice him, which he eventually did, crying, "Why, here is General Grant! Well, this is a great pleasure!" His first command to his surly Illinois regiment in 1861 was a dismissive, "Men, go to your quarters." Even later on, as ex-general and ex-president, arguably the most famous man in the world, when invited to call on Bismarck in Berlin he just stepped out of his hotel, lit a cigar, walked to the palace, tossed the butt away, and had his plain republican fist raised to knock on the door when it swung open quick to admit him.

Grant and Lee look at each other, trying to fathom what planet the other rode in from. They embody nothing less than the past and the future. Lee is military tradition, Marlborough and Wellington and Napoleon, not to mention Scott and Dumas and Stendhal. Grant is nobody's heir, a military orphan who just grewed like Mrs. Stowe's Topsy, an autochthonous creature of the frontier and the war, a product of no imagination but his own, a purely American breed that history and literature haven't caught up with.

As Grant makes himself comfortable in his chair, does Lee's nose twitch? Why, he wonders, does this strange little man smell of mustard? Last night, struck with a killing headache, Grant agonized, awake till dawn, bathing his feet and forehead, his wrists and neck, in mustard water and mustard-soaked cloths. He hasn't changed clothes, and the home-remedy scent still clings to his ragged cuffs and beard.

Oblivious to the smell, Grant is talking now, while blue officers file in and line up against the wall, shuffling and sniffing and quiet, like people tiptoeing into a sickroom to hear the last words. Grant talks about the Mexican War, says he remembers Lee from then, and Lee nods and says he remembers Grant too, though he probably doesn't. Captain Robert E. Lee, Winfield Scott's caparisoned aide, the soldier's *beau ideal*, remember quartermaster Lieutenant Sam Grant? I doubt it, but Lee has nothing to lose by being polite. Grant chatters on, more voluble in the presence of a stranger than I've ever heard him before or since until, he later claimed, "our conversation grew so pleasant that I almost forgot the object of our meeting."

Not quite *our* conversation. I was standing there against the wall with the rest of them, and I can tell you Grant was the only one talking. Lee was nodding and grinding his teeth, staring at this strange, chatty, mustard-smelling little man, wondering what was going to happen. Was he Grant's prisoner? Did Grant want his fancy, lion-headed sword? Grant didn't say anything about that, just prattled amiably on until Lee cleared his throat and suggested he was here less to swap stories than to surrender his army and perhaps they should get on with it. Relief passed from face to face that the foreplay was over.

"Oh yes," says Grant, "surrender." And without breaking stride he motions to me, and I hand him an order book with two carbons in it. I kept one of the carbons and had it framed. I'm looking at it now, thirty years later, as I write at my desk at 300 Mulberry Street, New York City Police headquarters. Grant later authenticated and autographed it for me. But the sheet is blank when I give it to Grant, and it stays blank for awhile as he looks at the air and thinks. The smoke of his cigar, which has been curling gently away, starts puffing like a locomotive, and when it has built a full head, Grant commences writing, blowing up a storm. You can imagine the room. Nobody talking, people coughing behind their hands, the jingle of spurs as men shift from foot to foot, the clock on the mantle slowly ticking, so slowly that each tick feels like it might be the last.

Outside, men tending the horses are throwing a ball around and shouting until someone goes out and tells them to stop. It's pretty hard, though, to quell all the noise outside. Men keep arriving as news of the surrender spreads. Hooves thud in, stones skid and scatter, there comes a question, a reply, then an abrupt "Whoop—!" broken off by a sharp "Sh-sh-sh!" and whispered voices. Then another rider arrives, then a flurry of them, and the whole process repeats. And always in the background, the neighing and snuffling and jingling of the horses as they too greet old friends.

"When I put my pen to the paper," Grant later wrote, "I did not know the first word that I should make use of in writing the terms." But Grant, for a man of few words, had a way with those few. "No terms except an unconditional and immediate surrender can be accepted," he wrote at Fort Donelson, and the electrified country gave new names to his initials, *Unconditional Surrender Grant*. "I propose to fight it out on this line if it takes all summer," he wrote from Spotsylvania, and the country clasped him to its bosom as the soul of manly grit. (My wife and daughter and I went to vaudeville last week. "Are you demanding unconditional surrender, sir?" gasps the belle. "I propose to fight it out along this line if it takes all summer," leers baggy-pants. So quickly does drama squeeze down to farce.) Now, called on to write the surrender terms, Grant huffs and puffs and licks his pencil and scribbles, puffs some more and scribbles some more and comes up with something that, as Huck Finn might say, sure did knock the spots out of any surrender document ever *I* see before. Just two hundred or so words, in which Lee's army is told, in effect, to stack arms and go home. Once there, in another of those memorable phrases, they are "not to be disturbed by United States authority so long as they observe their paroles and the laws in force where they may reside."

That was it. No mention of the Confederate States of America, which Lincoln had never acknowledged to exist at all. No mention of punishment or confiscations or "conquered territories," or anything else beyond the scope of the immediate armies. "Not to be disturbed by U.S. authority" is what it says, and what it does is in one stroke put the entire Army of Northern Virginia, *including General Lee*, out of reach of any official reprisals *in perpetuity*. Lee winds glasses on to read the document, looking suddenly aged and scholarly, like the schoolmaster he will soon become. "This will have a very happy effect on my army," he murmurs.

There's some hemming and hawing about the terms – Lee borrows

a pencil to caret something in – and Grant gives the document to Colonel Joe Bowers, one of his two secretaries, to make a copy, while he and Lee discuss getting rations to the Southern army.

The conversation trickles off. Grant lights another cigar, watches the smoke for awhile, turns, and seems for the first time to notice us standing against the wall. Oh, he says to Lee, let me present my officers and my staff. So he does – first Sheridan, who just that morning bottled Lee up, then the rest of us.

They go down the line, Lee shaking the hands of those that offer them and bowing to the others. He shares a private moment with Seth Williams, who was adjutant when Lee was superintendent at West Point. The last officer in line, the one closest to where Bowers is scratching out the surrender, is a surprise to Lee, a dark-complexioned man with high cheekbones and a flat nose. Lee takes one look at him and, I swear, jumps back a whole step. It's the only spontaneous move he's made since he entered the room, and it's a comic-opera jump like he's seen a snake. He turns to seek advice but finds himself alone. His aide Marshall is at the table with Bowers. Had they dressed up a Negro in uniform just to rub it in? Play a joke? No, somebody whispers, that's a Seneca Indian from upstate New York, chief of his tribe. Well, that's another matter entirely to General Lee. He extends his hand to the Indian and says, "I'm glad to see there's one real American present."

And the Indian takes Lee's hand, looks him in the eye, and in perfect unaccented English tells him, "We're all Americans, General." Lee nods solemnly, looks wise, and resumes his seat. Beautiful.

"Damn!" mutters Joe Bowers at the secretary's table, and all eyes, having no place else to go, turn to him. Joe is in trouble. He stayed behind to staff our base at City Point when we all left a week ago. Unable to stand the suspense, he lit out on his own and has been pounding after us for days, just barely managing to catch us at the last moment as we walked up to McLean's porch. He's nervous, sweating, and breathing hard. His hand is trembling and his pen is dripping. He's already blotted one copy of the surrender and thrown it away. He put the wrong date on the next one and had to throw *it* away. Now he's almost through a third, but he's spilled the inkbottle on it. Even *Grant* hands him a handkerchief to help mop it up.

(Bowers was proof that character is destiny. All through the war he was late for things, always rushing to catch up to Grant. After the war he

tried it once too often. Less than a year later, as Grant's train was pulling out of Garrison, N.Y., Bowers ran to catch it, leaped and missed and died under the wheels.)

Time is heavy in the McLean parlor. The introductions are done, and people are having trouble making small talk. The air is heavy too. Though the windows are open and a fine spring breeze is wafting through, there are more than a dozen large, hairy men in the little room, all of us sweating and ripe from days on horseback and nights on the cold, cold ground. The place is getting gamy. The one thing that's got history held up is the simple secretarial chore of making a copy, which looks fair to take Joe Bowers till sundown. The drama has been stretched to the sticking point, and it's time to go. History is twitching its lips and farce is in the wings.

Helpless, Bowers scrapes his chair back, turns to the officer behind him, Grant's other secretary, and whispers, "Parker, you'll have to write this, I can't do it." So who steps forward to save the day? Who brushes Bowers aside, sits at the table, pulls out his sheaf of papers and his trusty pen, borrows an inkbottle from Marshall and starts writing? Who, upright and imperturbable in the swirl of history, sits solidly at the table and in a big, round hand, rips off the immortal document that brings an end to four years of suffering and slaughter? Who ensures that the two armies can stop fighting each other and turn west to clear the country of the pesky redskins who are the last hindrances to its manifest destiny to sweep from coast to coast? *The Indian!*

That's right. The document that reglued the Union and made it stick, that ended the fighting and confirmed Lincoln's "new birth of freedom," was inscribed by a man whose native language wasn't English, who was kept out of the army long after even Negroes were welcomed, who was there by accident because he used to hobnob at Grant's father's harness shop in Galena and was the only man in the room whose ancestors back to the first generation were born in America.

His task accomplished, the Indian sits back and pockets his pen. He hands the surrender terms to Colonel Marshall and receives Lee's acceptance in return. The Indian and Marshall are history's children as much as the two generals. Marshall is the grandson of John Marshall, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. The Indian – "Grant's Indian" they call him at headquarters – is no slouch himself. He is Ely S. Parker, born Ha-sa-no-an-da, now called Do-ne-ho-ga-wa, grand-nephew of Red Jacket

and Grand Sachem of the Six Nations of the Iroquois Federation, chief of state of his entire nation and so, in strict diplomatic terms, the highest-ranking man in the room.

Now Lee is on his feet. He shakes hands with Grant, pulls on his gloves and goes out. The officers on the porch come to attention and salute, Lee returns the salute and calls for Traveller, whose bridle has been slipped to let him graze. Everyone agrees Lee struck the palm of his hand absently with his fist not once, not twice, but three times. He watches Traveller being bridled, reaches up himself to free the horse's forelock from the brow band and mounts. History, though not Grant, has Grant coming out the door, seeing Lee and removing his hat. Everyone else uncovers, Lee raises his own hat briefly then passes through the gate and down the road to the river.

As soon as Lee is out of sight, all hell, as Milton would say, breaks loose. Locusts descend on the McLean house. Everyone wants a piece of furniture or a piece of a piece. Wilmer McLean, trying to assert possession, stands in the middle of the room, grabs things from people, refuses the money that men shake in his face, but the furniture goes and money piles up willy-nilly at his feet. The tables and chairs the generals used vanish, then the candlesticks, the inkwells, the mirrors, the clock. Most of the prize stuff is grabbed up by people of rank, those who were in the room throughout and want mementos. Then the lower orders sweep in, and their motive is loot plain and simple. They strip the cane off chairs and divvy up the splinters, they tear sofa fabric into rags for sale and profit, they grab handfuls of horsehair from the innards and stuff it in their pockets. McLean's house, spared by the war, is devastated by the peace. In later years you could furnish a good-sized town from all the scraps claimed to have been liberated at Appomattox that day. It was like a rehearsal for Grant's presidency.

And through it all, that Indian officer sits at the table, then stands at the mantle, imperturbably copying out orders Grant has given for tomorrow's deployment and dispersal of arms, rations and prisoners. He has to stand because Sheridan whisked the table out from under him and carried it off. Out on the lawn Sheridan ran into George Custer, rolling around on the ground wrestling with Fitz Lee, General Lee's nephew, and enjoying a West Point reunion. Sheridan gave Custer the table to take home to his wife Libby, and Custer rode off from Appomattox, guiding his horse with

his knees, the marble-topped table upside-down on his head. Eleven years later, the centennial of the country's birth, when I heard how Custer had charged the Seventh Cavalry down toward the Little Big Horn shouting "We've caught them napping, boys!" and blundered into Crazy Horse and the Sioux nation, I imagined him doing it with his hands off the reins, holding that little marble-topped table on his head.

I see this all clearly now, though it was thirty years ago, a cloud-vision etched against the sky. The gray-bearded rider and his gilded sword. Grant with his misbuttoned tunic and the smell of mud, manure and mustard. The officers shifting from foot to foot. The solemn bows and handshakes. The reverential departure, the descent of the relic-hounds, and Custer riding to his fate with a little table on his head. And the Indian. "We're all Americans, General," he tells Lee, and then, when Bowers's hands are shaking, he takes the pen in the midst of the tumult and the tension and enshrines the surrender.

That's the way it happened. I know, I was there. The pen still works, and I'm using it to write these words.

I'm the Indian.