

The Uncivil War



Battle in the Classroom



Nick K. Adams

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Eloquent Books

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*To my first editor, my trusted artist, and my best friend—
she who never stops encouraging me—
my dear wife, Carolyn Stover Modarelli-Adams.*

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Preface

The story which follows combines both truth and fiction. It is true because it utilizes actual letters written home to Minnesota during the Civil War by my great-great-grandfather, and chronicles historical persons, places, and events. It is also fictional because I needed to create personalities for the present-day classroom setting, and for the names I chose at random from Confederate records of the 8th Tennessee Cavalry Regiment.

Whether truth or fiction, present-day or flashback, my intent was to keep the narrative as accurate as possible, drawing on my personal experiences as a fourth grade teacher, and from extensive background research of additional Civil War materials. Adhering to that effort to achieve such accuracy, I did not correct the spelling and grammar mistakes in the quoted letters of my Grandfather Griffin, and wrote flashback dialogues I thought to be consistent with backwoods 1860s America.

My purpose in writing this historical fiction is the same as Mr. Blackburg's purpose for teaching his students history: that our past can become alive and personal to you, my reader!

Chapter One

“The Bet”

If there was anybody Jeremy couldn't stand, it was Morgan Huddleston. She was so popular at school, and everything seemed to come with incredible ease for her: spelling, math, reading, and writing—everything! And here he was, stuck in the same class with her for the third year in a row. *What a pain fourth grade's gonna be*, he said to himself, remembering countless confrontations over the years that she had always seemed to win.

The curious thing was that, sitting right next to him, Morgan was silently thinking the same thing about Jeremy Wiggins. *Couldn't he just once be in someone else's classroom? Everything's a competition for him—scores, grades, projects, friends, everything. And he's got to win. What a pain*, she mused ruefully, as scenes of conflict from their past ran through her mind.

When the new year had begun a week before, their teacher, Mr. Blackburn, had randomly seated his new class as partner pairs, including Morgan and Jeremy, unaware of the underlying long-term animosity between these two. But it would surface quickly enough, disrupting the atmosphere of the classroom, and almost disabling his desire for cooperative learning.

Lunch was over, the trays all stacked by the door for pick-up, and the scraps trashed in the can, when Mr. B, as his students already called him, moved to the front of the room and sat down

in his tall swivel chair, ready to start the afternoon. His graying hair was usually a bit mussed by this time of day, as there wasn't enough of it left to stay neatly down. But he smiled broadly as his eyes swept the room, gathering the children's attention. This would be their first lesson in social studies, which most students had listed as dead last on his first day's survey of subject favorites. He hoped to change that attitude by getting them personally involved in history.

Jeremy was dressed slightly scruffy as usual, expressive of a socially unconcerned, physically active fourth grade boy. Morgan took more pride in her appearance, this day wearing a loose pullover and jeans, their blues a bit darker than the light blue of her eyes. Both turned in their seats, away from each other, silently wishing to be anywhere else in the classroom.

Mr. Blackburg began with, "One of the most important periods in United States history is the one called 'The American Civil War,' fought from 1861 to 1865. It brought radical changes to our nation, with hundreds of thousands of lives lost, hundreds of millions of dollars worth of property destroyed, and the abolition of slavery, with the resulting dislocation of millions of ex-slaves." He paused a moment to let that information sink in, then continued with the startling claim, "And I'm willing to bet that most of you were a part of it!"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Susan Lester, the very vocal resident of the front row. "We weren't even born yet. How could we have been a part?" Other heads nodded in agreement around the room. Was Mr. B crazy?

"That's my challenge for you to find out. Your social studies homework for this week is to ask your family what part they played in the American Civil War. I want a single paragraph report on what you learned, and it's due Friday."

"What about the bet you mentioned?" countered Will McEntry, Susan's partner.

"Oh yes, the bet... If at least half of the class does not report some role in the war," responded Mr. Blackburg, "I'll eat my lunch on the school roof."

The cheering of the class disrupted Jeremy, who had been fidgeting with his pencil, using it to enlarge the new hole at the knee of his jeans. He was barely listening because his mind could

only focus on “Miss Obnoxious,” as he called her, beside him, the eventual winner of last year’s all-school Spelling Bee simply because he didn’t know how to spell “doctrinaire.” He stared around the room, wondering what the fuss was all about.

But even though Morgan had been twirling her finger absentmindedly around the large curl by her right ear, she had heard the assignment clearly, and was already planning what she would ask her parents that night.

Mr. Blackburn was turning to list on the whiteboard the textbook pages they were to read as partner pairs before recess when one more hand went up. It was Tori Chin.

“Yes, Tori?” inquired Mr. B.

“I’m sure my family came to the U. S. long after that war. What should I do?”

“The assignment is just to find out,” answered Mr. Blackburn. “Whatever you find out, that’s your report.”

All around the room partner pairs pulled out their history books, flipped to the introductory section on the Civil War, and began quietly reading together. All except Jeremy and Morgan, of course, who remained rooted in their seats, backs to each other, books in their laps, both silently reading alone.

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