

From *The Wrong War*

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Albany

I may have fallen asleep for a short while, but when we stopped in Albany that evening to change trains and, in my case, to spend the night, I was fully awake. I needed to be.

The first hansom driver I spoke with promised for a truly outrageous sum to take me to a first-class hotel. I wondered aloud if there not be something in the way of a second- or even a third-class establishment in town that my employer could be expected to reimburse me for. The driver, apparently satisfied that I was neither rich nor a fool, then took me to a small but comfortable boarding house nearby for half the sum I'd originally been quoted.

Meals were included in the price (as proved to be the case at virtually all American hostelryes) and we ate supper *en famille*.

Apparently, it was the custom at this boarding house for all the guests to introduce themselves. All did, save for one large silent fellow with the features of an Indian, whom I learned from my seat mate was one of the construction crew working on the new State Capitol.

I was one of the last to speak, but as soon as the others learned that I was a reporter, here in the States to write about the war, virtually all of them had something more they wanted to say.

For one elderly white-haired woman, the oldest at the table, it was that she hoped that I might find something more pleasant to write about.

Her niece who sat next to her was about to say something along much the same lines, when a florid-faced man interrupted to say jokingly that he hoped the war would last long enough to have something to write about. "We'll soon have them on the run."

While no one disputed openly with this opinion, a fair-haired cleric, not much older than I, but who already had a receding hairline, volunteered that no matter how long it did take, there would be no rest until slavery was abolished.

The young woman sitting next to him held onto his hand throughout this short speech, gazing up at him adoringly, from which I gathered, as he held her hand with equal fervor, that he must be of the Protestant persuasion and thus free to marry.

Somehow, despite my mother's fears, I didn't think he was liable to corrupt me.

After dinner, I went up to my room, but not being tired or willing yet to attempt the bed which sagged threateningly in the middle much like a hammock, I went downstairs and out on to the porch to see what could be seen of Albany from that vantage point.

My eyes only adjusted gradually to the darkness, so that I first heard rather than saw that I was not alone.

"Not everyone shares his opinion," said a disembodied voice at my side. A slim young man with dark sideburns that partially covered his acne-pitted cheeks stood smoking a cheroot as slim as he.

"Some of us believe this war is a mistake." The young man's voice was filled with pain as if he were personally aggrieved.

Before I could learn the nature of the tragedy or tragedies that had helped form his opinion, a second voice spoke up from the step below us. "It's all about profit," the voice said in the clipped tones of a proper Englishman. I remembered the man now from the supper table, like me a relatively new arrival to the United States though a good deal older than I. "A man will have, say, an idle factory or perhaps he has made too many poorly-sewn uniforms and requires a market for them. 'Let there be war,' he'll cry to his Congressmen. And, if enough money accompanies his and others pleas to Congress, you can be sure the country will have war with its renewed demand for uniforms, weapons, and the hundred other items an army needs to go on the march."

"And never mind the poor bugger who dies in War's name. We all know who that will be." the young man interjected. Whereupon, having said all he felt could

be said on the subject, the young man opened the door to the house, stepped inside and left us alone on the porch.

The smoke from a still stronger smelling cigar heralded the second man's advance across the porch toward me. "As there is to be a war," he confided, "nothing can be done to stop that, the best a prudent man can do is to be sure he is one of the buggers who profits from it."

I forbear from any reply feeling sure that the man had only just launched into what would and did prove to be a lengthy peroration on the subject.

"Not owning a factory, nor being close friends with the President or one of his advisors, not all lines is open to us, uniforms for one. Still there is much a soldier will need of equipment that will not be otherwise available to him."

He paused, no doubt expecting some kind of brief response on my part, but I only continued to peer at him through the darkness and cigar smoke.

"Rum for one. Or whiskey, rather, as whiskey is what they drink out here in the colonies. The enlisted man always wants his drink and when he can't get it officially—damn to all those who hold the government's contracts—he'll do his best to get it unofficially. That's where we come in."

It took me a moment to realize I'd been asked to join, no, incorporated in this quixotic financial venture. My reaction much have shown on my face, for he added quickly, "T'will take only a few dollars to get started. We'll use the profits to buy more whiskey and double our money in no time."

Twice nothing is nothing, I thought, but what I said to him, gesturing toward the house behind us, was, "If I had those few dollars, do you think I would stay in such a place as this."

A moment passed in which I had time to realize how unnecessarily cruel my reply had been. If this poor man had those few dollars, would he have elected to lodge here, too?