

INTRODUCTION



The Sphinx Talks

EVEN AS OTHER CIVIL WAR generals rushed to publish their memoirs, flaunting their conquests and cashing in on their celebrity, Ulysses S. Grant refused to trumpet his accomplishments in print. The son of an incorrigible small-town braggart, the unassuming general and two-time president harbored a lifelong aversion to boasting. He was content to march to his grave in dignified silence, letting his extraordinary wartime record speak for itself.

Then, at the close of 1883, fate dealt him a series of progressively more savage blows that shattered this high-minded resolve. Returning to his Manhattan town house on Christmas Eve, Grant, sixty-one, pivoted to hand the driver a holiday tip when he slipped on the icy pavement and crashed to the ground, tearing a thigh muscle and possibly fracturing his hip. Until then a robust man, he crumpled over in excruciating pain and was hoisted up the steps by servants. Through anxious winter weeks, he remained bedridden or hobbled about on crutches. Before long, his discomfort intensified with the agonizing onset of pleurisy, coupled with severe rheumatism that crept up his legs, making it difficult for him to negotiate the familiar rooms.

Still worse lay in store. Several years earlier, Grant had entered into a promising partnership, christened Grant & Ward, with twenty-nine-year-old Ferdinand Ward, touted as the “Young Napoleon of Finance.” Thanks to his colleague’s financial wizardry, Grant seemed to coast on a tide of easy riches, fancying himself a newly minted millionaire. Then, one morning in early May

1884, he awoke to discover that Ward had manufactured the profits from thin air, the whole scheme was a colossal fraud, and he was ruined along with friends and family members who had entrusted their life savings to the firm. Abruptly Grant was thrust back into his early years of hardship at lonely frontier garrisons, on his unprofitable farm in St. Louis, and at his father's leather goods emporium in Galena, Illinois—places where he was branded an economic failure. Now, to scrape by and pay household bills, he had to endure the degradation of accepting money sent by total strangers as acts of charity.

At this point, Grant was seized by more than a desperate need to earn ready cash: he had to cast off the stigma of failure and reclaim his stature before the public and posterity. As his longtime friend William Tecumseh Sherman observed, he had “lost everything, and more in reputation.”¹ To a friend, Grant confided, “I could bear all the pecuniary loss if that was all, but that I could be so long deceived by a man who I had such opportunity to know is humiliating.”² So Grant proved receptive when editors of the prestigious *Century Magazine* solicited a series of articles about his foremost Civil War victories. “I consented for the money it gave me,” Grant admitted, “for at that moment I was living upon borrowed money.”³

That June, at his rambling seaside cottage in Long Branch, New Jersey, Grant experienced a strange sensation that foreshadowed another grave problem. His wife, Julia, served him “a plate of delicious peaches on the table,” but as he swallowed one, he stopped and winced. “Oh my,” he said, “I think something has stung me from that peach.” He sprang from his chair, strode the porch in distress, then rinsed out his throat, to no avail. “He was in great pain and said water hurt like fire,” Julia recalled.⁴ Throughout the summer, Grant, who had once smoked twenty cigars a day, was vexed by a baffling sore throat that never faded. Although Julia begged him to see a physician, he procrastinated for months; this man who was so intrepid on the battlefield seemed to dread the looming diagnosis. When at last he consulted his Manhattan doctor in October, he received grim tidings: a mass on his throat and tongue was “epithelial” in character—code language for cancer. To worsen matters, he was afflicted by painful neuralgia and had three large teeth extracted. All the while, he limped about from the Christmas Eve mishap.

Terrified that if he died he would leave Julia destitute, Grant agreed to pen his memoirs and relive his glory days of battle. As seen in his wartime orders, he had patented a lean, supple writing style, and a crisp narrative now flowed in

polished sentences, honed by the habits of a lifetime. Words poured from this supposedly taciturn man, showing how much thought and pent-up feeling lay beneath his tightly buttoned facade. He wrote in an overstuffed leather armchair, his outstretched legs swaddled by blankets, resting on a facing chair. He wore a wool cap over thick brown hair now streaked with gray, a shawl draped over his shoulders, and a muffler around his neck concealing a tumor the size of a baseball.

Seldom, if ever, has a literary masterpiece been composed under such horrific circumstances. Whenever he swallowed anything, Grant was stricken with pain and had to resort to opiates that clouded his brain. As a result, he endured extended periods of thirst and hunger as he labored over his manuscript. The torment of the inflamed throat never ceased. When the pain grew too great, his black valet, Harrison Terrell, sprayed his throat with “cocaine water,” temporarily numbing the area, or applied hot compresses to his head. Despite his fear of morphine addiction, Grant could not dispense entirely with such powerful medication. “I suffer pain all the time, except when asleep,” he told his doctor.⁵ Although bolstered by analgesics, Grant experienced only partial relief, informing a reporter that “when the suffering was so intense . . . he only wished for the one great relief to all human pain.”⁶

Summoning his last reserves of strength, through a stupendous act of willpower, Grant toiled four to six hours a day, adding more time on sleepless nights. For family and friends his obsessive labor was wondrous to behold: the soldier so famously reticent that someone quipped he “could be silent in several languages” pumped out 336,000 words of superb prose in a year.⁷ By May 1885, just two months before his death, Grant was forced to dictate, and, when his voice failed, he scribbled messages on thin strips of paper. Always cool in a crisis, Grant exhibited the prodigious stamina and granite resolve of his wartime effort.

Nobody was more thunderstruck than Samuel Clemens, aka Mark Twain, who had recently formed a publishing house with his nephew-in-law Charles Webster. To snare Grant’s memoirs, sure to be a literary sensation, Twain boosted the royalty promised by the *Century*’s publishers and won the rights. Twain had never seen a writer with Grant’s gritty determination. When this man “under sentence of death with that cancer” produced an astonishing ten thousand words in one day, Twain exclaimed, “It kills me these days to write half of that.”⁸ He was agog when Grant dictated at one sitting a nine-thousand-word portrait of Lee’s surrender at Appomattox “never pausing, never hesitating for a word, never

repeating—and in the written-out copy he made hardly a correction.”⁹ Twain, who considered the final product a masterwork, scoffed at scuttlebutt he had ghostwritten it. “There is no higher literature than these modern, simple *Memoirs*,” he insisted. “Their style is flawless . . . no man can improve upon it.”¹⁰

For Twain, the revelation of Grant’s character was as startling as his storytelling. Eager to spare his family, Grant was every inch the stoic gentleman. Only at night, when he was asleep, did his face grimace with pain. “The sick-room brought out the points of General Grant’s character,” Twain wrote. “His exceeding gentleness, kindness, forbearance, lovingness, charity. . . . He *was* the most lovable great child in the world.”¹¹ For one observer, it was wrenching to watch Grant “with a bandage about his aching head, and a horrible and mortal disease clutching his throat.” He felt “a great ache when I look at him who had saved us all when we were bankrupt in treasure and in leaders, and see him thus beset by woes and wants.”¹² In a magnificent finale, Grant finished the manuscript on July 16, 1885, one week before his death in upstate New York. He had steeled himself to stay alive until the last sentence was done and he could surrender his pen.

The triumph of the *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant*, which sold a record-breaking three hundred thousand copies in two-volume sets, was vintage Grant. Repeatedly he had bounced back from adversity, his career marked by surprising comebacks and stunning reversals. He had endured many scenes, constantly growing and changing in the process. Like Twain, Walt Whitman was mesmerized by Grant and grouped him with George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Ralph Waldo Emerson in the quartet of greatest Americans. “In all Homer and Shakespeare there is no fortune or personality really more picturesque or rapidly changing, more full of heroism, pathos, contrast,” he wrote.¹³ The plain unadorned Grant had nothing stylish about him, leading sophisticated people to underrate his talents. He was a nondescript face in the crowd, the common man from the heartland raised to a higher power, who proved a simple westerner could lead a mighty army to victory and occupy the presidential chair with distinction.

Dismissed as a philistine, a boor, a drunk, and an incompetent, Grant has been subjected to pernicious stereotypes that grossly impede our understanding of the man. As a contemporary newspaper sniffed, Grant was “an ignorant soldier, coarse in his taste and blunt in his perceptions, fond of money and material enjoyment and of low company.”¹⁴ In fact, Grant was a sensitive, complex, and

misunderstood man with a shrewd mind, a wry wit, a rich fund of anecdotes, wide knowledge, and penetrating insights. Many acquaintances remembered the “silent” Grant as the most engaging raconteur they ever met. His weather-beaten appearance during the war, when he wore simple military dress, often caked with mud, could be misleading, for an inner fineness and delicacy lay beneath the rough-hewn exterior. At the same time, Grant could be surprisingly naive and artless in business and politics.

The caricature of Grant as a filthy “butcher” is ironic for a man who couldn’t stomach the sight of blood, studiously refrained from romanticizing warfare, and shied away from a military career. “I never went into a battle willingly or with enthusiasm,” he remarked. “I was always glad when a battle was over.”¹⁵ Invariably he deprecated war. “It is at all times a sad and cruel business. I hate war with all my heart, and nothing but imperative duty could induce me to engage in its work or witness its horrors.”¹⁶ Grant never grew vainglorious from military fame, never gloated over enemy defeats, never engaged in victory celebrations. He has been derided as a plodding, dim-witted commander who enjoyed superior manpower and matériel and whose crude idea of strategy was to launch large, brutal assaults upon the enemy. In fact, close students of the war have shown that the percentage of casualties in Grant’s armies was often lower than those of many Confederate generals. If Grant never shrank from sending masses of soldiers into bloody battles, it had nothing to do with a heartless disregard for human life and everything to do with bringing the war to a speedy conclusion.

The relentless focus on Grant’s last battles against Robert E. Lee in Virginia has obscured his stellar record of winning battles in the western war long before taking charge of Union forces in early 1864. After that, he did not simply direct the Army of the Potomac, but masterminded the coordinated movements of all federal forces. A far-seeing general, he adopted a comprehensive policy for all theaters of war, treating them as an interrelated whole. However brilliant Lee was as a tactician, Grant surpassed him in grand strategy, crafting the plan that defeated the Confederacy. The military historian John Keegan paid homage to Grant as “the towering military genius of the Civil War” and noted the modernity of his methods as he mobilized railroads and telegraphs to set his armies in motion.¹⁷ Grant, he concluded, “was the greatest general of the war, one who would have excelled at any time in any army.”¹⁸

Many Grant biographies dwell at length on the Civil War, then quickly skip

over his presidency as an embarrassing coda to wartime heroism. He is portrayed as a rube in Washington, way out of his league. But Grant was an adept politician, the only president to serve two full consecutive terms between Andrew Jackson and Woodrow Wilson. Writing in 1888, British historian James Bryce assigned him to the “front rank” of presidents with Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln.¹⁹ After that his reputation tumbled, his presidency degraded to an unfair cartoon of an inept executive presiding over a scandal-ridden administration. Recent biographies have begun to rehabilitate Grant in a long overdue reappraisal. While scandals unquestionably sullied his presidency, they eclipsed a far more notable achievement—safeguarding the civil rights of African Americans. Even eminent historians have gotten wrong—sometimes badly wrong—Grant’s relationship with the black community. Typical is the view of C. Vann Woodward: “Grant had shown little interest during the war in emancipation as a late-developing war aim and little but hostility toward the more radical war aim of the few for black franchise and racial equality.”²⁰

In truth, Grant was instrumental in helping the Union vanquish the Confederacy *and* in realizing the wartime ideals enshrined in the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. The Civil War and Reconstruction formed two acts of a single historical drama to gain freedom and justice for black Americans, and Grant was the major personality who united those two periods. He was the single most important figure behind Reconstruction, and his historical reputation has risen sharply with a revisionist view of that period as a glorious experiment in equal rights for all American citizens instead of a shameful fiasco.

What has been critically absent from Grant biographies is a systematic account of his relations with the four million slaves, whom he helped to liberate, feed, house, employ, and arm during the war, then shielded from harm when they became American citizens. Frederick Douglass paired Grant with Lincoln as the two people who had done most to secure African American advances: “May we not justly say . . . that the liberty which Mr. Lincoln declared with his pen General Grant made effectual with his sword—by his skill in leading the Union armies to final victory?”²¹ For the admiring Douglass, Grant was “the vigilant, firm, impartial, and wise protector of my race.”²² More recently the historian Sean Wilentz has ratified this verdict: “The evidence clearly shows that [Grant] created the most auspicious record on racial equality and civil rights of any president from Lincoln to Lyndon B. Johnson.”²³

The imperishable story of Grant’s presidency was his campaign to crush the

Ku Klux Klan. Through the Klan, white supremacists tried to overturn the Civil War's outcome and restore the status quo ante. No southern sheriff would arrest the hooded night riders who terrorized black citizens and no southern jury would convict them. Grant had to cope with a complete collapse of evenhanded law enforcement in the erstwhile Confederate states. In 1870 he oversaw creation of the Justice Department, its first duty to bring thousands of anti-Klan indictments. By 1872 the monster had been slain, although its spirit resurfaced as the nation retreated from Reconstruction's lofty aims. Grant presided over the Fifteenth Amendment, which gave blacks the right to vote, and landmark civil rights legislation, including the 1875 act outlawing racial discrimination in public accommodations. His pursuit of justice for southern blacks was at times imperfect, but his noble desire to protect them never wavered.

Perhaps the most explosively persistent myth about Grant is that he was a "drunkard," with all that implies about self-indulgence and moral laxity. Modern science has shown that alcoholism is a "chronic disease," not a "personal failing as it has been viewed by many."²⁴ Because Grant's drinking has been scrutinized in purely moralistic terms, his admirers have felt the need to defend him from the charge as vigorously as detractors have rushed to pin it on him. The drinking issue, both real and imaginary, so permeated Grant's career that a thoroughgoing account is needed to settle the matter. This biography will contend that Grant was an alcoholic with an astonishingly consistent pattern of drinking, recognized by friend and foe alike: a solitary binge drinker who would not touch a drop of alcohol, then succumb at three- or four-month intervals, usually on the road. As a rule, he underwent a radical personality change and could not stop himself once he started to imbibe. Alcohol was not a recreation selfishly indulged, but a forbidden impulse against which he struggled for most of his life. He joined a temperance lodge in early adulthood and lent the movement open support in later years. While drinking almost never interfered with his official duties, it haunted his career and trailed him everywhere, an infuriating, ever-present ghost he could not shake. It influenced how people perceived him and deserves close attention. As with so many problems in his life, Grant managed to attain mastery over alcohol in the long haul, a feat as impressive as any of his wartime victories.