



DEAR AMERICA

*The Diary of
Emma Simpson*



*When Will This
Cruel War Be Over?*

BARRY DENENBERG

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For my own lovely Emma



While the events described and some of the characters in this book may be based on actual historical events and real people, Emma Simpson is a fictional character, created by the author, and her diary and its epilogue are works of fiction.

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*Gordonsville,
Virginia*



1863

Times gone by



Wednesday, December 23, 1863

Brother Cole returned home today.

I cannot fully convey the pain that pierced my heart as Nelson and Amos carried his coffin from the cart.

Mother is inconsolable – her hopes so recently raised by the intelligence that he was recovering from his wounds in Richmond.

We received word that he was on lookout duty late one evening when a ball from a Yankee sharpshooter's rifle wounded him in the chest. His condition, although serious, was not thought to be life threatening. We were told that when he was well enough to travel he would be given a furlough and returned home.

Only two weeks later we learned that, while recuperating in the hospital, he died from pneumonia.

As I write this I wonder how I can remain so

calm. Perhaps the full knowledge of what has happened to our family has not been wholly realized.

What words can I use to express our profound grief? How can I adequately describe the apprehension, fear, hope and, finally, despair that has filled our days?

As if it were not enough to learn of his suffering, what solace are we to find in knowing that he met his demise not in glorious battle defending our beloved land, but was touched by the hands of fate in such a tragic manner?

Mother urges me to trust in the Lord, for He is our protector.

Brother Cole is safe in heaven, now. Surely the Lord is with him. He was a good son and a gentle brother. I fear we shall not see his kind again.

Friday, December 25, 1863

There will be no Christmas celebration this year.

My thoughts dwell on times gone by. My memories beckon to me, pulling me back, reminding

me at every turn of how our lives used to be, reminding me of Christmases past.

Even Father, who usually tolerated no variation of his arduous daily duties, considered Christmas a special time. He and Brother Cole would go with Nelson to choose a proper tree, which Father insisted be put up as early as possible so that we could decorate it appropriately and enjoy it for the longest possible time.

The house would be a beehive of activity for weeks before.

Mother was even more occupied than usual: seeing to it that everything was just so, supervising the Negroes, talking to Dolphy about readying all the beautiful silk and satin dresses we would be wearing – we all dressed with such care then – to Denise about preparing the food, and Iris about the endless list of house-keeping chores.

The guest rooms on the second and third floors had to be put in perfect “apple-pie order,” as Iris called it. Everything was washed, swept, dusted,

cleaned, and polished until each room sparkled.

The house was filled with the merry sounds of loved ones and warmed by a feeling of hospitality that lightened the heart. The children gleefully anticipating their gifts—candy and toys, a wagon with horse attached, a monkey in a box, a hobbyhorse, dolls, and diaries.

The hams, turkeys, mutton, and bacon were brought from the smokehouse by the Negroes, and the tables piled high with pies, cakes, cookies, and candies.

It seems only yesterday that we anxiously awaited the arrival of Uncle Benjamin, Aunt Caroline, and Cousin Rachel from Richmond. Father enjoyed Uncle Benjamin's company immensely, taking out the chessboard immediately upon his arrival. Aunt Caroline is so much like Mother, both in appearance and manner—one would think they were twins. And Cousin Rachel, whom I have known nearly all my life, grew dearer to me with each visit. O how glorious was their arrival, made all the more glorious by the knowledge that they would remain

with us to greet the New Year. There was so much to talk about; those days seemed to just fly by.

Could it be only three years ago that Father, Mother, Brother Cole, and I stood on the front porch greeting the constant stream of friends, neighbors, and relatives arriving to celebrate the Christmas season? I can see the scene so clearly in my mind's eye, as house servants darted in and out, attending to the gift-laden carriages, making sure that all the guests were nicely settled in their rooms.

Those visits were the most joyous memories of my life. Alas, now they are only that, memories.

I can remember that Christmas Eve, after our sleigh ride—how gloriously Mother sang hymns for us that night, while Aunt Caroline accompanied her on the piano. Mother has such a melodious voice, and she and Aunt Caroline are the picture of harmony.

Cousin Rachel had to be coaxed for quite a time but she finally agreed to grace us with her

delightful flute playing. She, like Mother and Aunt Caroline, is so talented.

I wish I were as gifted as they, but I am afraid that I am not musically inclined.

They each have such beautiful, wavy brown hair—I am envious. I wish mine looked more like theirs, rather than this common, straight, dark hair that I, like Brother Cole, seem to have inherited from Father.

All of us drinking eggnog as Father offered a toast to everyone's lifelong health and happiness.

And O how hard it was to wait for Christmas morning. Brother Cole and I would wake everyone at dawn, eager to see what was in our stockings.

I can still remember the surprised look on Cousin Rachel's face when she unwrapped her gift, revealing the two lively, little white rabbits that she immediately christened Agnes and Annie. That night we stayed up until the early hours of the morning, talking and feeding them apples and cabbage leaves.

And Cousin Rachel was such a delight to

converse with. I know I tend to be on the quiet side. Mother accuses me of being much too serious and thinks that Cousin Rachel is a proper antidote for me, since she is such a chatterbox. Mother is, of course, correct in her supposition, for I am truly comforted when Cousin Rachel is around to entertain me with her endless conversation – she has an opinion on everything.

Everyone seemed so happy then. How could I know that would be the last time I would see Uncle Benjamin? How could I know it would be the last Christmas we would all celebrate together?

1863 was the most dismal year of my life.

The house seems so empty now, for indeed it is. Father has been gone for over two years. And my dear, sweet Brother Cole is in the kingdom of the Lord.

Once it wasn't that way.

Now our land is in a distressing state. Our struggle with the Yankees is, they say, going poorly, even after two years of this infernal fighting.

Friday, January 1, 1864

I have decided upon my resolutions for the New Year. I have always had the habit of writing down my resolutions and referring to them from time to time throughout the year.

Those I made in years past seem so childish: wash my hair more, take better care of my appearance, watch sweets, tend to the horses, rise earlier in the morning.

This year I have decided to concentrate on fewer areas in the hope that I can be more successful.

I have resolved to faithfully keep my diary, which was begun at Mother's suggestion. She hoped it might help develop my writing skills and improve my penmanship.

I strive to take my time—although there is so much I want to say that sometimes my pen flies in my hand and I have to remind myself to take care.

My only other resolution, which is truthfully the most important one, is to try and help Mother more. I must confess, I have felt overwhelmed many times over the past two years. I fear I have

been more of a burden to Mother than a help. So much has fallen on her shoulders. This coming year I vow that she can depend on me more.

My most fervent prayer is that 1864 will be a happier year, although I do not see anything on the horizon that would support that hope. I trust that the Lord will provide.

