

*Walt Whitman was a nurse for Union Armies during the Civil War. He once said, "The real war will never get in the books." Pittman's **Stories of the Confederate South** presents a true account of the real War Between the States.*

Stories of the Confederate South

By Rickey E. Pittman

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Stories of the Confederate South

A sunset scene with a bright sun in the center, casting a lens flare. Below the sun, the silhouettes of Confederate soldiers are visible against the twilight sky. The soldiers are holding rifles and some are carrying flags.

Rickey E. Pittman

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The Taking of Jim Limber

My fault is past. But, O, what form of prayer Can serve
my turn? ‘Forgive me my foul murder’?

—*Hamlet*

It’s near dawn. I stare at my letter until the words swirl on the page. Setting my pen on my desk, I close my eyes and bury my face in my hands, listening to the rain pound the windowpanes like an idiot beating a drum. The laudanum’s euphoria has faded, and once again peaceful sleep has eluded me. Jim Limber’s ghost claws at the ragged nerves of my conscience, surfacing in the dark river of thoughts that drift without mooring and swirl in the undertow of the night’s silence.

I whisper, “I was a soldier, Jim Limber. A soldier follows orders. I did what I was told. I did what they wanted. Leave me be... Leave me be.”

But I know he won’t.

I crumple the letter I’ve written, walk to the fireplace, and toss it into the flames. The wad of rag parchment opens as if the fire wishes to read and absorb my confession, and its crackling tongues hungrily consume ink and paper, truth and history.

My eyes drift to a faded newspaper clipping on my desk, a letter of Jefferson Davis pleading for information of Jim Limber’s welfare. My thoughts are dragged like a prisoner of war back to Savannah.

We had deposited Jefferson Davis in Fort Monroe, and returned by steamer to Savannah where we placed his wife Varina and the Davis children under house arrest. I had been assigned sentry duty. Throughout the day, secessionists with

sad and angry eyes strolled by the shrine, hoping for a glimpse of the Davis family.

The unforgiving Georgia rain lingered as relentlessly as rebel opposition had in Virginia. I slung my tampion-plugged Springfield over my shoulder with the barrel pointed to the ground and bowed my head. The water streamed from the brim of my black slouch hat like a flooding creek, and in spite of the oilcloth poncho, my uniform was drenched, and it clung cold and heavy upon my shivering skin. The weather and the curfew finally drove the Savannah pilgrims to their homes, and I was left alone in the humid Savannah night.

Turning my head, I gazed into the open window behind me and studied the Davis family, strangely moved by this tableau of a traitor's family. I heard Mrs. Davis and the children talking.

"Do you think the Yankees will come back in our house tonight, Mama?" Maggie asked.

"If they do, it cannot be helped," Mrs. Davis replied.

One of the Davis boys said, "Mother, you don't think that Yankee captain meant what he said about taking Jim from us, do you? Are they going to execute us? What's going to happen to father? They don't really have him in chains, do they?"

"Hush, Jeff. Don't talk about such things. We must place our faith in God."

"Mama, would you read to us?" Maggie asked. "I think it would make us feel better."

"Yes, certainly. Bring me my Bible, Maggie."

I edged closer to the window.

Mrs. Davis opened the Bible and read, "But the wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. There is no peace, said my God, to the wicked..."

The rain intensified and muted her voice, and the thick drops pounded the wooden shingles of the house like a drummer thumping the devil's tattoo. Down the street, boots carelessly splashed through puddles, the traveler's horseshoe taps scraping and slipping on the brick-paved street.

I raised my eyes and studied the shadow-man staggering and weaving toward me. Steadying himself on a hitching rail in front of the house, he lifted a candle lantern, which cast a yellow nimbus above his head. The mustached phantasm growled, "Private!"

It was Captain Hudson. I wiped the water from my eyes with my hand, and in the light of the lantern observed that he had shed his uniform and donned a suit he had taken from the Davis' Negro yesterday. "Sir!" I shifted my rifle to shoulder arms and snapped to attention.

"As you were, soldier."

"Aye, sir." I slung the rifle back onto my shoulder. As the captain peered into the Davis window, the sour smell of corn mash wafted through the thick air. I knew our captain was fond of spirits, and I also knew that liquor fed his meanness. Yesterday, Captain Hudson came to the Davis' quarters drunk, and he had rifled through Mrs. Davis' few remaining clothes. His sodden eyes had gazed so longingly at the various women's garments he pulled from the trunk, I was suspicious that he might want to wear them.

"The prisoners are shecure, private?" Captain Hudson said.

I resisted the urge to snicker at his slurred speech. "Yes, sir."

"Why are you standin' in the rain?"

"It's my post, sir."

"Your post, yes. Well, your discipline is commendable." He put his hand on my shoulder. "Son, I'm relocating your post to inside this fine Southern house. Follow me."

Captain Hudson entered the Davis home without knocking, and I followed him inside. Mrs. Davis, in a chair close to the fireplace, had set her open Bible aside and was mending a shirt. The Davis boys were sprawled on the floor playing with a few clay marbles, a wooden top, and a whirli-jig, while the girls sat on the floor near their mother's chair with their dolls.

I thought about my brothers who had fought with the Confederacy in Kentucky. It had been two years since I last heard from them. I wondered if they had made it home safely, wondered if Federal troops entered their homes in this same intrusive manner.

Mrs. Davis set the shirt in her lap and looked at us. "A gentleman would have requested entry into my home before barging in. What do you want this time? You've already taken everything of any value."

One of the Davis boys said, "Maybe he wants another dress."

"Jeff, you hush that," Mrs. Davis said. "How can we help you, Captain?"

The captain walked to the fireplace. His boots were thick with mud, and he left a dirty trail on the hardwood floor. He picked up a daguerreotype on the mantle, studying the image of the house's former occupants. "For tonight, the sentry's post has been moved from outside to inside." He slipped the silver picture frame into his trouser pocket.

"We have so little room and privacy as it is," Mrs. Davis said. "We're not going to attempt an escape. Surely it is not necessary to have him inside our living quarters."

"Even so, he will move inside." Captain Hudson glanced over at the Davis children. He fixed his dark eyes on the little black boy playing with the Davis children.

“Every time I come here, I see that darkie playing with these white children,” Captain Hudson said. He looked at me. “What do you think of that, private?”

Being from Kentucky, I had seen black and white children play together many times, but the tone of his question caused me to reply cautiously. “I don’t rightly know, Captain.” I had hoped his *schadenfreude* would be dormant tonight, but I could tell from his eyes that the meanness had already set in.

Captain Hudson stepped over and twirled a finger in the boy’s long curly hair. “Are you one of the Davis slaves, boy?”

The boy had just spun a top. His eyes followed the spinning cedar cone until it wobbled and finally toppled over. He pushed the Captain’s hand away from his head. “No, sir. I’ve already told you once before. This is my family.”

“His name is Jim Limber,” Varina Davis said. “So please address him in a civilized manner. He’s part of our household, and no concern of yours, sir. We are his legal guardians.”

“You sure talk uppity for a prisoner.”

“*Tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis*,” Varina said.

Jeff gathered the boys’ scattered marbles together for another game. “That Yankee doesn’t know any Latin, Mama,” he said. “I can tell by the blank look on his face.”

Jim Limber laughed with the other children. “I know what it means.” He stood and struck a pose as if he were on stage. “Times are changing, and we change with them.” He bowed several times as the Davis children applauded.

The captain’s face flushed. “Come here, boy.” He motioned to Jim Limber with his hand. “I said come here, boy.”

Jim stood and cautiously approached him.

“You’re a bastard slave child of Jefferson Davis, aren’t you?”

“Must you be so crude?” Varina said. “My children are present in case you haven’t noticed.”

Captain Hudson pulled at Jim’s shirt. “Mighty fine clothes for a field hand to wear. He’s contraband. I think I’ll take him from you. Maybe I’ll give him to someone who will teach him to hate you and the South.” He sat in an armchair, popped a Lucifer with his thumb and lit a thin cigar. A plume of smoke twisted its way across the room, then spiraled toward the high ceiling. He said to Jim, “Take off your jacket and shirt. I want to see what they’ve done to you.”

“Even a villain like yourself would not resort to such barbaric behavior,” Varina said. “Why can’t you just leave us alone?”

Jim Limber cast Varina Davis a puzzled look.

The captain sat in a chair. “I said, take off your shirt and jacket or my guard will do it for you.”

The boy complied.

Captain Hudson twisted Jim Limber around and examined him, poking each scar on Jim’s back. “Jeff Davis did this to you, didn’t he, boy!”

“No, sir. Mister Davis never hurt me.”

“I don’t believe you.”

The captain rose and dragged Jim across the floor. The little boy resisted, kicking and flailing his arms at the captain. His screams mingled with the cries of the Davis family.

“What are you going to do with our little Jim?” Varina asked. “Please, let him go.” Her children scrambled over and clung to her.

“You will never see this darkie again, lady,” the captain replied. He roughly pushed Jim toward me. “Take him outside, Private.”

My hand latched onto the boy’s bare shoulder, and I yanked him toward the door.

Jim Limber struggled to free himself from my iron hand. He began to cry and kicked me in the shin. “Mama! Mama!”

I winced from the kick, and then savagely boxed the boy’s ear. “Be still, damn you!”

Mrs. Davis strode toward me. “You’re not taking my little Jim.”

I heard Captain Hudson draw and cock his pistol.

“Don’t try something foolish,” he said. “Not a word more, madam, or more of your family will go with him. And I’d just as soon shoot you as look at you.”

He closed the door behind us as we left. The heavy oak door only slightly muted the weeping of the Davis family. “I’ll take the boy now,” he said.

In spite of the captain’s orders, I felt awkward returning inside, so I resumed my earlier post in the rain. I watched Captain Hudson drag the struggling Jim Limber into the darkness.

The door opened and the oldest Davis boy shouted, “The Yankees have taken Jim Limber! Jim! Jim! Our father will find you, Jim!” His cry echoed through the empty Savannah streets.

Mrs. Davis appeared at the door. Her lips were tightly drawn together and her eyes bored into mine like a pair of one-penny nails. She rested her hand on Jeff’s shoulder and gently pulled him inside. The rain resumed and intensified its attack, peppering me like rebel canister.

My captain, after he sent telegrams to several politicians he knew, was commissioned to journey to several cities and to exhibit the boy as one of Jeff Davis’ slaves. I was appointed to accompany him. Our first stop was a small theatre in Washington. The auditorium was filled to capacity with

Washington socialites and politicians delirious from war fever and the North's victory.

Captain Hudson strode to the podium and cleared his throat. "As you know, Jefferson Davis is safely imprisoned, in chains and under constant guard. When he was captured, we noticed this young black slave in his household. Upon inspection, we found upon his body visible signs of abuse. Private, bring the boy forth so the audience can see for themselves."

I led Jim Limber by the hand to the center of the stage and told him, "Take off your jacket and slowly turn around."

Jim's eyes were lifeless now, the vacant eyes of a captive whose mind is numbed by his circumstances and who has surrendered to his fate. He slipped off his jacket and slid his suspenders down his shirtless shoulders. When he turned, the crowd gasped as the scars on his bare back glowed beneath the quicklime white beam of the followspot.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Captain Hudson said, "on this boy's back you can see the evil fruits of slavery. What kind of monster would inflict such harm to a young child?"

A man hollered, "Jeff Davis ought to be whipped himself!"

A woman on the front row rose from her seat and shook a ragged copy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at the audience. "Slavery should have been abolished years ago. That poor child! Why, some of his wounds have never healed. He looks as if he were beaten just yesterday!"

He was, I thought. But not by Jeff Davis.

We toured for several weeks in this manner until Captain Hudson received correspondence and new orders from Washington. It seemed some prominent abolitionists had taken an interest in Jim Limber and had complained to Washington about the boy's treatment in public. The tour was to end immediately. There were to be no more sideshows. Captain

Hudson would place Jim Limber in the care of a local benevolent institution or turn him over to a suitable guardian. Then, the captain was to report for administrative duty in Washington. This news displeased Captain Hudson greatly.

A week later, Captain Hudson hired a hansom. He ordered the driver to take us to the river just outside the city limits.

As we traveled, Jim Limber peered out the carriage window. The moon was full and his eyes latched onto the white orb in childlike awe.

"I bet you my brother Jeff is looking at this same moon tonight," Jim said. "I want to go home. When are you going to let me go back to my family?"

I whispered, "Best be quiet or you'll get another lickin'."

"You can stop here, driver," Captain Hudson said.

The driver remained with the carriage while the three of us walked down to the river. The captain and I returned a half-hour later, our boots sloshing water.

"Where's the darkie?" the driver asked.

"He ran away," the captain said. "Good riddance, too."

That was the last time either of us spoke of Jim Limber.

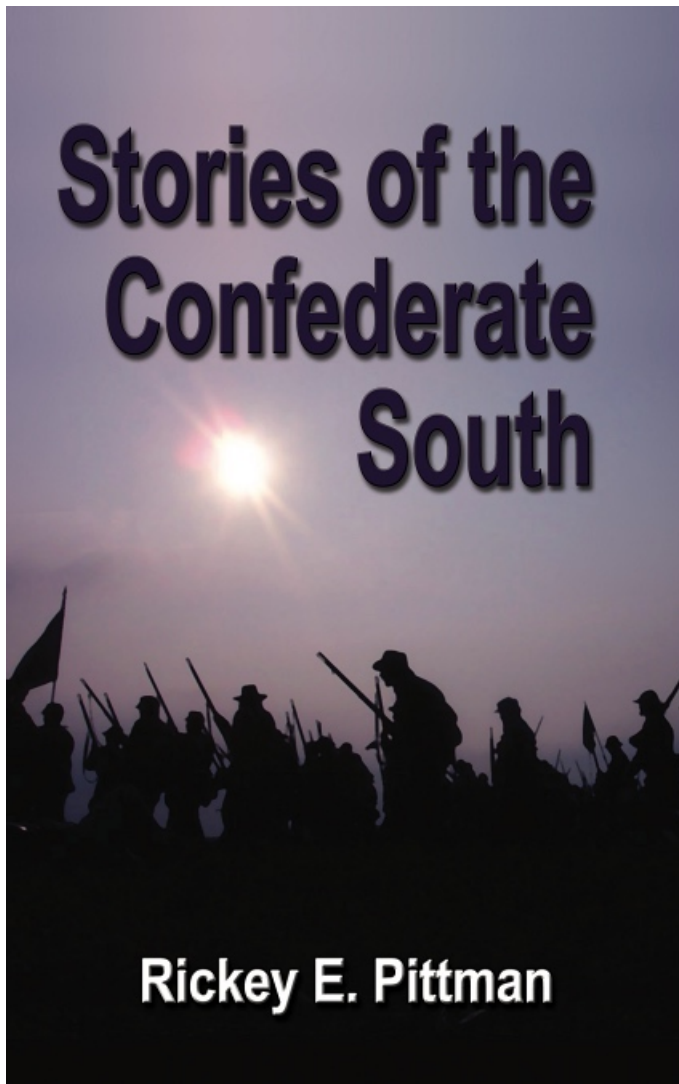
I awoke from my reverie and looked at the fire. My letter, like all the letters from nights before, was now a thin sheet of gray ashes.

"Leave me be, Jim Limber," I whispered.

But I know he won't.

About Rickey Pittman

Rickey E. Pittman, the Bard of the South, is a storyteller, author, and folksinger. He was the Grand Prize Winner of the 1998 Ernest Hemingway Short Story Competition, and is originally from Dallas, Texas. Pittman presents his stories, music and programs at schools, libraries, organizations, museums, historical reenactments, restaurants, banquets, and Celtic festivals throughout the South. An adjunct college English instructor with an M.A. from Abilene Christian University, he has fifteen published books, five music CDs and several single song releases.



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