

New Fiction by Gordon Laws: “Make Their Ears Heavy, Shut Their Eyes”



I know a deaf man who was once shopping in a general store. A stranger in town was also in the store, and he observed that the deaf man made no movement in response to sounds or voices and hence the stranger discerned he was deaf. The stranger asked the clerk for a pencil and paper and, upon receiving them, wrote, “Can deaf people read?” He approached the deaf man and held up the paper for him to read. The deaf man was incensed at the stranger’s ignorance. He wanted to take the pencil and paper and write back, “No. Can you write?” But the deaf man had no hands and instead rolled his left eye and walked away.

Do you know how Tiresias lost his sight? One myth says that Tiresias stumbled upon Athena bathing and saw her naked, and she struck him blind. Other myths say that Tiresias was turned into a woman for seven years and experienced pregnancy and childbirth. Some people say that Tiresias saw the truth and it was so overwhelming that he went blind. I suppose you will remember that Oedipus Rex ground out his eyes once he learned the truth of his deeds and was forced to admit that Tiresias's explanation of his life was correct.

Did you know that the original Cyclopes were three brothers, each with just one eye? They were master craftsmen with their crowning achievement being the creation of Zeus's thunderbolt.

For the man so loved his country that he gave his firstborn son that whosoever believeth in Lincoln would surely perish *and* have everlasting life.

I was there when Lincoln dedicated the cemetery. It was hard to hear in the back. That land is consecrated and sacred now. I did not bury my boy there. I dug him up from a local farm, put him in a casket a local guy made, and brought him down to the rail station to ship him home.

I am a moulder. Or I used to be a moulder. Or actually, I am still a moulder but now have no hands and cannot mould. What is a moulder, you say? Do they teach you nothing nowadays? I create the moulds used in metalworking. That is, I used to . . . before I lost my hands. Fortunately, I am a man of means. And my children help support me.

In the town where Lincoln gave the speech, the town where my boy died, there's a large fellow. Name of Powers . . . Solomon Powers. Some men break rocks. Other men cut stone. Solomon Powers is a stonecutter. You have seen his work if you have been to the town. He cut and laid the stones at the entrance of the big cemetery on the hill, the one where they buried all the boys. Except my boy. They didn't bury him there. Mr. Powers is a marvelous stonecutter and a first rate gentleman. The town was full of people when I came to pick up my boy. He let me stay at his place for free even though he could have gotten money for it. Said he wouldn't dream of charging anyone who had sacrificed for the Union. We sat up together all night talking about our trades—cutting stones and making moulds. He is a fine stonecutter.

You know that fellow Key who wrote the poem? The one about the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air? Did you know he had a son named Philip? Did you know that son had an affair with Congressman Dan Sickles's wife? Old Sickles loved to see the prostitutes in Washington, D.C., but he sure was protective of his wife who was half his age. Did you know Sickles shot Philip to death for cuckolding him? Sickles got off, but he didn't stay in Congress, so you know where he wound up? In the army. You know where he went with the army? To that town where Lincoln gave the speech. Know what happened to him there? A bursting bomb blew his leg off. See? All roads lead to Gettysburg, and everything comes full circle.

My son's wound was in his back. The fellows in his unit assured me that he did not have his back to the enemy. They think a piece of a bomb bursting in air might have gotten him. My son was at the Angle, the place they say was the High Water Mark of the Confederacy. There was a cannonade by the Rebels before the big charge. It could have been one of those bombs. Or it might have been later during the charge. Maybe even a Union bomb when they were shooting close range as the Rebels crossed the stone wall. His mates don't remember. It's all a blur. But his back was never to the enemy.

The day after Lincoln's speech, poor Mr. Powers had a terrible tragedy at his house. There was an orphan boy living at Mr. Powers' house. He was learning to be a stonecutter. A fellow who was visiting found a shell on the battlefield, and while handling it near the young man—Allen, I think, was his name—the bomb went off. Poor Allen got a big piece in the stomach. That's what they tell me, anyway. He died in just a couple of minutes. Mr. Powers was so kind about it—he buried young Allen in his own family plot up on the hill where they didn't bury my son. It's hard to know where, though, because he doesn't have a stone yet. Maybe Mr. Powers will cut him a special stone. Allen was thirteen, they tell me.

You remember Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus? You remember that he saw a light and heard the voice of Jesus, and after, he was a new man with a new mission and he took a new name—Paul. Do you remember that he was also blind for a while after and stayed that way until Ananias taught him the truth and then scales fell away from his eyes and he was baptized? That all happened because Paul was a chosen vessel of the Lord.

The last thing I remember seeing before my right eye went dark was a bright light. Brighter than words can describe. Sometimes, I have dreams of seeing that flash of light, and in my dreams, I try to stop time and, with my good eye, stare

into it and see if there are any figures there. And I wait and listen. If Jesus is there and wants to tell me that I am kicking against the pricks, I want to hear him. The last thing I heard before my hearing went was, "Sir! Excuse me, sir! Mister!" I am still waiting for the rest of the message. But I guess someone would have to write it out for me. Except in my dreams where I can still hear.

My son George is buried in the Briggs family plot. in the Mount Moriah Cemetery in Philadelphia. He gave his life for me, for you, and for all our country. The government will make a stone for him if I ask them, but I haven't yet. He was at the fulcrum, the tipping point of the war, the place where everyone says it could have gone either way. I would like him to have a stone grander than anything they could conceive. I would like to carve it myself, but I have no hands and besides I am not a stonecutter. Or at least, I am not a stonecutter like my friend Mr. Powers. I would like Mr. Powers to make the stone for my boy. Maybe he will be able to after he does the stone for young Allen.

Going through an amputation is not so bad. You don't feel it. They give you chloroform and make sure you are mostly asleep. Then they give you laudanum after to manage the pain. Eventually, it heals up and seems mostly natural. Sometimes you still think you got your hands, though. I mean, sometimes, I go to pick up something and wind up hitting my stubs against

the object because I have forgotten I don't have hands. Sometimes, I swear, I feel pain in my hands, the sort of ache that would come after a long day of work.

Jesus was a carpenter. They put nails through his hands. That has to be worse than amputation. He showed people the scars after he rose. I don't see why he should have scars. Why does he have to prove anything to anyone?

My younger son, Oliver, is a curious lad. Not curious in the sense that he is strange. Curious in the sense that he wants to understand everything. That little fellow at the Powers' house, Allen . . . he and Oliver are the same age. Were the same age, I guess. Oliver was obsessed with all things army while his brother was in it, and when word reached us that George had died, Oliver vowed to become a soldier and avenge his brother. I tried to tell him it doesn't work like that. There are hundreds of thousands of men. You shoot four shots per minute. Tens of thousands of men also shoot. There are rockets and bombs and shells going across the sky. You can't know who killed your brother. You can't kill everyone on the other side. They might get you before you get any of them.

When I went out to the Schwartz farm to find George's remains, I found an unexploded shell. I wanted to bring it home to Oliver. I wanted to show him how these bombs work. I wanted to explain how pieces of it go flying every which direction. I wanted him to know that a piece the size of a nickel can kill you if it gets you in the back. That if it gets to your lungs,

your lungs fill up with blood until you drown. That's what I wanted him to know.

Do you realize how sacred it is to be a stonecutter? The name *Peter* means *stone*, and Jesus said, "Upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Mr. Powers cut rocks upon which the gates of the cemetery are fixed. They will probably stand for all time—at least longer than you and I will live. Daniel said he saw a stone cut out of a mountain without hands that would roll forward and fill the earth. It was God who cut that stone. And that stone smashed every kingdom on earth.

That fellow that accidentally killed young Allen . . . he hit the shell against a rock to try to get the stuck fuse out of it. See, he wanted to make sure it was safe for when he showed it around to people, like his kids. I think about that mistake all the time. All the time. Even the gates of hell cannot prevail against a rock. And a rolling stone will smash all kingdoms.

One time, in one of my dreams about the light, I was staring deep into it with my left eye and I saw a man clothed in white robes. He motioned to me to come to him. He sat on a large throne. I advanced slowly, and I started to kneel, but he said, "No, come here." I walked over to him. He held out his

hand. I took it. He placed me on his knee, and he said, "You are also my son. What would you like to know?"

I said, "I want to know the message in the light. Whatever you want to tell me."

"Do you want the truth?" he said.

"Yes. I can bear the truth. Let me not be like Oedipus or others who cannot. Test me."

He nodded. His smile was soft. He said, "I want the best for you, my son. But the truth is it pleases me to bruise you. I will put you to grief."

I think that was just a dream. I am still waiting for the true voice from the light.