

Onward Christian Soldier

By Michael Aubrecht

Chapter 1 SAMPLE

“You may be whatever you resolve to be.”

This is a story about faith. A story filled with the kinds of heartache and hardships that would leave many of us questioning our own beliefs. It is a love story that is filled with sorrow, testimony, hope, and despair. It is a story that reaffirms the power of prayer, and that all things, in Him, are possible. Ultimately, it is the story of a man who suffered greatly, but chose to embrace the Will of his Savior as the foundation for a legendary life.

Like many great men in American history, General Thomas Stonewall Jackson started from humble origins. Looking back, many would consider his childhood to be fraught with despair, yet it was the painful trials he faced early on, that helped shape his unwavering faith in both God and country.

Born on January 21, 1824, in Clarksburg, Virginia, Thomas was the third child of Jonathan Jackson and Julia Beckwith Neale. His father was a popular and successful attorney, while his mother raised Thomas and his siblings, Elizabeth, Warren, and, later, Laura Ann. Their family was an extension of a rich and patriotic lineage that traced its roots back to the time of the Revolutionary War. Many relatives of the Jacksons were now the proud owners of factories or mills, scattered from Virginia to Oregon. Their surname bore a crest of honor, and all that shared it took great pride in the accomplishments of their Presbyterian ancestors.

Benefiting from their father’s academic background, the Jackson children blossomed well and appeared to be living out the “American Dream” amidst the painted backdrop of the glorious South. Socially superior to many of their under-educated peers, blessings in the Jackson house abounded, and Jonathan’s financial gains as a practicing lawyer provided an elegant and comfortable lifestyle.

A caring and compassionate man, Jackson’s father was known for coming to the assistance of those less fortunate, and his charitable ways proved to be more satisfying than litigation. In helping to provide security for others though, Jonathan unknowingly spent his own family into financial stress. Eventually the bill collectors came looking for him, and his inability to pay weighed heavily on his shoulders.

Unfortunately, things were headed from bad to worse as several unforeseen tragedies were about to deal devastating blows to this otherwise prospering family.

It’s no secret that in the days of Jackson’s childhood, the science of medicine was still very primitive. In fact, several of the common ailments that we experience today were no less than a death sentence during that time in history. Many diseases that have been long forgotten, or eradicated over the last century, were untreatable at the time, and the unfortunate victims who contracted them rarely survived.

In March of 1826, both Thomas' father and sister Elizabeth, who was age six at the time, contracted a fatal case of typhoid fever. Adding to both the agony and irony of the situation, Julia gave birth to her fourth child, Laura Ann, the very next day after her husband had died. Now a widow and mother of four, at the tender young age of twenty-eight, Thomas' mother was left with extensive financial debt and the inability to support her family.

Desperate and rapidly falling into an impoverished state, she realized that her only choice to provide for her children was to remarry. Unfortunately for the Jackson children, Julia's judgment had been clouded by the overwhelming grief and guilt often experienced by widows who are left with few alternatives.

As a result, her choice in a replacement for her beloved Jonathan fell well short of both a parent and a provider. Her new husband, Blake Woodson, not only disliked his stepchildren immensely, but was also financially unstable. The previous harmony of the Jackson household was almost immediately pushed aside by the arrival of their new stepfather. Still grieving the loss of their own father, the children's once promising future was now bleak and void of hope.

In order to appease her newfound husband and provide a loving environment for her children, Julia made the ultimate sacrifice, and sent Thomas and Laura to live with Jonathan's relatives in West Virginia, while Warren went to stay with Julia's own kin. Despite the "loss" of his mother, her deep religious faith and the way in which she accepted her own fate would stay in Jackson's memory for years to come.

During the Civil War, he would later recall her grace and tenderness often while on campaign, and confided in his chaplain that she was rarely absent in his thoughts. He often said that she was his inner strength, and that any man could be measured by the mother that raised him.

Brokenhearted, Julia passed away after suffering complications during childbirth, on December 4, 1831. Although her newborn, William Woodson, survived her death, Julia's husband had little regard for his son's half brothers or sister, and had no intention of reuniting the family. Thus, both Thomas and Laura spent the remaining years of their childhood nursing their emotional wounds in the custody of their parental uncles. Warren, however, was not as lucky, and later died of tuberculosis in 1841.

Growing up with his uncle in Jackson's Mill, Thomas practiced the Episcopalian faith in which he had been baptized, but never confirmed. His enthusiasm for studying the Word of God was far from fruition, and the principles of the Christian faith were just beginning to take hold of him.

During his early teens, Thomas' intellectual abilities began to blossom, and he soon developed a gifted memory that enabled him to quote Scripture on demand. Despite his Biblical book-knowledge and Christian upbringing, Jackson never fully embraced his faith until converting to Presbyterianism as a young man.

Despite his lack of religious fervor, Thomas was known throughout his upbringing as a boy of high moral character. Often, he would defend girls who were being teased by those who were rustic and immature.

Sometimes he would take on bullies twice his size on their behalf, and his chivalry often ended in bruised eyes and egos. His courage, at the time, was without question, but his motives may have been more anger related and less compassionate. It was understandable that the hurt and pain of his interrupted childhood haunted Jackson from time to time, and a call to faith would later provide a welcome cure.

At the tender age of seventeen, Thomas took an unlikely position as a constable for the county. Acting as a minor sheriff, he was tasked with distributing warrants, collecting debts, and summoning witnesses for the local court.

After surviving an obscure bout of dyspepsia, himself, Jackson believed that the physical requirements of the job would help him maintain fitness. Following the death of his father, sister, and brother to disease, Thomas had become excessively health conscious, and his severe fear of contracting any illness would later result in obsessive-compulsive behavior.

Over the next two years, Thomas served his county well, and honed the meticulous habits that would later benefit him on the battlefield. Due to his reputation as a promising young member of the law enforcement community, the now nineteen-year-old was eventually offered a full government-funded scholarship at the nation's most prestigious military academy. The nomination offered a tremendous opportunity for both a first-class education, as well as an honorable career in the United States Army. What more could an orphaned boy ask for?

Without the slightest hesitation, Cadet Jackson immediately packed up his few belongings and headed straight for West Point.

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