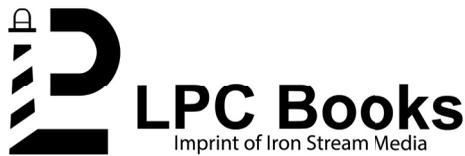


VICTOR!

THE FINAL BATTLE OF ULYSSES S. GRANT

DR. CRAIG VON BUSECK



Birmingham, Alabama

Chapter Seven

IS IT CANCER?

OCTOBER 1884—NEW YORK CITY

As summer ended, William Vanderbilt encouraged the Grants to return to 3 East Sixty-Sixth Street. By early October, the Grants moved back into their former home, along with their son Fred and his family. Ulysses and Julia had separate bedrooms on the second floor. The third floor was occupied by Fred; his wife, Ida; Julia's namesake, Julia Dent Grant, age eight; and three-year-old Ulysses S. Grant III.

Soon Buck also moved in with his wife, Fannie, and their daughter, Miriam, who was two months younger than her cousin Ulysses.¹⁹⁵

When the Grants arrived back in New York, Ulysses asked Adam Badeau to continue his work with Fred as an editor and researcher. The general offered Badeau a spare room in the house where "he would always be welcome." After everyone was settled, Grant asked Badeau to look over "the remaining articles for the *Century*."¹⁹⁶

On the morning of October 20, 1884, four months after Grant first noticed the soreness of his throat, he went to see his family physician, Dr. Fordyce Barker, who had finally returned from Europe. Grant told Barker about his nagging throat pain and the difficulty of eating. The doctor conducted a preliminary examination of Grant's throat and noticed a suspicious swelling at the back of the general's tongue. But Barker did not want to make a diagnosis; instead, he gave the general his business card and sent him to see Dr. John Hancock Douglas, one of America's foremost throat specialists.¹⁹⁷

Douglas had taken care of General John Rawlins, Grant's former military chief of staff, throughout his losing fight with tubercu-

losis. Douglas had also served as associate Secretary of the United States Sanitary Commission throughout the Civil War. He had met Grant at Fort Donelson, before the general became a national figure.¹⁹⁸

Two days later, on October 22, General Grant walked into Doctor Douglas's office, observing the medical proprieties of the day by handing his army acquaintance the card from Doctor Barker. Douglas was a barrel-chested man with a full head of white hair and a beard like Thomas Nast's Santa Claus.

Grant could have gone to Douglas as soon as the problem emerged at Long Branch, but the general was aware of the well-known rules of professional etiquette among medical practitioners. Family and close friends knew Grant was particular about proprieties, especially where the feelings of other people were concerned.¹⁹⁹

Holding the card from Dr. Barker in his hand, Douglas asked, "In what way can I be of service?" The general told him of the growing pain in his throat and the difficulty of swallowing certain foods and liquids. Douglas asked his patient to sit, then used a reflecting mirror for a detailed examination. Douglas later described Grant's throat tissue as a "dark, deep congestive hue, a scaly squamous inflammation, strongly suggestive of serious epithelial trouble." The tongue was somewhat rigid at the base on the right side.²⁰⁰

The cause of the pain was actually at the base of the tongue. In the tissue on the right side, Douglas found a dark swollen inflammation, some of it crusty, and the gland beneath the tissue was enlarged. He also identified some ulceration on the right tonsil. Checking the roof of his patient's mouth, he found an irritated area that appeared to be three small suspicious growths.²⁰¹

Grant could read the result in the doctor's facial expression. "Is it cancer?" the general inquired.

"The question having been asked," Doctor Douglas later wrote, "I could give no uncertain, hesitating reply. I gave that which I believed, qualified with a hope. I realized that if he once found that I had deceived him, I could never reinstate myself in his good opin-

ion. ‘General, the disease is serious, epithelial in character, and sometimes capable of being cured.’”²⁰²

To ease the pain, Dr. Douglas coated Grant’s throat and tongue with a solution of cocaine and water, which brought immediate relief. Although Douglas could give the general temporary freedom from the pain for the first time in weeks, he knew Grant’s condition would grow worse. The pain would return more frequently until it became constant and excruciating.²⁰³

Douglas told Grant, whose house was two miles from the doctor’s office, that he would have to come to him twice a day for treatment.²⁰⁴ In addition to the cocaine water, Douglas would use iodoform as a disinfectant, which would aid in healing the ulcerated and inflamed tonsil. These daily treatments would temporarily allow Grant to sleep and to eat.²⁰⁵

From this preliminary examination, Douglas had already concluded that Grant’s inflammation was cancerous. He believed the general’s disease was malignant and would likely kill him. The carcinoma at the base of Grant’s tongue would soon spread into his neck. In time it would become nearly impossible for the general to eat and, later, to breathe. After enduring excruciating pain, Grant would eventually die of hemorrhage, starvation, or strangulation.²⁰⁶

Douglas’s carefully chosen words, “epithelial in character, and sometimes capable of being cured,” meant only one thing to Grant—cancer, and most likely, a death sentence. Deep down, Grant knew it.

SECURING THE FUTURE

After receiving the shocking diagnosis, Grant and his valet, Harrison, boarded a public horse-drawn streetcar—to the surprise of the other passengers. Grant traveled across town to the offices of The Century Company’s president, Roswell Smith. Grant knew his time was short, and he wanted to get his financial house in order as quickly as he could. During the meeting, Grant told Smith that he was ready to write his memoirs and hinted that more than one volume might be involved.

Grant understood that if he passed away before he could secure an income for Julia, she would struggle for the rest of her life. It was a race against the tolling bell of death, and on that day, the bell tolled loudly.

On the spot, Grant and Smith agreed to a verbal contract of a 10 percent royalty on each copy of his memoirs, with projected sales of twenty-five thousand copies. Smith promised Grant that a formal agreement would be drawn up, and in the interim Grant should finish the four articles they had already agreed to. These pieces could be later expanded for the final book.

Smith was overjoyed. "General Grant has just been in," he told his colleagues at the *Century*, "spent some time and wants us to publish his book or books." Smith went to work on a draft agreement for the book.²⁰⁷ *The Century Magazine's* editor, Richard Watson Gilder, told Robert Johnson that Grant "ought not to be permitted to get too high an idea of immediate sales and profits. We have never had such a card before as Grant . . . and we mustn't let that slip!"²⁰⁸

Adam Badeau observed that when the general returned from his visit to Douglas he seemed serious but not overly alarmed. The physician "had told him that his throat was affected by a complaint with a cancerous tendency," Grant explained, then went back to work on the next *Century* article.²⁰⁹

TREATMENT BEGINS

The next day General Grant gathered his crutches and with his ever-present shadow, Harrison, climbed aboard a public streetcar to go to his appointment with Dr. Douglas. The passengers were startled to be on the bus with the former president of the United States, but Grant could no longer afford private carriages.²¹⁰

The general did not inform Julia of the physician's diagnosis for several days, but she grew suspicious of her husband's departures at the same time every day. Confronting Harrison, she learned of her husband's daily visits with Dr. Douglas.

Accompanied by Fred, Julia went to see the throat specialist herself. In a gentle tone, Douglas explained that their loved one

had cancer, that it was painful, and that it would become excruciating. He charted the likely course of the disease. He told them that many patients rallied in mid-course, but then suffered setbacks as the cancer continued to invade the body. He also warned that Grant's emotional state would shift from depression to hope and back again.²¹¹

"I then went myself to the specialist and learned the dreadful truth but still could not believe the malady was a fatal one," Julia later wrote. "I asked again and again if it were not curable and was answered that there had been instances when it had been cured. Then hope returned to me. My husband was healthy, temperate, strong. Why should he not be well and strong again? . . . Down in my heart, I could not believe that God in his wisdom and mercy would take this great, wise, good man from us, to whom he was so necessary and so beloved. It could not be, and I surely thought he would recover."²¹²

The doctor instructed Julia and Fred on how to apply the painkillers and warned them how to avoid irritating the throat even further. At the end of their visit, Douglas told Julia and Fred that the disease would take a long course but that, in the end, Grant would die.²¹³

Inconsolable, Julia left the office in tears. Fred stayed behind a few minutes to thank Dr. Douglas for his aid and to assure him that they would do whatever necessary to care for his father.

During the next two months, the general's pain and congestion temporarily diminished with the added care of the doctor and his family. Although he visited Douglas almost daily, Grant continued to work diligently on his memoirs.²¹⁴

A DEFINING DIAGNOSIS

Over the next few weeks, Douglas consulted with Grant's personal physician, Dr. Fordyce Barker, and with two other specialists, Dr. Henry Sands and Dr. T. M. Markoe. All three agreed with Douglas's diagnosis, confirming his initial thoughts about Grant's condition and the needed medical treatment.

To arrive at a definitive diagnosis, Douglas froze a portion of Grant's ulcerated throat and snipped a sample. He sent the specimen to one of the country's leading microbiologists, Dr. George Shrady, for a biopsy. To guard against influencing Shrady's opinion, Douglas did not identify his patient.²¹⁵

After examining the tissue, Shrady met with Douglas. "This specimen comes from the throat and base of the tongue and is affected with cancer," Shrady announced clinically.

Douglas replied, "Are you sure?"

"Perfectly sure. This patient has a lingual epithelioma—cancer of the tongue."

"This patient is General Grant," Douglas said.

Shrady paused to process this revelation, then answered with a note of sadness: "Then General Grant is doomed."²¹⁶

As the disease quickly spread through the general's throat and neck, his doctors gathered for a formal consultation. They planned to examine the patient and then discuss the option of an operation to remove the cancerous tissue with the goal of buying time.²¹⁷ Those present included Grant's family physician and long-trusted friend, Dr. Barker, along with Dr. Douglas, Dr. Shrady, and Dr. Sands.

Grant was clearly anxious as the consultation began, so Shrady looked for a way to ease the tension: "Each in turn made a very formal and careful examination of the throat of the patient," Dr. Shrady later wrote, "using for the purpose the ordinary circular reflecting mirror fastened to the forehead by a band around the observer's head. Very few words were exchanged by the little group. There seemed to be a strain about the procedure which plainly affected the patient. Dr. Sands, as well as the others present, duly appreciated this and were evidently desirous of diverting the patient's mind from the real object of the visit. Accordingly, when he handed me the mirror, he remarked in his quiet off-handed manner, that whenever I followed him in such an examination, it was necessary to enlarge the head loop to give extra accommodation for thickness of hair.

“As an opportunity was thus afforded to start a conversation of some sort between us, I ventured to suggest that hair did not always make the difference, nor the mere size of the skull, as sometimes the best brains were very closely packed in very small quarters. At this the general gave a faint smile for the first time during the meeting.”²¹⁸

After the examination ended, the doctors met in private to share their conclusions. Shrady advised against operating on Grant, explaining that the cancerous tissue at the back of his tongue was already growing, had ruptured and spread cancer through the surrounding area. An operation would do the patient absolutely no good and would only increase Grant’s discomfort. Shrady believed that over the next months, Grant would go through periods of excruciating pain, relieved by short spells of exhaustion. The end would come soon, within a year at the most, perhaps much sooner. Douglas agreed with Shrady’s diagnosis.²¹⁹

“With the first formal consultation of the surgical staff, the advisability of an operation was thoroughly discussed, and arguments were made against any such efforts to relieve him,” Shrady later wrote. “Thus the treatment of the case was narrowed to such efforts as might be necessary to guard against possible complications and to make him as comfortable as possible by assuaging his pain and keeping his throat clear of an accidental accumulation of secretions. . . . The wisdom of such a decision was manifested in sparing him unnecessary mutilation and allowing him to pass the remainder of his days in comparative comfort. Relatively, however, it meant suffering for him until the end.”²²⁰

THE SLOW DECLINE

Fearing for his wife’s financial future, Grant had numerous discussions with George Childs on his thoughts of what the prospective sale of the memoirs might bring. Barely covering their monthly bills, the Grants gave up their pew at their Madison Avenue church, telling friends he was forced to do so “because of my inability to pay the rent.”²²¹

In recruiting his friend and former aide Adam Badeau to become his editor and research assistant, Grant had promised him \$5,000 out of the first \$20,000 that the book earned, then \$5,000 out of the next \$10,000. Grant sheepishly told Badeau that he was bankrupt and could not offer more. Badeau was reluctant to agree, fearing the general's memoirs would overshadow his own recent three-volume work. He was finally worn down by his loyalty to Grant.

The general made it clear that Badeau would provide research and editing services, but that Grant himself would be the one and only author. "I am going to do it myself," he told a visitor one day. "If I do not do it myself it will not be mine."²²²

After several weeks of working side by side with the general, Badeau described Grant's physical condition as debilitated but still tolerable. "He was crippled and unable to move without crutches, but he walked out alone, and he had driven me once or twice at Long Branch behind his own horse. He gave up driving, however, after his return to town. But he was cheerful; his children and grandchildren were a great solace to him; many friends came in to see him and to testify their undiminished respect."

Within a few weeks of Douglas's diagnosis, Grant's health and strength started to fade. Badeau soon revised his estimate of Grant's health, saying that "he complained constantly of pains in his throat."²²³

Grant wrapped a shawl around his neck, both for comfort and to hide the growing cancer that had become visible. To stay warm and to fight bouts of neuralgia, he often covered his head with a simple knit cap, the kind people wear while skating on a frozen pond.

On most days, Grant worked from the early morning until well into the evening in the room at the head of the stairs on the second floor of his New York City home. Two windows looked out onto Sixty-Sixth Street, which provided the light for his work and a soothing view of beautiful Central Park just down the street. His bedroom was connected by a doorway at the back of the library,

and beyond it was Julia's room. The general labored at a small desk filled with piles of notes Badeau and Fred compiled for him.²²⁴ "He worked often five, and six, and seven hours a day," Badeau observed.²²⁵

The second floor of 3 East Sixty-Sixth Street became a literary assembly line. As Ulysses wrote in the front room near the light of the window, Fred and Badeau edited or compiled research materials in the next room from books written on the Mexican War and the Civil War. Badeau also used his own work as a reference.²²⁶ Badeau and Fred placed a series of maps, arranged in chronological order, on a nearby folding table so Grant could refer to them as needed. The general also kept a copy of *The Memoirs of General William T. Sherman* at his desk for reference.²²⁷ In the beginning, Grant wrote his memoirs in his own hand on sheets of lined loose-leaf paper.²²⁸

In the evening and overnight hours, Grant made notes to remind himself of small details and anecdotes from his life and his campaigns to work on the next day. Badeau compiled a stack of his own notes. Then the two discussed how these ideas would fit into the evolving outline of the book. After that, Grant decided on the direction of the book. Most days he wrote with quiet determination, unless the pain became too great. Only the general knew how much pain he was in, as he masked it from others—especially his wife.²²⁹

FAMILY STRENGTH

Julia spent much of each day in her bedroom, knowing that her Ulys was fully aware of her presence. When he wrote a passage that particularly pleased him, he called to Julia in his weakening voice, asking her to come in and let him read it to her.²³⁰

At the conclusion of each writing session, he forwarded the pages he had written to be edited or revised. Fred and Badeau both made comments, and then the general either included or rejected the additions in the next session. In the evening, Grant reviewed the day's work and, with Badeau and Fred, planned for the next.²³¹

Occasionally, Badeau became argumentative about the general's decisions. At that point, Grant simply stopped talking to him and turned his attention back to his writing. After a moment, the short-tempered Badeau stormed from the room.²³²

As they had done for many years in their marriage, Ulysses read aloud to Julia toward the end of the evening as long as his voice held out.²³³ General Grant's voice was soft, deep, and distinct, and his speech deliberate, quiet, and even-toned.²³⁴ Julia cherished this time alone with the man she had called "Victor" ever since his triumph at Vicksburg, and occasionally she offered suggestions.²³⁵

STEADY DECLINE

While Grant worked diligently for hours at a time, the cancer's effect on his strength was apparent. His cough worsened, his throat seemed always aflame, and his voice failed from time to time.²³⁶ Swallowing solid food became nearly impossible, so Harrison brought the general milk on a tray twice each day to help maintain his strength. Julia and Harrison insisted that he drink it, as it was one of the few sources of nourishment he received—but even drinking milk had become excruciating.

Family meals, once the highlight of the day in the Grant household, became depressing episodes for the general. Adam Badeau later wrote, "I shall always recall his figure as he sat at the head of the table, his head bowed over his plate, his mouth set grimly, his features clinched in the endeavor to conceal the expression of pain, especially from Mrs. Grant, who sat at the other end. He no longer carved or helped the family, and at last was often obliged to leave before the meal was over, pacing the hall or the adjoining library in his agony. At this time he said to me that he had no desire to live if he was not to recover. He preferred death at once to lingering, hopeless disease."²³⁷

Harrison became a silent sentinel, sitting in a corner a few yards from where the general worked. He often sensed what his employer needed and rose quietly to attend to him. He readjusted the shawl that Grant kept constantly wrapped around his throat as

needed and then resumed his quiet vigil. He continued to accompany Grant on his visits to the doctor's office and assumed the duty of keeping track of when and in what quantity Grant's medicines were to be taken. Becoming more of a nurse than a valet, he added the swabbing of Grant's throat with cocaine water to his other duties.

By November, Grant was in constant pain. In addition to his throat ailment, he had a severe attack of neuralgia, causing extreme pain in his cheek, jaw, teeth, and gums. To relieve this new source of pain, the dentist extracted several teeth without anesthesia. Harrison made sure the general—in agony after the procedure—returned home safely.²³⁸ At least the ordeal of the extractions made it easier for Dr. Douglas to clean the general's throat during his daily appointments.²³⁹

Grant stubbornly refused Julia's advice that he take a carriage instead of a horse-drawn public carriage for his daily visits to Dr. Douglas. That changed with the coming of colder weather. In his weakened state, Grant was much more susceptible to disease in the winter months. Both Dr. Douglas and Dr. Shrady decided it was best to make daily calls to the Grant home. These visits were brief and formal, since both doctors understood the importance of the general's writing and did not want to divert his attention from the work for too long.

They stayed only when he insisted. Over the weeks, Grant grew to enjoy their company. He looked forward to the daily diversions and often shared his thoughts on the war and other subjects of interest. Talking about the Civil War became a way for him to both refresh his memory and to think through the reasons for his decisions at the time.²⁴⁰

The effects of the disease multiplied. When he lay down to sleep, he was overcome with a sensation of strangulation, so he was forced to sleep sitting up in a leather armchair with his legs resting in another armchair facing him.²⁴¹ He retained the soldierly fashion of merely covering the lower portion of his body.²⁴² The uncomfortable position coupled with his growing pain made it difficult

for him to sleep through the night.²⁴³ Added to his other maladies, exhaustion amplified the challenge of completing his memoirs.

Despite these hardships, Grant was determined to finish the work that would provide income for his family after his death. The speed of his writing had increased, partly because Grant gained confidence as a writer but also because he was driven to complete the task before he became incapacitated by illness.

Writing the introduction to *Personal Memoirs*, Grant explained, “The first volume, as well as a portion of the second, was written before I had reason to suppose I was in a critical condition of health. Later I was reduced almost to the point of death, and it became impossible for me to attend to anything for weeks. I have, however, somewhat regained my strength, and am able, often, to devote as many hours a day as a person should devote to such work. I would have more hope of satisfying the expectation of the public if I could have allowed myself more time.”²⁴⁴

As he soldiered on, time became a wraith, hovering over him as he wrote during the day and haunting him during his sleepless, pain-filled nights. When he became too exhausted to write, Grant scribbled notes on what he wanted to accomplish the following day—knowing every day could be his last.