

## *Shine*

By Lawrence Reid Bechtel

It was the day the General Robert E. Lee Monument would be unveiled, and Shine aimed to do a brisk business from it. People had been coming into town for a week in anticipation of the event, including a good part of what was left of the rebel army, old men gathering for a last hurrah. Shine had paid a patrolman a full five dollars to move his setup from way down on Water Street by the railroad tracks, his usual place, right up to Second Street, across from the park, but only for that one day. In preparation, he had bought on credit from Dickerson's store three new tins of polish, one brown, one black, and one amber, at fifty cent each. He had stubbed in fresh bristles to his cleaning brush, sewn a tear in his buffing cloth, waxed his shoeshine box, and spent hours reupholstering *The Throne*, his name for the customer chair.

Shine borrowed a two-wheeled pushcart to get *The Throne* up to Second Street by noon. He would rather have been up there at ten but the patrolman would not allow that without another five dollars. But he had taken a chance and gotten into place a half hour early. He figured he could make a solid twelve dollars, at one dollar per shine, ten minutes per customer, twelve customers in the two hours. With tips he could take home twenty or more. Think of it!

With everything in order, Shine sat down on his shoe-shine box and watched across the street into the park, where the show was going to begin at two. The monument was hidden under a gigantic flag, the stars and bars. He had heard that the General's daughter, a little girl of three, was supposed to pull a cord at the appointed hour so the flag would fall away. A stage was being set up in front and chairs for the dignitaries wheeled in on dollies, with room for the rest of everybody to stand and watch.

It took nerve for a black man to be a businessman Shine thought to himself, gloating a little, but he had done it. There was not another shoe-shine man anywhere up or down Second, either. He began earmarking the money he expected to take in: how much to pay down his debt at Dickerson's store, how much to help with the back rent, how much for tar and shingles enough to fix the roof leak, with still a nickel left over for his own pocket. Twenty or more dollars in no more than two hours was a high goal, but a man had to set high to get high in life, as his Uncle Baxter used to say. He, Shine, was there prove it was true, this 21st day of May, in the year of Our Lord nineteen hundred and twenty-four.

"Good morning, there, Shine!

Shine nearly fell off his shoe-shine box. "Good morning, Mr. Foster, sir!" he said, getting at once to his feet. Here he had been daydreaming and already a customer.

Mr. Foster walked with a cane, taking all his weight on one leg and throwing forward the other, back and forth, like a boat in choppy water. The result of shrapnel at Chickamauga, he said, time and again.

“You looking awful fine this morning,” said Shine, with a broad smile. “You really trimmed out.”

Mr. Foster stopped, leaning on his cane with both hands. “Why thank you, Shine. If only the damn shrapnel in my knee would stop acting up. The surgeon swore he got it all, but I knew better. It was hell at Chickamauga.”

“I’m sure it was, Mr. Foster.”

“Why you up here on Second Street, Shine?”

“Got permission, Mr. Foster, to serve such fine folks as yourself.”

Mr. Foster nodded agreeably.

“Say, would you like a shine? I got a special going today. Special shine for a special day.” Shine opened his box, and showed the new tins of wax, brown and black and amber, and held up his brush and buffing cloth. “Why don’t you set up in The Throne here, Mr. Foster.”

Mr. Foster scratched in his beard, which came nearly down to his vest coat pocket. “How much is this special shine going to set me back?”

“One dollar is all, Mr. Foster. One dollar.”

“One dollar?” he said, laughing good-naturedly. “Who do you think I am, President Coolidge?”

“Oh, Mr. Foster, you better. You a veteran. Got shrapnel in your knee to prove it. Now tell me, Mr. Foster, would you go to the unveiling of the General Lee Monument and your shoes not shined? Why, the old gentleman might just roll over in his grave, and his horse with him.”

Mr. Foster laughed again. He complained the price was too steep but hoisted himself up in the chair anyway. “There you go, Shine,” he said, breathing hard. “Give me the special.”

Shine opened the new tin of brown and went to work, first on the toe box scuffs. Stitching was tore some at the welt, and the left heel was badly wore down, no doubt from the way Mr. Foster rolled his weight. But Shine he would bring up these shoes to look almost like new. Polish the sole edge, too. Customers always liked that touch.

Another man came up, also with a long beard. “Foster!” said the man. “I thought you must be in the grave by now.”

“Hornbeam!” said Mr. Foster. “You’re one to talk.”

“I’m here, ain’t I?”

They bantered back and forth about Chickamauga and ribbed each other over who was first to break through the gap under Longstreet. They both had run out of ammunition and begun throwing spent mini balls in close. “And goddamn if we didn’t nearly starve afterwards,” said Hornbeam.

“We would have won the war,” said Mr. Foster, “if we’d a had the rations those Yanks had.”

Shine was just finishing. Working the two ends of his buffing cloth at once, he came around the horn, as he called the heel, swung forward along both shanks, and then slid down across the toe box. “There you go!” he said, sitting back so the shoes could be in full view.

Mr. Foster turned his shoes this way and that, nodding with approval. “Fine!” he said, “mighty fine. You’re a magician, Shine.” Then he turned to his friend. “Say Hornbeam, you best set in here now and get yourself a shine. You don’t want to go shameful in to see the General, do you?”

“I give you a special, too, Mr. Hornbeam,” said Shine, “good as Mr. Foster here. Probably they put you two right up there on the podium, your shoes look so good.”

Mr. Foster lowered himself with difficulty down from the seat, and Hornbeam, still agile for an old man, fairly sprang up in the seat after him.

Shine said, “That will one dollar, Mr. Foster.”

But Mr. Foster instead said to Hornbeam, “what say we toss a coin when Shine is done? Whoever loses, pays both.” They bantered again, accusing each other of being cheats and liars who could not be trusted, but finally agreed to it.

Shine would rather have had money in his pocket from Mr. Foster, and then money in his pocket from this Hornbeam. But both men were well dressed and amiable and ought to be trustworthy he thought, Mr. Foster especially. So he went to work on Hornbeam’s shoes, which were amber in tone, so he opened the amber tin to match. These shoes were quality, with stitching tight at every seam and smaller thread than he had ever seen. They brung up a shine to please any man’s heart.

Hornbeam was about to get down from The Throne when another man showed up. He had not been at Chickamauga but claimed to have been a supply sergeant with Jackson’s brigade. Mr. Foster and Hornbeam at once launched into complaints about supply sergeants, especially when it came to food. “Edible would have been appreciated,” said Hornbeam.

“Have you ever tried to feed an army?” asked the supply sergeant defensively. “Why, I could get artillery shells by the hundreds. But bread flower?” He shook his head. “Hardly a pound, and even that infested with weevils.” The man pulled a flask from his inside pocket. “But there was one ration I had on hand no matter what the black-market price.” He unscrewed the cap and held up the bottle. “One hundred and thirty proof,” he said with a smile and took a healthy draught. Mr. Foster said he never drank before three but was persuaded to take a sip anyway, “in honor of General Lee, may his fame shine eternally.” Hornbeam did not need to be persuaded, drank twice, and remained seated.

Shine waited anxiously for an opportunity to ask Hornbeam to pay. The street was filling up now with wagons and pedestrians. A man on a penny farthing rode by waving a flag. Then two men in costume chased each other down the street, the one dressed as Johnny Reb beating

the other painted in blackface with a Union cap on. A band in the park began tuning up. A drum corps hammered away, the sound reverberating from the store fronts. Women twirling parasols and accompanied by their consorts hurried into the park, looking for seats.

Still Hornbeam had not gotten up, until Mr. Foster suggested the former supply sergeant get his shoes shined, too. Hornbeam slapped the armrest of The Throne. "Let's draw straws! Short straw pays all three." The bottle went around again. Pedestrians had to walk out into the street to get by the men, who had grown expansive in their guffawing about army life.

Shine finally spoke up. "Gentlemen!" he said, "please if you could draw your straws now and settle up. I don't want no trouble with the patrolman."

The men laughed at his request and asserted noisily that they would run off the damn patrolman, whoever he was, for they had fought in the war and were there to celebrate General Lee. Yet another man, heavysset and wearing a yellow waistcoat which only accentuated his girth, stopped to see what was going on and was offered the bottle, too. Gravely, he introduced himself as grandson to the patriarch Ordan Terwood Percival. Mr. Percival conceded that he himself had never been in the war, but that his brother had been killed in Pickett's charge, God rest his soul. Nodding to each man in turn, he spoke of the nobility of sacrifice, the honor of service, and the depth of his gratitude to all the veterans who had fought and died to "preserve our way of life, as is our sacred right."

He continued on in this vein until the supply sergeant broke in, saying, "well then, draw straws with us, Percival, and chance a free shoeshine from the nigger here." So the men all drew straws, or broken-off toothpicks as it happened, but two of the picks were so nearly even that an argument erupted, good-natured but still an argument.

Shine pulled his shoebox and tools out of the way of their jostling. He would make no twenty or more dollars today, that was sure. All he wanted now was the two dollars he was owed. He watched in despair as people streamed into the park. All those shoes, he thought, and another dollar missed with every pair gone by. Finally, the men settled it out that Mr. Percival had the shortest straw. Still he had to be persuaded to pay, but only after he got his shoeshine. So Hornbeam got down and he got up in the chair and rolled his pantlegs back, for his shoes were hightops, with clasps. "I want the tongue shined too, mind you," he said.

So Shine got out his new tin of black polish, sat down on his box, hoping for the last time, and went to work. Of course it was just about as he had finished up, tongue and all, that he was interrupted again, this time by a patrolman who came rushing across the street, waving his baton. "What is the cause of this disorderly assembly?" he demanded. "You boys are blocking up the sidewalk. On this of all days!"

The men all clamored their objections, proudly announcing they were veterans and duty bound to be here for General Lee. "We thought to get our shoes shined for the occasion," said Mr. Foster, opening his arm to show Shine at work.

"Well all the same, you can't congregate here," said the patrolman, more reasonably. "As for you," he said, shaking his baton at Shine, "get on out of here."

“But I paid a patrolman five dollars to be here,” said Shine.

“You may have paid *some* patrolman five dollars,” said the man, winking at the collection of men who stood around him. “But not this one.” He held out his hand and winked again.

“But I have no more five dollars,” said Shine.

“Then scram. Vamoose. *Git!* Or do you not understand the King’s English?” Again he winked, and the men laughed. The supply sergeant handed him the bottle.

“You are a card,” said Hornbeam, “even if you are a patrolman.”

Shine began to pack up.

The patrolman watched him, hands on hips. Suddenly, he thrust out his baton. “Say!” he said sharply, “turn around. I say turn *around.*”

Slowly Shine stood up and slowly he turned around.

“I seen you somewhere,” said the patrolman, squinting his eyes, as if that would help his powers of recognition. The men all fell silent.

“Free Union!” he said suddenly, his eyes springing open. “I seen you in Free Union. At the filling station. I was gassing up the Ford.” He struck his baton against the flat of his hand a couple of times and came up closer to Shine. “You was lookin’ at *my* daughter sittin’ in *my* Ford!”

“No!” blurted out Shine. “You got it all wrong Mr. Patrolman. I don’t never go over to Free Union. I don’t even know how to get there from here!”

Shine’s objections only made the patrolman more certain that he had seen him, and that Shine had not just looked at his daughter but *leered* at her.

Shine repeated his objections more forcefully, for he knew he was in danger. He had been to Free Union that day. And while he stood under a shade tree waiting on his brother who had gone in the store he had seen the patrolman. Seen him gas up the Ford. Seen the woman sitting inside. She even looked back at Shine. But it was not the man’s daughter, but Bessie, kitchen maid to the Bolster family. She was near white and handsome, which was her misfortune.

“We could string him up!” said Hornbeam. “I got the rope in my truck.” The other men chimed in, even Mr. Foster. “Sure, let’s string up the nigger!”

Mr. Percival and the supply sergeant got hold of Shine by the arms, gripping him so hard it hurt.

Shine couldn’t bear the shame of making a scene on the public street, even when his life was at risk. People turned to see what was going on, so he appealed to Mr. Foster. “Mr. Foster,” he said, “when have I ever done wrong? When have I ever been anything but good to you and your family—or anybody? Vouch for me, can you?”

Mr. Foster looked at the ground, but the patrolman spoke. "Much as I hate to," he said, "I got to intervene here." He pushed aside Shine's shoebox so he could step into the middle of the group of men. He drew in a breath and seemed to grow larger. "Now, I got no objection to you boys stringing up this nigger. He deserves it. I ought to be the one leading the posse, for godsake. But I am sworn to uphold the law, and lynching is not allowed inside the town limits. So take your hands off him, you two."

Mr. Percival and the supply sergeant were not ready to let go and had to be told again.

All at once the band in the park stuck up with "Dixie."

Mr. Percival looked at the other men. "We are about to miss the very event we came for!" he said and hurried heavily across the street. Hornbeam followed, then the supply sergeant. Mr. Foster looked at the patrolman. "I shall see to it that this Negro gets off the street," he said. "You can go on, I think."

The patrolman eyed Mr. Foster and then faced Shine. "Count yourself lucky," he said. "For if I ever catch you again around my daughter, I shall skin you alive!" He turned and strode off, tucking his baton back into his belt.

Shine shuddered inwardly and watched him go.

Mr. Foster turned and smiled warmly. "I would not have let them string you up!" he said. "They were only having their fun, after all. You can understand. It *is* a special day."

Shine nodded briefly. "I am owed four dollars, Mr. Foster. Two customers, one dollar each, two for Mr. Percival's high tops."

"That may be so," said Mr. Foster, "but I am not responsible!" He turned up his hands.

"But you did start the wager, Mr. Foster. Which led to the drawing of straws." Shine paused for a minute. "Somebody has to be responsible."

Mr. Foster hemmed and hawed for a minute or two. "Well alright," he said at last. "Hold out your hand."

Shine held out his hand.

"Now close your eyes."

Shine did not want to do this.

"Do you want your money or don't you?" said Mr. Foster, irritated.

Shine closed his eyes.

"There now," said Mr. Foster, plopping money onto Shine's open palm. "Go buy your honey a dress." Then he walked off across the street, to the unveiling ceremony for the General Robert E. Lee Monument, already proudly underway.

Shine opened his eyes. Quarters. Three of them. All heads. Now, how often did that happen? Each quarter showed a busty woman in a swirling robe, with a shield at her shoulder and the word “LIBERTY” in an arc above her head. Three liberties, he thought, and can’t do much of nothin’ with ‘em. Oh, how his heart burned!