

MARY CHESNUT
A Civil War Diary
Libretto by Steven Mark Kohn
Based on Mary Chesnut's "A Diary from Dixie"

I. PROLOGUE

*Music begins... a light comes up to reveal Mary, sitting at her desk, writing in her diary.
After a moment, Mary looks up and speaks.*

That little girl, Lizzie Hamilton?
That plucky, beautiful little thing?
A Yankee raider tried to take the ring she was wearing.
"You shall not have it" she said.
Then the man put a pistol to her head.
"Take it off and hand it to me, or I will blow your brains out."
"Blow way" said she.
"Even Sherman would not stand for that."

The man laughed in her face.
Then he swaggered off and stumbled down the steps.
His revolver went off...and shot HIM dead.
The Lord does work in mysterious ways.

During Stoneman's raid, I had to burn some personal papers.
Molly kept saying "missus, listen to de guns. Burn up everything!
Them Yankees are sure to come, and they'll put in the newspapers
whatever you write here every day."
The guns did sound very near,
and I confess I lost my head.
So I burned a part of my journal.

(sung)

I HAVE ALWAYS KEPT A JOURNAL
A LINE OF POETRY OR PROSE
THAT ONLY I UNDERSTAND AND NO ONE ELSE
IT HELPS TO GET ME THROUGH THE LONG DAY

FOR I CAN'T PLACE MY RESTLESS SPIRIT
INTO THOSE POMPOUS, LAZY MEN
THE ONES WHO, LIKE IT OR NOT, WILL WRITE OUR HISTORY.
ALAS, THAT'S HOW IT IS TODAY
SO, I'LL TELL THE STORY IN MY OWN WAY

FIVE YEARS HAVE COME AND GONE
HOW IT CHILLS MY HEART
WHEN I REMEMBER
ALL THE EVENTS WHICH CROWDED IN
I AM VERY WEAK WITH DATES

But my memory, my implacable enemy lets me forget nothing.

II. A DINNER PARTY

As she speaks, Mary removes first article of clothing and places it aside.

The drawing room was crowded with judges,
lawyers, generals and congressmen.
Everyone was there.

JEFFERSON DAVIS, HENRY BREWSTER, ROBERT BARNWELL,
GENERAL SCOTT, SENATOR DOUGLAS
AND OF COURSE MY HUSBAND, COLONEL CHESNUT.
EVERYONE TALKING ALL AT ONCE,
CHATTERING LIKE A BUNCH OF HENS,
AND ALL THE TALK WAS
ABRAHAM LINCOLN! ABRAHAM LINCOLN! ABRAHAM LINCOLN!
Newly elected president of these - *United-* States of America.

“LINCOLN IS A VULGAR MAN, AN AWFUL MAN” SAID BREWSTER

“HIS WIFE AND SON AS WELL, SEEN TO BE BELIEVED”

“MAYBE SO,” SAID DOUGLAS.

“BUT HE’S A VERY CLEVER FELLOW, AND THE HARDEST
MAN THAT I HAVE EVER MET”.

MR. SCOTT CALLED LINCOLN “A TRUE AMERICAN,
A ROUGH AND STRONG GOOD-NATURED FELLOW.”

“But he’s so ugly!”

That was *Mrs.* Scott.

“HE’S IS A VERY UGLY MAN! GROTESQUE

IN APPEARANCE, THE KIND WHO YOU ALWAYS SEE SITTING ON BOXES
WHITTILING STICKS AND TELLING VULGAR STORIES!”

JUST THEN A WOMAN CAME RUNNING FROM THE NEXT ROOM
SCREAMING AT US

“YANKEES ARE NO WORSE THAN YOU!

THEY’RE JUST AS GOOD AS YOU ARE!

PEOPLE FROM THE NORTH ARE EVERY BIT AS GOOD!”

Now, if I were in the north, and they were berating us,

I might hold my tongue, being one against many.

But she would have none of that.

SHE HARANGUED FOR SEVERAL MINUTES,

SHRIEKING LIKE A HAG!

A moment later, she’s playing “Yankee Doodle”
on the piano in the other room.

We stared at each other in disbelief!

Finally, one of the judges, who had had
quite enough of this, requested she just play the “Doodle”,

AND LEAVE OUT THE “YANKEE!”

III. MULBERRY

HERE AT MULBERRY

OUR HOUSE IS FILLED TO OVERFLOWING.

PEOPLE COMING AND GOING

CARRIAGES DRIVING UP AND DRIVING OFF
A WEALTH OF FOREST TREES LINING THE ROADS
A BRIDGE, CANOPIED WITH OVERARCHING BRANCHES
AND THE CHEROKEE ROSE ENTWINING
EACH PILLAR AND POST

OUR HOME IS A MASSIVE BRICK BUILDING,
ONE OF THE HOMESTEADS OF OLDEN TIMES,
WHERE COMFORTS AND BLESSINGS,
BIRTHDAYS AND WEDDINGS,
MERRY CHRISTMASSES,
DEPARTURES FOR SCHOOL AND HOME RETURNINGS
HAVE ENRICHED THIS PLACE
WITH THE TREASURES OF LIFE.

A WARM WELCOME GREETUS US WHENEVER WE ENTER.
OUR PEOPLE ARE THERE,
RESPECTFUL AND ORDERLY
WHILE MY HUSBAND IS OUT ON HIS USUAL RIDE
AROUND THE PLANTATION.
THESE ARE THE SOFT, MELLOW DAYS
OF OUR OWN GENTLE AUTUMN

IV. FORT SUMTER

But we are all becoming a bit restless.
The Republicans are in power now.
The New York Herald says "slavery must be extinguished, if in blood."
I have no love of slavery, but we can handle our own affairs,
thank you, without the meddlesome North telling us what to do.
They're calling us "rebels" up there.
The air is full of news.
Talk of a civil war.
All of the leaders in South Carolina are in favor of secession.
"Dissolve the union!", they say.
Meanwhile, our new Confederacy is busy writing it's own constitution.
My good friend, Jefferson Davis, is to be our president.
Those who want a fight are in high glee.
Captain Humphrey folded the United States Army Flag,
and ours was run up in it's place!
State after state is joining us, and one by one,
they are taking back their fortresses!

"FORT SUMTER MUST BE TAKEN"
THAT IS THE TALK
IT IS ONE OF THEIR STRONGEST FORTS
WITH A LARGE ARSENAL

THE STREETS ARE ALIVE
WITH MARCHING SOLDIERS
SHOUTING, WAVING AND SINGING

SEVERAL THOUSAND MEN
AMMUNITION WAGONS
RUMBLING ALONG THE STREETS
...ALL NIGHT

BEAUREGARD AND PICKENS
ARE HOLDING A COUNCIL OF WAR
HOSTILITIES ARE SOON TO BEGIN
...THEY SAY

JEFFERSON DAVIS
HAS SENT MY HUSBAND
TO DEMAND THE SURRENDER OF FORT SUMTER
COLONEL ANDERSON HAS UNTIL FOUR O'CLOCK
TO ACCEPT THE TERMS AND SURRENDER...
SURRENDER OR BE FIRED UPON!

And now patience...we must wait...
What is the next move?
We stand in need of wise counsel.
Something more than courage.
I pray God to guide us.

I hear the bells of St. Michael's chime out.
I count four,
and I begin to hope.
then it is half past four...

I SPRANG TO MY FEET
THE HEAVY BOOMING OF A CANNON!
I FELL ON MY KNEES AND
PRAYED AS I HAVE NEVER PRAYED BEFORE!

THERE WAS A SOUND OF STIR ALL OVER THE HOUSE
A PATTING OF FEET IN THE CORRIDORS
WE RAN TO THE HOUSETOP
ALL WOMEN AT THE IRON RAILING
STARING OUT TO SEA...

MEN COULD BARELY BE HEARD
RUNNING TOWARD THE ROAR OF THE CANNON
EXPLOSIONS LIGHTING UP THE HARBOR
COULD BE SEEN IN THE DISTANCE
AND WHO COULD TELL WHAT EACH VOLLEY MEANT
IN DEATH AND DESTRUCTION!

AS NIGHT FELL, SO FELL MY HEART
ACHING IN SILENT DREAD
I KNEW MY HUSBAND WAS FLOATING IN A BOAT
IN THAT DARK BAY
WITH SHELLS BURSTING OVER HIS HEAD

And through all of this
I saw no change in our negro servants.
Lawrence sits at our door, sleepy, respectful
and profoundly indifferent.
You could not tell that they heard the awful roar going on in the bay,
though it had been dinning in our ears all night and through the next day
Could it be they are they wiser than we are... silent and strong...biding their time?

Then there was shouting in the streets.
I could hear it getting closer.
Someone called "come out, there's a crowd coming"
I ran outside. A mob it was indeed,
They were shouting, but as messengers of good news!

FORT SUMTER IS ON FIRE!
ANDERSON'S SURRENDERED!
AND OUR FLAG IS FLYING THERE NOW!

Willie Preston fired the shot
that broke Anderson's flag staff!
"WELL DONE, WILLIE!"
THAT'S WHAT MRS. HAMPTON SAID.
And she's the mildest, gentlest of old ladies.
A SPIRIT'S WAKING UP INSIDE US!
NORTH CAROLINA AND VIRGINIA
ARE COMING TO OUR AID!
LINING UP BESIDE US!

V. A LONG WAR

As she speaks, Mary removes second article of clothing and places it aside.

In Mrs. Davis's drawing room,
The President, Jefferson Davis, took a seat by me on the sofa.
He seems to prefer my company to his Generals.
We joked about how we think each southerner
is equal to three Yankees at least.
He believes we can win this war with patience and perseverance.
He talked for nearly an hour.
But there was a sad refrain running through it all.

"IT'LL BE A LONG WAR,
A BITTER WAR", SAID HE,
"AND LONG BEFORE WE'RE THROUGH,
WE MAY LOSE OUR WILL,
WE MAY WANT FOR COURAGE

THERE WILL BE HARD TIMES,
ANXIOUS TIMES.
WE'LL BE OUTNUMBERED, GUNS AND MEN
ONLY FOOLS WILL DOUBT
OR MOCK THE COURAGE
OF THE YANKEES.

WE HAVE STUNG THEIR PRIDE.
THEY WILL FIGHT LIKE DEVILS.”

He told me of how the northern papers said
we are to be exterminated in short time.
“They have been preparing for war”, he said.
“While we argue and bicker, they organize.
Their men are well-trained and well-armed.
We have patriotism, but will that be enough?
Our army is in confusion.
We have much to do, and far to go.

IT’LL BE A LONG WAR, A BLOODY WAR
WE’LL LOSE OUR SONS AND BROTHERS TOO
TAKE A FOND LAST LOOK
AT A CHANGING WORLD
HAVE NO ILLUSIONS
MAY GOD HAVE MERCY
ON US ALL.”

VI. FIRST CODA

Today I saw a negro woman
sold on the auction block.
A pretty, young thing,
surrounded by men shouting and bidding for her.
South Carolina slave holder as I am,
I must say that my very soul sickened.
I tried to reason-this is no different than the willing sale most
women make of themselves in marriage.
It’s in the Bible, you know.
Whether in slavery or marriage,
women sell themselves from queens on down!

VII. RALLYING THE TROOPS

As she speaks, Mary remove third article of clothing and place it aside.

An unwilling bride is what *we* are.
I don’t understand why the North wants to keep us.
All we want is to be left alone.
But they are willing to risk life and limb,
and money, just to hold on to us.
They must love us so.
Mr. Lamar says “the fight had to come.
The quarrel has lasted long enough”.

SOLDIERS EVERYWHERE
THEY SEEM TO BE IN THE AIR
SOUTH CAROLINA TROOPS PASS EVERYDAY
THEY MARCH WITH A GAY STEP
AND BOW TO US FROM THEIR HORSES

FROM CAMDEN TO RICHMOND
GIRLS AT EVERY WINDOW
LINING UP TO LOOK AT THE PASSING TROOPS

A letter from my husband has just reached me.

Mary picks up a letter from her desk and reads.

“My Dear Mary,
We are strongly posted and entrenched.
We have at our command
15,000 of the best troops in the world.
We have also two batteries of artillery,
and expect more from Richmond.
The morale of our men is high.
The opinion here is that
Lincoln’s army will not meet us.
Not if they can avoid it!”

She places the letter down.

THE NOISE OF DRUMS
THE TRAMP OF MARCHING REGIMENTS,
BANDS OF MEN COMING IN FROM EVERY QUARTER!

SOLDIERS EVERYWHERE
THEY SEEM TO BE IN THE AIR
SOUTH CAROLINE TROOPS PASS EVERYDAY!

VIII. A LETTER FROM THE COLONEL

It seemed like just yesterday. Our brave young boys,
parading through the streets, so full of spirit and hope.
Some months have passed since then, and the war,
which we all thought would end in a few weeks...hasn't.
I receive many letters from my husband. Here is another.

Mary picks up a letter from her desk and begins to read.

“My dear Mary,
I have been a witness to one of
the most stirring events of modern times.
The fight on Friday was the largest
and fiercest of the whole war.
Some 60 to 70 thousand enemy troops.
The numbers and armaments all in favor of the enemy.
But our men and generals behaved with a resolution and
dashing heroism that will never be surpassed in
any country or any age.

Our line was three times repelled
by superior numbers and artillery.
Then Lee assembled his generals
and told them that victory depended
on defeating the army before nightfall,
or all would be lost.

Our men made a rapid and irresistible charge.
The enemy melted before them.
The fight was terrific and sublime.
The field became one dense cloud of smoke,
so that nothing could be seen

The victory was full and complete
We took twenty three pieces of artillery,
many small arms and ammunition
and burned most of their stores and wagons.

But we have lost many men and officers.
Alex Haskell and young McMahan are among them.
We are fighting again today.
Will let you know the result
as soon as possible.
I hope to be home sometime next week.
With devotion. Yours,
James Chesnut"

Mary places the letter on her desk, and sits down, speaking as she writes a reply.

My dear husband,
The war seems everywhere now.
Here at home, I saw 200 soldiers lying on a platform,
wounded and sick. The memory haunts me still.
May God keep you safe, and bring you home soon.
Love, Mary.

She folds the letter and places it into an envelope.

Our soldiers are doing their duty.
But is it enough?
Our losses are mounting.
And many are wondering how much longer we can go on.

IX. A GAME OF CHESS

WAR SEEMS A GAME OF CHESS
WE HAVE KINGS AND QUEENS, KNIGHT AND BISHOPS
THEY MOVE ACROSS THE BOARD
WITH A CASUAL WAVE OF A GENERAL'S HAND
TAKE MAN, LOSE A MAN
ONE MORE OR LESS

BUT WE'RE RUNNING OUT OF PAWNS
AND THE GENERALS CAN'T ARRANGE THE BOARD TO SUIT THEM
WAR IS A GAME OF CHESS
PLAYED BY LITTLE CHILDREN
DRESSED LIKE GENERALS
AND WHEN OUR BEST ARE DEAD AND GONE
MAYBE THEN WE'LL LEARN
THERE ARE NO WINNERS
ONLY SURVIVORS

X. THE LISTS

As she speaks Mary puts on a blood-stained hospital apron

I have felt myself a coward and a skulker for some time now.
The way men must feel who hire others to fight for them.
Something inside me kept calling out
“go, you shabby creature!
See what those brave fellows have to bear”.
So I have begun regular attendance at Wayside Hospital.
No more dodging of duty
Today we gave wounded men their breakfast
Those who could come to the table, did so.
The badly wounded remained in the wards.
So much suffering. Such wounds, such distortion,
with stumps of limbs half cured.
One poor creature had one arm taken off at the socket.
Another was blinded, his face covered in bandages.
And those were the living.

Each day we gather round the bulletin board
TO SEE THE LISTS OF THOSE WHO’VE DIED
FIRST CAME COLONEL MEANS
THEN JOHN L. MILLER

EDWARD CHEVES’ NAME WAS WRITTEN THERE
HE WAS JOHN CHEVES’ ONLY SON
AS THE DAYS WENT ON, THE LISTS GOT LONGER

JACOB TAYLOR WAS SHOT THREE TIMES
“OH, MY GOD” WAS ALL HE SAID
THEN HE BREATHED HIS LAST
IN A DISTANT FIELD
ONLY SEVENTEEN YEARS OLD

(as she reads the lists...)

GEORGE CUTHBERT WAS SHOT AT CHANCELLORSVILLE
FRANK HAMPTON KILLED AT BRANDY STATION
A SABER WOUND ACROSS HIS HANDSOME FACE
ROBERT BARNWELL IS BURIED NOW
WITH HIS WIFE AND NEWBORN BABE
IN THE SAME GRAVE IN COLUMBIA

IN ALL MY LIFE
I HAVE NEVER SEEN SUCH BITTER WEEPING

WILLIE PRESTON, HIS MOTHER’S DARLING
NEVER DID A BOY ENJOY LIFE MORE
JOE DAVIS, HOW WELL I REMEMBER HIM
IN ALL THE PRIDE OF HIS MAGNIFICENT YOUTH
COLONEL BARTOW
JOHNSON PETTIGREW
JOHN BOYKIN
HENRY NOTT
ALBERT LURYEA

STONEWALL JACKSON IS WITH THEM NOW
AMONG THE UNRETURNING BRAVE
MARCHING SIDE BY SIDE
THROUGH THE GATES OF HEAVEN!
GOD WILL HAVE MERCY ON THEM ALL

XI. SHERMAN'S MARCH

Mary removes her apron.

After three days of travel,
we came to a road laid bare by General Sherman's torches.
I saw it with my own eyes.
Nothing but smoking ruins was left in Sherman's track.
No house, No living thing, man or beast.
The countryside was burned

AND ON AND ON THEY COME
THUNDERING AT OUR VERY DOORS

SOME HAVE FAITH IN THE MERCY OF GENERAL SHERMAN
THEY SAY HE'S A CATHOLIC
WE CAN COUNT ON HIS GOOD GRACES
BUT I PUT MY SILVER IN A BOX
IN THE HANDS OF A TRUSTED SERVANT
MY HUSBAND CARES FOR NONE OF THAT NOW
BUT I'LL HOLD ON TO WHAT I CAN

AND ON AND ON THEY COME
THUNDERING AT OUR VERY DOORS

THERE IS TALK OF HIS CRIMES
OF WHAT HE DID IN MISSISSIPPI
MILLIONS OF OUR PROPERTY DESTROYED
RUTHLESS, COLD-BLOODED
HE TAKES HIS TIME
HE DOES THINGS LEISURELY
FOR THERE ARE NONE LEFT TO STOP HIM
I COUNTED FOURTEEN GENERALS SITTING IN CHURCH
LESS PIETY AND MORE DRILLING WOULD SERVE US BETTER

AND ON AND ON THEY COME
THUNDERING AT OUR VERY DOORS

HE MARCHES CONSTANTLY
THAT GHOUL, THAT HYENA!
LEAVING A TRACK OF DEATH FIFTY MILES WIDE

In Columbia, women ran from burning homes carrying bundles of clothes.
Sherman's soldiers tore the bundles from their arms
and dashed them back into the flames!
They were howling 'round the fire like demons,
dancing in their joy and triumph!

FIRE AND THE SWORD ARE FOR US NOW!
THEY MEAN TO WIPE US OFF THE FACE OF THE EARTH
LEAVING ONLY ASHES AND DUST
AS THEY HAVE AT DALTON! LANCASTER!
ATLANTA!

AND ON AND ON THEY COME
THUNDERING AT OUR VERY DOORS!

XII. SECOND CODA

As she speaks, Mary removes the fourth article of clothing and places it aside.

The Prestons have lost everything, their private fortunes gone.
What money remains is virtually worthless anyway.
I paid five hundred dollars for candles, sugar and a lamp.
Oranges are five dollars apiece.

Molly is full of airs these days.
The smell of freedom must have gone to her head.
My husband said "let them go, if they wish.
It is too much bother to clothe and feed them now."

I've been driven from my home, yet I continue to write daily.
It is principally a diversion, but may, at some future day,
afford facts about these times and perhaps prove useful
to people more important than I am.

A dispatch came for my husband. I opened it.

She opens the dispatch and reads.

Abraham Lincoln has been killed...murdered in the capital.
He may be the first president put to death in the *United States*,
but he will not be the last...for I see no end to this madness.

She places the dispatch down on her desk.

XIII. RETURNING PRISONERS:

Yesterday we went to the capital grounds to see our returning prisoners.

I LOOKED STRAIGHT IN THEIR FACES
AS THEY MOVED SLOWLY PAST
A STRANGE VACANT LOOK IN THEIR EYES
AS IF THEY HAD BEEN DEAD TO THE WORLD FOR YEARS

A POOR SUFFERING WOMAN WAS SEARCHING FOR HER SON
MOVING IN AND OUT AMONG THEM
THE ANXIOUS DREAD AND EXPECTATION SEARED INTO HER FACE
WAS MORE THAN MY HEART COULD BEAR TO SEE

IT IS HARD NOT TO ENVY THOSE WHO ARE GONE
THEIR DIFFICULTIES ENDED
THOSE WHO HAVE FOUND PEACE IN DEATH

And now it is my turn to go home...

XIV. SO LOVELY HERE IN SPRING

THE LIVE OAKS AND WILLOW OAKS
STILL STAND, SILENT AND UNTOUCHED
THE ROSES AND YELLOW JASMINE
STILL PERFUME THE AIR
IT IS SO LOVELY HERE IN SPRING
IT IS SO LOVELY...

OUR OLD HOUSE IS WAITING THERE
IT STANDS, CLEAR AGAINST A SUNLIT SKY
THE GARDENS ARE OVERFLOWING
FOOD ENOUGH TO SHARE
IT IS SO LOVELY HERE IN SPRING
IT IS SO LOVELY HERE...

FROM MY WINDOW I LOOK OUT
ON MANY A GALLANT YOUTH
AND MAIDEN FAIR
THE STREET IS SO CROWDED
IT'S SUCH A GAY SIGHT
ALMOST AS IF NOTHING'S REALLY CHANGED...

OUR PEOPLE ARE ALL AT HOME
I HEAR VOICES RINGING IN THE HALLS
MY HUSBAND IS IN THE PARLOR
READING IN HIS CHAIR
IT IS SO LOVELY HERE IN SPRING
IT IS SO LOVELY HERE...

Mary removes her final article of clothing and sets it aside.

XV. EPILOGUE

Mary approaches her writing desk.

I HAVE ALWAYS KEPT A JOURNAL
A LINE OF POETRY OR PROSE
THAT ONLY I UNDERSTAND AND NO ONE ELSE
IT HELPS TO GET ME THROUGH THE LONG DAY

FOR I CAN'T PLACE MY RESTLESS SPIRIT
INTO THOSE POMPOUS, LAZY MEN
THE ONES WHO, LIKE IT OR NOT, WILL WRITE OUR HISTORY.
ALAS, THAT'S HOW IT IS TODAY
SO, I'LL TELL THE STORY IN MY OWN WAY

Mary sits at her desk, arranges her papers, dips her quill and resumes writing in her diary.

Lights fade slowly to black.