



## 84. MAJOR DUNLOP'S HAT

**T**hat's it right there, perfectly preserved. You see the ragged hole where a fragment of shell went in and where his soul went out. A little blood is visible inside, though it's almost black, but I'd rather not unlock the glass case to take it out and show you. Humidity and temperature are controlled. One time a member of his family came in and said she had the right to it. But I said the major's hat belongs to the public, owned by the nation for which he gave his life. It belongs to the ages. She sued my museum, claiming that we charged admission and were a private, for-profit company. We argued that her claim of descent from Major Dunlop was fraudulent, because he had no children. Well, the hat is here, as you can see. It's one of our most popular attractions.

Actually, we didn't know that Major Dunlop had no children, but the burden of proof was on her, and she was no historian. She came to the hearing drunk, or probably on some medication, which did her case no good. All these little things affect the court, which is to say the judge, who is a human being first to last. Essentially, there is no justice. Or at any rate, there is no justice in this world. Justice might be blind, meaning impartial, but I think she's just stone blind, and subject to a pinch now and then.

What's that? I have no idea whether Major Dunlop died for justice. He died for orders, sure enough. For Liberty and Union I might say, but not being a New Englander, he most likely didn't die to abolish slavery. Died to prove he was no coward. He died for his friends is a pretty safe bet, because that's usually what it comes down to in battle. But as to some abstraction—justice, or what have you—one's best not speculating is how I view it. We load on those poor nineteenth-century people a lot of our own ideas, our own hopes and wishes.

Yes, I mentioned Major Dunlop's soul. Does that surprise you? Because you think I have none myself. I'll pass on feeling insulted, because I think the question is a fair one. I mean the question you implied, whether we have souls. I sense your assumption is that we do. But I ask you what it is. If Major Dunlop is somewhere now, alive and well, it's not as Major Dunlop. Maybe a luminescent orb, some eerie floating thing the ghost hunters claim to see. Or he has reentered earthly life as a plumber in Detroit or a rickshaw driver in Calcutta—with no thought of Major Charles Dunlop in his head. Who is he, then? Maybe he's a Civil War buff like you now. Or, say, he could be me.

Now that would be justice. But if there's justice, who's holding the scales? Who's putting a thumb on one of the plates? Let's say the major died for justice. For what? Where is the justice for which the major so nobly died? Do we have it? So he died for nothing, if he died for justice, which, if I remember my high school algebra, means justice is nothing. I mean as a thing in itself. Maybe it's fairness, whatever that is. He died, basically, for people like me to figure out what justice and fairness are. He died, and I'm left holding his hat.

What does that mean? It means that he handed the whole ball of wax to me. Justice is what I say it is. I decide. I am "We the People," and I'm the judge and jury, not someone else, a king or a duke or a dictator. I'm basically corrupt. I'll grant you that. And I'm ignorant. The only person less qualified than I am to govern me is someone else. Died for justice? Well, he died for me. That's what I mean when I say I'm holding his hat. And I'm not letting go. 🍷