

The Last Silk Dress Study Guide

The Last Silk Dress by Ann Rinaldi

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Plot Summary

The Last Silk Dress is a novel by writer Ann Rinaldi. In this novel, Susan Dobson Chilmark wants to do something to help with the Confederate Cause during the war, but her mother will not allow her to join the usual sewing circles because of the mean gossip that is spreading due to her brother's refusal to join the Confederate army. Therefore, when Susan learns of a need to collect silk dresses to make a hot air balloon the Confederates can use to spy on the Union, she jumps at the chance to collect the dresses herself. Unfortunately, after her efforts to support the Cause, Susan learns some family secrets that make her question the basic values of the Confederacy. The Last Silk Dress is about a Southern girl caught between the past and the future as the Civil War rages around her, a novel of coming of age that will leave the reader sympathetic for the well-written young heroine, Susan.

Susan Chilmark is a fourteen-year-old girl as the novel begins. Susan wants to help out the Confederate Cause as the Civil War rages outside her safe little world, but Susan's mother will not allow her to join a proper sewing circle or join any of the other volunteer groups that works to aid the soldiers because of gossip around Richmond regarding her brother. Susan's brother left the family when he was only a few years older than her after a falling out with their parents. Rumor has it that Lucien Chilmark runs a brothel and has refused to join the Confederate Army.

Susan sneaks out of the house anyway, wearing boy's clothing that Lucien left behind in his room. While at the Spotswood Hotel awaiting word on the Battle of Manassas, Susan runs into a man who believes she is a thief. This man takes Susan into his coach and throttles her before he realizes she is a girl. At the man's business establishment, Susan admits to who she is and why she was wearing boy's clothing. The man turns out to be Susan's estranged brother, Lucien. Lucien shares a meal with Susan and then sends her home, making her promise not to come back to him unless it is an emergency.

After the Battle of Manassas, the injured are taken wherever a bed can be found. While Susan's mother refuses to take in a group of privates, their neighbor Mrs. Harrold takes in three privates. Susan helps to nurse the soldiers and is deeply saddened when the soldier she is caring for dies. A short time later, Susan's father comes home for a surprise visit while working on the battleship Virginia. Susan tells her father about meeting Lucien and he is surprisingly supportive of the relationship.

Susan is helping to sew sandbags with a group of local women, thanks to the patronage of Mrs. Wigfall, and learns that General Longstreet has expressed a desire to have a hot air balloon such as the Union uses to spy on troops. Susan volunteers to collect the dresses with the help of her best friend, Connie. However, when they come to the final day and have not been able to collect enough from the respectable women of Richmond, Susan talks Lucien into taking her to a brothel where she might collect dresses from the ladies there. Thrilled to be included, these ladies donate more than enough dresses for the cause.



After being forced to destroy the Virginia to keep it from falling into Union hands, Susan's father decides to join the army as an engineer. A short time later, Susan's father is killed scouting a dangerous area alone. Susan's mother is shocked to learn that the entire estate and all of their money has been left to Lucien, as well as the care of Susan. To get back at Lucien, Susan's mother tells Susan how her father had an affair with a household slave, eventually leading to the disagreement between him and Lucien. Susan also learns that her mother had an affair and that the man she thought was her father is not.

Susan goes to live with Lucien and realizes she no longer believes in the Confederacy and its Cause. Susan sees the hot air balloon she helped create on the river and she realizes she no longer wants the Confederacy to have it. Susan enlists the help of her friend, artist Timothy Tobias Collier, to arrange for the balloon to fall into Union hands. Afterward, Susan finds herself in danger from the local authorities for her actions. Hence, Lucien reluctantly agrees to take Susan north to the home of the Colliers.



Prologue and Part 1, June 21, 1861: Chapters 1-4

Prologue and Part 1, June 21, 1861: Chapters 1-4 Summary

This book takes place during the Civil War. The idea for the book is based on a letter written by General James Longstreet during the war that claims the Confederacy had a hot air balloon that was made from the last silk dresses in Richmond. Although these claims cannot be substantiated, the author has found some evidence that the Confederacy did in fact have several balloons through the course of the war.

In the Prologue, Susan has gone with her father to his place of business, Tredegar Iron Works, to watch what was supposed to be a peaceful rally in the aftermath of shots fired on Fort Sumter. However, the rally becomes violent and Susan's father is injured when he picks up the American flag from where some men threw it after replacing it with the Confederate flag. Susan's father takes her up to his office and talks to her about her ideals, making her promise she will always do what is right even if it means hurting those she loves most. Susan's father admits to her that he once did something he is not proud of that led to her brother, Lucien, leaving the family home and that he did it for her mother.

In Chapter 1, Susan is working on some sewing for the soldiers in the sitting room alone because her mother refuses to allow her to join a sewing circle for fear of the rumors going around town about her brother, Lucien, who has reportedly refused to join the Confederate army. Susan's mother wants to speak to her, but Susan wants to go to the Spotwood Hotel to see if there is any word on the Battle of Manassas yet. Susan's best friend has a brother who is fighting in the battle. Susan sneaks out a window and changes into some of the clothing her brother left behind before leaving for the hotel.

In Chapter 2, at the hotel, Susan runs into her best friend, Connie. Connie tells Susan that her mother has forbade her to spend time with Susan anymore because of the rumors about Susan's brother, Lucien. Susan grows angry because she thinks Connie should disobey her mother if she is truly a friend. Later, a man hands Susan a coin and asks her to get a paper. When Susan returns with the paper, the man grabs her and demands to know where she got the shirt she is wearing. The man drags Susan into his coach, threatening to punish him for thievery. When Susan tries to tell him the shirt belongs to her brother, Lucien, the man claims that he is Lucien Chilmark.

In Chapter 3, Susan wakes in a strange place. A kind woman is ministering to her. Lucien is standing across the room and he immediately begins to demand an explanation of Susan's behavior. Lucien appears saddened that rumors about him have impacted Susan's life, but he welcomes news from home after his long estrangement. Lucien also learns that his mother is not always nice to Susan and admits that she was



not always kind to him either. However, Lucien agrees to take Susan home so that she might sneak back into the house without her mother's knowledge and he can sneak a visit with their household slave, Rhody.

In Chapter 4, Lucien tells Susan that there was once a girl who lived in their home, Sallie, who was the daughter of Rhody's sister. Lucien grew up with Sallie and fell in love with her when he returned from college. However, Lucien's parents, Charlotte and Hugh, were not happy that Lucien had taught Sallie to read. Hugh sent Sallie back east. Hugh and Lucien had a fight that caused Lucien to leave the home for good.

Prologue and Part 1, June 21, 1861: Chapters 1-4 Analysis

Susan is only fourteen when the Civil War begins. Susan does not understand fully what is happening around her. However, it is apparent to the reader that Susan's father, Hugh, is a patriotic American and he is heartbroken to see his country torn apart. Hugh gives Susan some advice that she will remember often and use as the plot of the novel unfolds.

Susan is not allowed to participate in any of the common activities of the Southern ladies during the Civil War such as sewing circles because there is a lot of gossip going around town due to the fact that her brother, Lucien, has refused to show his support for the war by joining the Confederate army. Instead, Lucien has stayed in Richmond to run a business and to bring food into the city through his fishing efforts. This is frowned upon and has caused the people of Richmond to doubt the loyalty of the entire Chilmark family even though Lucien has been estranged from the family for years. Charlotte, in her own selfish way, is trying to protect Susan from this.

Susan meets Lucien while wearing his old boyhood clothing. There is a misunderstanding that is quickly rectified. However, Susan knows little about Lucien and remains somewhat afraid of him due to the spanking he gave her in his carriage when he thought she was a boy thief. Later, Lucien tells Susan his story of why he left home, how he fell in love with a slave girl and was forbidden to spend time with her by his parents who finally sent the girl away. This shows the reader how romantic and kind Lucien is despite his previous actions and suggests a reason why he did not join the Cause. Lucien does not believe in slavery and has chosen not to participate in a war to win the right to continue the institution. This is interesting because it provides Susan with another point of view on the war that might cause some conflict later in the novel.



Part 1, June 20, 1861: Chapters 5-8

Part 1, June 20, 1861: Chapters 5-8 Summary

In Chapter 5, Susan's mother, Charlotte, has guests over for dinner when Susan returns home. Mr. Wigfall is a U.S. Senator from Texas and his wife busies herself making flags for Confederate troops to take into battle. Mrs. Wigfall shows Charlotte and Susan a Texas flag she has made after dinner. When Mrs. Wigfall learns that Charlotte does not allow Susan to join the sewing circles because her sewing is not very good, Mrs. Wigfall volunteers to teach her. Although Susan can see that Charlotte does not want to, she agrees because of Mrs. Wigfall's status in the community. The next day, a group from The Richmond Citizens' Committee comes to talk to Charlotte about taking in some of the wounded from the Battle of Manassas. Before she leaves, Susan asks if she can go to the train station to help with the influx of wounded, but Charlotte refuses.

In Chapter 6, later that evening, a man comes to the door with a wagon of wounded. However, Charlotte refuses to take any of the men because they are not officers. When Susan protests, Charlotte slaps her. Their neighbor, Mrs. Harrold, agrees to take in four of the wounded. Susan convinces her mother to allow her to help Mrs. Harrold. At Mrs. Harrold's, Susan is put in charge of a young private from North Carolina who will not eat the food offered, but wants a soup from home called sour soup. Susan agrees to make it.

In Chapter 7, as Susan feeds the young soldier his sour soup, he talks to her about his mother and the home he left behind. Susan agrees to write a letter for the man to his mother. The next morning, Susan sneaks out of the house to return to Mrs. Harrold's. Susan learns that her soldier has taken a turn for the worse during the night and is not expected to live. Despite concern on Mrs. Harrold's part, Susan sits with the soldier most of the day until he dies. When Susan returns home, she finds her mother entertaining two officers who have small wounds from the battle. The next morning, Susan attends the young soldier's funeral with Mrs. Harrold.

In Chapter 8, Susan is in the lobby of the Sandwood Hotel awaiting Mrs. Wigfall when she sees Connie and her mother. Connie's mother walks up to Charlotte and begins to berate her for her brother's lack of commitment to the Confederate cause. There are tears in Susan's eyes when Mrs. Wigfall finds her. Mrs. Wigfall comforts Susan, making Susan wish Mrs. Wigfall were her mother. Later, when Susan returns home she discovers her father has come home for a brief visit. However, Charlotte tells Hugh that Susan took her good silk dress to Mrs. Wigfall to make a flag even though her mother told her not to. Susan is sent to bed early and not allowed to spend the evening with her father. The next morning, over breakfast, Susan tells her father about meeting Lucien. After their conversation, Hugh rushes out to meet with his lawyer.



Part 1, June 20, 1861: Chapters 5-8 Analysis

After the Battle of Manassas, many of the wounded are brought into Richmond for care. Due to a lack of space at the hospital, many of the men need to find beds in private homes. While Mrs. Harrold, the widowed woman who lives next door to the Chilmarks, takes in three privates, Susan's mother, Charlotte Chilmark, refuses to take in anyone who is not an officer. The reader can interpret this in two ways, that Charlotte is a snob who will not allow men of a lesser rank into her home or that she is alone and afraid of the actions of a less educated man. While Charlotte's actions often point to her snobbery and her deep concern for the way people perceive her in public, it is also possible that Charlotte is simply frightened. Charlotte is a good Southern woman who has grown up with many customs that tell her it is improper for a good woman to be in certain compromising situations with a man, especially a man below her in social status.

Charlotte Chilmark is a complicated character who has lived a life of hardship. The reader already knows that Charlotte has lost three children outside of the son who has chosen to remove himself from the home. This leaves Charlotte alone with Susan as her only surviving child. Charlotte is clearly over protective of Susan. However, her treatment of Susan in the home is questionable and leaves the reader wondering if Charlotte is truly a character to be pitied, or if she is a cold, heartless woman who is only concerned with her own reputation. The reader cannot clearly judge at this point in the novel, but it is clear that Charlotte is a difficult woman for Susan to and it is this that is the most important aspect of Charlotte's character in this novel.

The aftermath of the battle of Manassas comes to Susan's doorstep. Susan finds herself ministering to a man her mother did not feel was good enough to grace their doorstep. Susan, however, finds him to be a good man who is only doing what he thinks is right. In fact, this man has left all he knows behind and placed his life in danger for what he thinks is right. It is a lesson Susan will take to heart and draw on as the plot of the novel continues to develop. This will also mark a turn in Susan's beliefs in the Confederate cause as she watches a young, innocent man die for something that even he does not fully understand.



Part 2, January 20, 1862: Chapters 9-15

Part 2, January 20, 1862: Chapters 9-15 Summary

In Chapter 9, six months have passed. Susan attends the funeral of President John Tyler with her mother and the Wigfalls. Susan is pleased to see Lucien in the back of the church. Susan has not seen Lucien since that day in June, but she received some good wool from him for a cloak for a Christmas gift that Hugh made Charlotte allow Susan keep. Later, after the funeral, Susan receives a note from Lucien with a flag she made that was supposed to be on Tyler's casket that thanks her for her effort and asks if she might like to go on a picnic with him and Fanny later in the spring. A few months later, Susan goes on her picnic with Lucien and Fanny. They sit on a hill overlooking the James River. They can see a Union hot air balloon in the distance. Susan thinks the balloon is beautiful.

In Chapter 10, while her father continues to work on the warship, Virginia, Susan continues to do her best to help with the Cause. At St. Paul's church, Susan is helping a group of ladies sew sandbags for fortification. The discussion turns to the actions of the local officials and their Baltimore detectives who have been putting Richmond citizens in Castle Godwin for the slightest offenses. Some of the women comment that they would like to do more to help the Confederate Cause. When talk of the Union balloons begins, Susan tells what she knows of the balloons, information she has gotten mostly from Lucien. Then Mrs. Wigfall tells everyone that General Longstreet has expressed a desire to build such a balloon for the Confederates. It is suggested the women of Richmond donate their silk dresses to the balloon project and Susan quickly volunteers to collect them with the help of her friend, Connie.

In Chapter 11, Susan is surprised when her mother is happy that she has volunteered to collect the silk dresses. When Charlotte gives Susan a list with the names of all the proper ladies in town from whom she is to collect the dresses, Susan is a little disappointed but not surprised. However, when they get to the last day of collecting and still do not have enough dresses, Susan decides it is time to defy her mother again. Susan decides to go to Lucien.

In Chapter 12, Susan is ushered into Lucien's office by Sarah, his free servant. Lucien has a headache and is in bad mood, therefore he does not find Susan's visit entertaining. In fact, when Susan tells him she wants to collect dresses from prostitutes, but has no plans to tell anyone where she got them, he calls her a hypocrite. However, Lucien agrees to help.

In Chapter 13, Lucien takes Susan and Connie to a brothel owned by Lulie Ballard. Lucien explains the situation to Lulie and she is more than happy to help. As the girls wait for Lulie and her girls to get the dresses collected, Susan plays the piano for Lucien. When Lulie calls Susan and Connie, Lucien asks Susan to wait. Lucien tells Susan that a friend of his from the North is coming to his house for dinner that night and



that he would like her to meet him. Susan quickly agrees. Upstairs, Susan and Connie literally take the dresses off the girls' backs, collecting twenty dresses to more than fill their quota for the balloon.

In Chapter 14, Susan has dinner with Lucien and his friend, Timothy Tobias Collier, an artist from the North. Timothy tells Susan how he makes sketches of battle scenes and their aftermath to help the people in the North to understand the true toll of this war. As they talk, Susan finds Timothy flirting with her in a way that makes her very nervous. After dinner, Timothy asks Lucien's permission to sketch Susan.

Chapter 15. Susan and Mrs. Wigfall are taking the dresses to the train depot to send them to General Longstreet when they are stopped by the Baltimore Detectives. Mrs. Wigfall suddenly realizes she does not have the necessary paperwork for the shipment. However, Lucien shows up and talks to the detective, smoothing things over and allowing the shipment to go through. Lucien then gives Susan a package that contains a copy of the sketch Timothy did of her.

Part 2, January 20, 1862: Chapters 9-15 Analysis

The author does a good job of touching on a great deal of the true history of this time period. In this section of the book, the author describes the funeral of former President John Tyler. Susan actually attends the funeral and her Confederate flag was supposed to be on the casket, but the city officials could not decide if the Confederate flag or the American flag should be on the casket, therefore neither was on it. This comes straight out of history and is an interesting fact for readers to learn.

Susan sees the Union hot air balloon that is used to spy on the Confederates, to track troop movements, and to scout out the cities and battlements. Susan finds the balloon beautiful and becomes excited at the idea of helping the South get a balloon of their own. To this end, Susan finds herself coming up short on dresses from the proper ladies of Richmond and therefore decides to ask some of the less socially respected women to donate as well. Many women in the South during the Civil War were unable to participate in the Cause due to their place in society, most notably the prostitutes. In this book, the author expands on this idea by showing Susan collecting dresses from a brothel where her brother once took refuge after finding himself penniless and alone after leaving his family home. This episode shows a basic flaw in the hierarchy of Southern society that Charlotte seems to feel is so overwhelmingly important, allowing Susan to see past the gossip and improprieties that have kept her from her brother for so long.

Susan meets Timothy Tobias Collier in these chapters. Timothy is an artist from the North. Due to Timothy's birthplace, he represents a different point of view to Susan of the war and its impact on the country as a whole. Not only this, but Timothy also represents a romantic possibility that will bring Susan out of childhood and into adulthood as the novel progresses.



Part 3, April 5, 1862: Chapters 16-23

Part 3, April 5, 1862: Chapters 16-23 Summary

In Chapter 16, after church, Susan joins most of the other churchgoers in bringing food to the train depot to feed the soldiers passing through the area. It is a long and exhausting day, leaving most of the families in Richmond without much food in their larders. Later in the day, Susan is honored when the Washington Artillery of New Orleans marches past her house to thank her for the flag she made that they carry into battle.

In Chapter 17, food has grown scarce in Richmond because of the set prices the local government has set, causing most farmers and fishermen to refuse to sell their food in the city. Just as Susan and her household are beginning to feel the effects of the lack of food, Lucien begins sending baskets of food to them. Charlotte, however, refuses to eat any of it. At the end of May, Susan receives a letter from her father informing her of the destruction of the Virginia at his own hand and his decision to join the Confederate army as an engineer.

In Chapter 18, just as it appears the war is coming to Richmond with McClellan's approaching army, Charlotte confronts Susan with a copy of Harper's Weekly Magazine in which her portrait appears. Charlotte calls Susan a Yankee brat and accuses her of purposely trying to embarrass the family. Charlotte then beats Susan with a switch and forbids her from seeing the Confederate balloon when it comes down the James River. Susan runs away, going to Lucien. Lucien is sympathetic, but there is little he can do. Lucien sends Susan back to Charlotte with the advice that she not take anything Charlotte says to heart.

In Chapter 19, battles rage outside of Richmond, but Richmond is not taken. However, the city is flooded with casualties. There are now hospitals on nearly every street corner. Susan volunteers to run supplies to the various hospitals. Susan's mother is volunteering as a nurse at the large military hospital, Chimborazo. When Susan sees Charlotte there, she is surprised by the compassion her mother shows for her patients when she cannot even show love to her only daughter. However, Susan comes to the understanding that Charlotte is not a bad person, she has simply been hurt too much by life.

In Chapter 20, Susan goes to see her balloon with Connie and her brother, Kenneth. Susan is overwhelmed with pride and happiness at the sight.

In Chapter 21, when Susan arrives home with Connie and Kenneth, her mother has a visitor. Susan soon learns from Lieutenant Hotchkiss that her father has been killed while scouting a clear path of travel.



In Chapter 22, Charlotte and Susan wait in the lawyer's office to hear the reading of Hugh's will. When Lucien arrives, he and Charlotte have a few unkind words before the lawyer finally reads the will. They learn that Hugh has left his entire estate to Lucien as the eldest male of the family. Hugh has also left Susan in Lucien's custody although he suggests that Susan be allowed to continue living in the family home with Charlotte. Charlotte is outraged and argues the validity of the will. Outside the lawyer's office, Charlotte and Lucien fight over Susan until Susan makes it clear that she wants Lucien in her life.

In Chapter 23, that night Charlotte tells Susan that Hugh Chilmark was not her father. Charlotte explains that Hugh had an affair with one of their house slaves, Lettie, resulting in a child, Sallie. When Charlotte learned the truth while going through some of Lettie's things in the attic, she confronted Hugh. A short time later, while on vacation in New York, Charlotte befriended a man who had recently lost his wife and conceived Susan. Devastated, Susan dresses in Lucien's old clothes again and runs away to his gambling house. However, she is too ashamed to go inside and is discovered accidentally by Sarah. Sarah takes Susan to Lucien's home and cleans her up before putting her to bed. When Lucien comes later, Susan tells him everything Charlotte said. Lucien confirms that Hugh did have an affair with Lettie, but claims to have not known about Charlotte's affair. Lucien then tells Susan she can live with him.

Part 3, April 5, 1862: Chapters 16-23 Analysis

The war continues to rage around Richmond and life for those in the city is becoming increasingly difficult. Susan is surviving well, however, thanks to her brother, Lucien. Susan and her mother appear to come to an impasse during the care of soldiers injured protecting Richmond. However, this impasse is short-lived when Charlotte discovers the portrait of Susan that Timothy Tobias Collier drew. Then, when Hugh Chilmark dies, the whole world is turned upside down for both Susan and her mother.

The death of Hugh has a huge impact on Susan, not only because it changes her entire family structure and robs her of the one caring parent she had, but because it gives Lucien custody of Susan. Now Lucien can act if Charlotte beats Susan again, as she did after the discovery of the Harper's Weekly portrait. However, it also changes everything for Charlotte, leaving her at the mercy of her estranged son for her every need now that he has financial control over the estate. This is perhaps why Charlotte decided to tell Susan the truth about her own paternity and the actions of her father with the household slaves. At least, this is what the reader hopes is Charlotte's reasoning, not that she is simply a very angry woman who used this information to hurt the only person she has control over.

Susan's life is turned upside down when she learns that her father was fallible and that he was not her biological father. However, Susan has Lucien to turn to, a man who now shares with Susan some of her dark opinions of the Southern way of life.



Part 4, June 20, 1862: Chapters 24-28

Part 4, June 20, 1862: Chapters 24-28 Summary

In Chapter 24, Susan is sick for several weeks due to pneumonia. When she begins to recover, Connie and Kenneth come to see her, but Susan at first refuses to see them. Susan does see them, however, and says goodbye to Kenneth as he prepares to return to the army. Later, Susan speaks with Lucien and learns that he wants to send her away to school.

In Chapter 25, as McClellan's army once again attacks near Richmond, Lucien begins spending long nights helping the wounded. Susan wants to help too, but Lucien will not allow it because of her illness. A short time later, Mrs. Wigfall comes by and tells Susan that Kenneth has been killed. Susan visits Connie. Susan has begun to question the Cause and she is further disillusioned by the war with Kenneth's death. Therefore, Susan asks Connie if she would mind if Susan did something to take the hot air balloon away from the Confederates.

In Chapter 26, Timothy Tobias Collier comes for a visit. Susan finds herself alone with him as he declares his affections for her. Susan discusses her changed feelings for the Confederacy and asks Timothy if he will help her get rid of the balloon she helped to create. Timothy agrees, but insists they must tell Lucien first.

In Chapter 27, at dinner, Susan and Timothy tell Lucien about their plan to give the Confederate balloon to the Union. Lucien is outraged and insists that it is treason. Lucien forbids both Timothy and Susan from acting on their plan.

In Chapter 28, Susan and Timothy have decided to go on with their plan despite Lucien's opinions. On the day it is to take place, Timothy sends Susan a note through Connie. Worried about Timothy, Susan dresses in boy's clothes and sneaks out of the house to watch the Union capture the balloon. However, things go wrong when Susan is spotted by a picket. The boy discovers that Susan is a girl and attempts to sexually assault her. Lucien arrives at the perfect moment, shoots the picket, and rescues Susan. Back at the gambling house, Lucien sends Susan home and begins to create an alibi for himself.

Part 4, June 20, 1862: Chapters 24-28 Analysis

Susan moves in with Lucien and begins a new life under his roof. Despite her mother's warnings, Susan does not find herself as ostracized by her closeness with Lucien as she had thought. However, the war is growing closer and closer. Susan finds herself confronted by it nearly every day as a battle rages close to Richmond.

Susan's friend, Kenneth, dies in battle. This pushes Susan over the edge in her changing feelings regarding the war. Susan cannot understand how someone would

want to protect an institution that allows men like her father to take advantage of their slaves, making babies with them while good Southern women are expected to look the other way. Now to have Kenneth die for such a confusing and immoral cause, Susan has reached a breaking point. Susan enlists the help of new lover, Timothy, to help her rid herself of the balloon she helped to create for the Confederacy.

In the last few chapters, the themes of the book have taken a sharp turn. No longer is Susan a good Southern girl who is searching for a way to support her men and the Cause they are fighting for. Susan has lost too much, her father, a friend, and her own identity. Now Susan wants to rid herself of the symbol of her support of the Cause and by doing this, Susan commits a crime that could cause her to be placed in prison.



Part 4, June 20, 1862: Chapters 29-33

Part 4, June 20, 1862: Chapters 29-33 Summary

In Chapter 29, Susan wakes the next morning to hear Timothy and Lucien fighting downstairs. Susan rushes down to defend her lover, but Lucien is not willing to hear any of it. However, Lucien does allow Susan and Timothy a few minutes alone to say their goodbyes.

In Chapter 30, Lucien locks Susan up in her room for several days in punishment for her actions. When Lucien learns that Susan refuses to eat, he confronts her and they argue. Susan finally realizes that Lucien is angry not only because of the danger she purposely placed herself in, but because he was forced to kill a young Confederate soldier. Lucien is torn up inside because of his own actions and is beginning to question his own identity as a Southern gentleman. A short time later, a Baltimore detective comes to ask questions about Susan's possible involvement in the loss of the balloon. Lucien sticks to his own and Susan's alibis. When Susan comes down, she also acts her way through the ordeal, pretending to be the perfect Southern belle. Lucien then tells Susan that he is going to have to send her away for her own protection from the local law.

In Chapter 31, Timothy insists that Lucien should send Susan North to his own family. Lucien argues this idea until Timothy accuses him of being afraid that by sending Susan North he will lose her forever. Finally, Lucien relents and agrees to send Susan to Timothy's family.

In Chapter 32, Lucien refuses to allow Susan to take many of her personal possessions, keeping her to just a few boy's clothes and a hairbrush. Later, Susan visits with Connie to say goodbye. Connie gives Susan her most prized possession, a handkerchief given to her by the Prince of Wales. Later still, Susan and Lucien go to visit Charlotte. Charlotte is as cold and self-absorbed as usual. Susan is hurt by the visit.

In Chapter 33, Susan thinks of all she is leaving behind by leaving Richmond. However, she is excited about the future.

Part 4, June 20, 1862: Chapters 29-33 Analysis

Susan believes that the only consequence of her actions she will have to live with is the anger of her brother. However, Susan quickly realizes that her actions impact everyone around her in ways that she never could have understood before. Susan finds herself forced to grow up in just a few short days as she comes to see how her actions have hurt not only the Cause, but her beloved brother as well as his friendship with Timothy.

Susan has lost her belief in the Confederate cause. Whether or not what she did in giving away the balloon to the Union, Susan has acted in a way that her father told her many times she should. Susan did what she believed was right despite how she knew it

would impact those around her. This is something Hugh Chilmark failed to do with his wife and led to his son leaving home and never finding forgiveness for Hugh again. For this reason, Susan did what she had to do and nearly lost Lucien herself in the process. However, love won out for them and helped them find each other again despite the pain and difference in opinions they have between them.



Characters

Susan Dobson Chilmark

Susan is fourteen when the novel begins. Susan is the daughter of Southern parents. Susan lives in Richmond with her mother, Charlotte, as the Civil War rages around them. Susan's mother will not allow Susan to join any of the common sewing circles or other charitable organizations that work to further the Southern Cause because of rumors around Richmond about Susan's brother, Lucien. Lucien has anti-Southern ideas and has refused to join the Confederate army.

Susan adores her father, but he is absent during most of the novel because of his work in outfitting the warship, Virginia. This leaves Susan chiefly alone with her mother, Charlotte, who is considered insane by many of the people in Richmond because of her behaviors that resulted after the death of her daughter, Isabel, and two stillborn children. Susan will learn later in the novel, however, that Hugh also has contributed to the pain in Charlotte's life when he had an affair with a household slave.

Susan finds herself caught between her abusive mother and her anti-Confederate brother, Lucien. Susan tries to do what is right throughout the novel, but struggles to understand exactly what that is. Susan's mother tells her the Confederate Cause is the only right thing, while her brother teaches her to question her beliefs in the Confederacy. In the end, Susan comes to her own conclusions about the Confederacy, the war, and her own identity that do not always match those around her, but help her discover her own moral compass.

Lucien Dobson Chilmark

Lucien Chilmark is Susan's older brother. Lucien is a kind, gentle Southern gentleman. However, Lucien and his family do not see eye to eye on many things, specifically slavery, and this has caused a falling out between Lucien and his family. For this reason, Lucien has not seen his parents in over seven years and has no relationship with his baby sister. In fact, Lucien runs a gambling house and is the source of much gossip in Richmond that embarrasses his mother and leaves her angry with him and refusing to allow Susan to leave the home.

Lucien once fell in love with a young slave girl who lived in his family's home and taught her to read. When this was discovered, the girl was sent away. When Lucien confronted his father about these actions, he learned that the girl was in fact his half-sister, the result of an affair Lucien's father had with another slave in the household. For this reason, Lucien left home and refused to ever return.

Lucien lives a life outside the accepted standards of society. Lucien is friends with a brothel owner who once took him in when he was penniless and homeless. Lucien also has a mistress, a fact that has caused many in Richmond to look down on him. Lucien



has also refused to join the Confederate army, even maneuvering to get out of the draft so that he cannot be forced to join. For these reasons, Lucien is a source of great embarrassment for his family. However, when Lucien takes in Susan, he proves himself to be a greater man than those who are considered Southern gentlemen.

Charlotte Chilmark

Charlotte Chilmark is a true Southern lady who has had a difficult life. Charlotte lost a daughter when she took her child home to North Carolina and caused her to catch yellow fever. The loss of this daughter impacted Charlotte deeply, as did two miscarriages she had soon after. However, it was learning that her husband had an affair with a household slave that resulted in a child that drove Charlotte over the edge. Charlotte had an affair with a Yankee man and conceived her daughter Susan in direct reaction to her husband's deception.

Charlotte is considered crazy by her husband, her children, and her neighbors. Charlotte has fits of temper that often result in her verbally and physically abusing those around her, most especially her daughter, Susan. This causes a difficult relationship between Charlotte and Susan, as well as Charlotte and her son, Lucien. In the end, Charlotte appears to choose her own selfish desires over those of her children and ends up alone.

Hugh Chilmark

Hugh Chilmark is Susan's kind, gentle father. Hugh is a considerate man who loves his wife deeply and has done things that he regrets in an attempt to make up a great wrong to his wife. When Hugh was a young man, he had an affair with a household slave that resulted in a child. When Hugh's wife learned of the affair, she had difficulty with it. For this reason, Hugh found himself forced to do many things to attempt to appease his wife, including sending his only son away.

Hugh is a patriotic man who is heartbroken when the Civil War begins. Hugh tries to teach his daughter, Susan, to do what is right no matter what the consequences might be. Instead of following his own advice, Hugh joins the fight for the Confederacy, first working to transform the Merrimack into the Confederate warship, Virginia. Later, Hugh joins the Confederate army as an engineer and is killed while scouting a safer travel route. His death leaves a huge hole in Susan's life. It also leaves Lucien in charge of his estate, a fact that angers and confuses Charlotte as it is the last thing she expected her husband to do.

Charlotte Wigfall

Charlotte Wigfall is the wife of a U.S. Senator from Texas. Mrs. Wigfall is a kind woman who sees a need in Susan and quickly moves in to become something of a surrogate mother to her, teaching Susan how to sew and giving her some confidence in herself.



Susan wishes that Mrs. Wigfall might have been her real mother, making Mrs. Wigfall that more sympathetic to Susan and helping her in her endeavors to get to know Lucien better.

Timothy Tobias Collier

Timothy Tobias Collier is an artist whose work often appears in Harper's Weekly Magazine. Timothy travels with Union troops and often sketches the battles and their aftermath for the magazine. Susan meets Timothy at Lucien's house. Timothy and Lucien are good friends from before the war. Susan and Timothy immediately are drawn to one another despite their differences in background. When Susan decides she wants to turn the hot air balloon she helped to make over to the Union, she turns to Timothy for help.

Connie Turnstable

Connie Turnstable is Susan's best friend. Connie's mother is a woman of high status in Richmond and therefore one who is most impacted by the gossip about Susan's brother Lucien. In fact, it seems Mrs. Turnstable spreads most of the gossip and uses it to keep Charlotte from participating in some social activities in the city. It is women like Mrs. Turnstable that Charlotte attempts to keep Susan from by keeping her from the sewing circles and other social events. However, despite her mother's opinion of the Chilmarks, Connie remains Susan's friend and even defies her own mother by choosing to help Susan collect silk dresses for the hot air balloon.

Rhody

Rhody is a household slave who works for the Chilmarks. Rhody was purchased by Hugh Chilmark along with her husband and sister, Lettie. Rhody's husband died soon after coming to live with the Chilmarks from injuries received under another master, leaving Rhody alone with their son, Wilium. Lettie also ran away from the Chilmarks shortly after giving birth to her own child, leaving Rhody to raise that child as well. Rhody is a good friend to Susan and supports her through her mother's crazy behaviors. However, when Susan learns that her father had an affair with Lettie, she cannot understand how Rhody can blame Lettie over Hugh.

Sallie

Sallie is Lettie's daughter. Sallie's father is Hugh Chilmark. Sallie grew up as a playmate with Lucien and his sister, Isabel. When Isabel died, Charlotte wanted Sallie sent away because she was a reminder of her loss, but Hugh refused. Charlotte later learned that Sallie was Hugh's daughter and this is why he refused to send her away. Lucien also learns this truth after teaching Sallie to read and falling in love with her. Lucien wants to run away with Sallie, but instead learns that Hugh has sent her to live in the North.

When Lucien confronts his father, he learns the truth and is devastated by this secret in his own family, causing an irreparable rift between father and son.

Mrs. Harrold

Mrs. Harrold is Susan's next door neighbor. After the Battle of Manassas, many of the households are asked to take in wounded soldiers. Charlotte signs up, but agrees to only take in officers. Mrs. Harrold, however, does not care about the wounded's rank and takes in three of the wounded soldiers. Susan helps Mrs. Harrold with her charges, witnessing the toll of war for the first time when the boy she is assigned to care for dies of his wounds.



Objects/Places

Portrait

Timothy Tobias Collier makes a sketch of Susan that he calls Southern Belle that appears in Harper's Weekly Magazine. Susan's mother beats her for allowing this portrait to be made and to appear in a Northern periodical.

Pictures

When Susan prepares to go North to live with Timothy's family, she chooses to take with her a portrait of Hugh and Charlotte and one of Lucien rather than the fancy dresses Lucien bought her.

Hugh's Will

Hugh surprises everyone when his will leaves his entire estate to Lucien as his eldest living male heir. Charlotte had expected Hugh to leave everything to her because he and Lucien had a falling out years before.

Silk Dresses

Susan helps to collect silk dresses from the ladies of Richmond that are later used to make a hot air balloon for the Confederate army.

Lucien's Old Clothes

Susan wears Lucien's old clothes so that she might move through the city without being noticed or placing herself in danger. However, Lucien sees the monogram on the shirt and recognizes it as his own, almost beating Susan for theft.

Fish

Lucien makes a great deal of his money fishing and selling his fish in Richmond. When the government fixes the prices and makes it impossible for Lucien to sell his fish in the city, he begins donating it to help troops and the wounded in exchange for not having to obey the draft.



Lucien's Gambling House

Lucien is a half partner in a gambling house in Richmond. It is here that Lucien takes Susan the first time they meet and where Susan goes to see him on three occasions over the next year.

Hot Air Balloons

The Union begins using hot air balloons early in the war to spy on the Confederates, watching troop movements, battlement placements, and other such things. Susan collects silk dresses from the ladies of Richmond to help build a similar balloon for the Confederates after seeing one of the Union's balloons.

The Virginia

The Virginia is the battleship the Confederates created out of the captured Merrimack in the early months of the war. Susan's father worked on the Virginia in his capacity as an executive to the Tredegar Iron Works in Richmond. When the Virginia came in danger of being captured by the Union, Hugh Chilmark helped blow it up.

Battle of Manassas

The Battle of Manassas, or the First Battle of Bull Run, took place on June 21, 1861. It was the first major battle of the Civil War. Susan cares for a North Carolina private who was wounded in this battle.

Seven Days Campaign

The Seven Days' Campaign took place from June 25-July 1, 1862 outside of Richmond. General Grant fought off the Union Army of the Potomac led by McClellan for seven days to keep Richmond from falling into Union hands. In a letter, Longstreet claims the Confederates used a hot air balloon during the campaign to aid their efforts. This letter is the inspiration for this novel.

Richmond, Virginia

Richmond, Virginia was the capitol of the Confederacy during the Civil War. This is where this novel is set.



Themes

Loyalty

This novel takes place in the South during the Civil War. Hence, the loyalty of the characters in the book is constantly tested by the war and the people around them. In the beginning, Susan's mother refuses to allow her to join a sewing circle because she is afraid Susan will hear and possibly be influenced by gossip regarding her brother. Lucien is a strong opponent to slavery and therefore has refused to join the Confederate army to fight for this outdated institution. This has caused a great deal of gossip and disapproval among the social elite in Richmond.

As the novel progresses, Susan does all she can to prove she is a staunch supporter of the Confederate Cause, even nursing a young North Carolina soldier who was injured in the Battle of Manassas. However, no matter how hard Susan works, her mother continues to question her loyalties to the south and to call her a Yankee. Susan is hurt by these unkind words and does not understand where they come from.

When Susan meets her brother, Lucien, she learns of his distaste for slavery, but continues to misunderstand his reasons for not joining the Confederate army. However, when Susan learns that her father had an affair with a household slave and fathered a child with this slave, Susan begins to question her own beliefs in the South. Susan cannot understand how someone can fight for a system that allows a man to take advantage of another person and then expect his wife to look the other way. For this reason, Susan loses her faith in the South and begins to embrace the values of the North, fulfilling her mother's prophecy when she called Susan a Yankee.

Family

Family is of great importance in the South during the Civil War. In this book, Susan's family is of great importance to her, but her family is broken. Susan's brother disappeared from her life when she was only seven, the result of a fight between her father and Lucien that Susan does not know the details of and therefore does not fully understand. When Susan meets Lucien, she begins to understand some of the background that led to the falling out, but continues to wonder what could have been so bad that Lucien refused to see their father up until the days leading up to the war.

Susan is close to her father and trust him in everything he says and does. For this reason, Susan is devastated when she discovers that not only is the man she called father not her true father, but that he was not the honest and kind man she always believed him to be. This causes Susan to begin to question her own identity. When coupled with a mother who cannot and will not love her, Susan feels that she is alone in a world she no longer understands.



Susan's relationship with Lucien is what makes family a true theme of the book. Susan finds in Lucien all the love and understanding she never found in Charlotte. Susan also finds an honesty in Lucien that was missing in her relationship with her father, Hugh. Lucien proves to be as confused and uncertain in his own identity as Susan, but his beliefs are strong enough that he is able to give Susan enough strength to follow through with the good things Hugh taught her.

History

The author uses true history to fill her novel with enough authenticity that the reader feels as though the story might have really happened to some teenage girl living during the Civil War. The author begins her novel with the removal of the American Flag the day after the first shot was fired at Fort Sumter. This is an important event because it reflects the feelings and actions of many Southerners throughout the country on those important first days of the war. The author then continues to describe the activities in Richmond during the first battle of the war, the Battle of Manassas.

As the novel continues, the author draws on many well-known and well chronicled events of the war. However, the author also draws on history that cannot be fully researched due to the destruction of war documents at the end of the war in Richmond. The author uses a single letter written by real Civil War general, Longstreet, that describes a hot air balloon used by the Confederacy that was confiscated by the Union in July of 1862 to support the entire plot of her novel. By using something that cannot be documented but that also cannot be disproved, the author has written a fictional story that is so filled with true history that the reader cannot help but learn a few true facts about a very important time in American history by reading this book. Hence, history is an important theme of the book.

Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the first-person point of view. The narrating character is Susan Dobson Chilmark, the fourteen-year-old daughter of a Southern Belle and her West Point trained husband. Susan is a staunch supporter of the Confederate Cause when the novel begins, working hard to prove to Richmond and her mother in particular that she cares just as much about the Cause as everyone else. However, as the novel progresses and Susan begins to lose everything that matters to her, her father, her friend, her identity, Susan begins to question her undying commitment to the Cause and work to aid the Union.

The point of view of this novel works well because it tells a story through the eyes of one person, a fourteen-year-old girl who is struggling to figure out her own identity in a world turned upside down. The author remains with only one narrating character throughout the novel, keeping the chances for confusion down as the reader sees everything through the eyes of only one person and understands the feelings and needs of only one character. The first person point of view is a very intimate point of view that helps build a connection between reader and character that cannot be duplicated with another point of view.

Setting

The novel is set in Richmond, Virginia in the years 1861-1862, the first full year of the Civil War. The setting of the novel places the reader in the middle of the Confederate capitol as the war begins and rages around the city. This setting places the main character in a good position to see and understand how the war would quickly impact the Southern way of life as well as the families whose sons have gone off to fight the war.

The setting of this novel places the main character in the middle of the Confederate Cause in the beginning of the Civil War. The main character is a young girl who knows little about politics and the institution of slavery that has brought about the tensions between North and South in her country. This setting allows the young character to learn about the institution of slavery, the abuses inherent in it, and the direct impact of war on a country. Susan spends a year fighting for the Cause, only to find herself in a position to disregard everything she thought she knew and to turn her back on the Cause that had been so important only a short time before. For this reason, the setting of the novel is of intense importance to the overall plot of the novel.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is simple English. The main character of the novel is a fourteen year old girl, therefore most of the language is unsophisticated. The novel is set in the South, therefore some of the dialogue includes strange grammar and altered words that are meant to reflect the Southern dialect. However, the novel does not include any slang or foreign words and phrases that might confuse a young reader.

The language of the novel is authentic to the young narrator and supports the intended audience, young adults. For this reason, the language is somewhat simple, but not so simple that an older reader might not enjoy the plot of the novel. Hence, the language of the novel supports the overall plot and is appropriate to the subject.

Structure

The novel is divided into four parts and a prologue. Each part is named for an important date in the first year of the Civil War, including the date of the Battle of Manassas, the date of John Tyler's funeral, and the beginning date of the Seven Days Campaign. Each part includes multiple chapters, some as long as thirty pages while others are as short as two or three pages. The novel is told both in dialogue and narrative, showing a strong story rather than telling one.

The novel contains one main plot and multiple subplots. The main plot follows Susan Dobson Chilmark as she grows up during the first year of the Civil War. One subplot follows Susan as she meets and gets to know her estranged brother, Lucien. Another subplot follows Susan as she tries to do things to help the Cause, including collecting silk dresses to build a hot air balloon with. All the plots come to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.



Quotes

"Whenever I think of my father, which is often, I remember the day of the riot at Tredegar Iron Works. And I think of the way he got hit with the rock and how his face bled. That is the memory that will always come to my mind first, I suppose, when I think of my father" (Prologue, p. 3).

"My strange brother, whom I knew only from the contents of the room" (Chapter 1, p. 25).

"His face was soft, looking at me, as if he had found something he had lost a very long time ago. And just remembered what it was" (Chapter 4, p. 57).

"Why, my mama is hypocritical, I thought, standing there. Instantly, I squashed the thought. It was disloyal" (Chapter 7, p. 77).

"Richmond had turned out in full to bury the tenth president of the United States, John Tyler. Outside, on the icy streets, there were at least 150 carriages for the funeral cortege. I had seen the dark, riderless horse with the boots reversed in the stirrups that represented the dead man" (Chapter 9, p. 101).

"And I never felt so cold or alone, knowing that my brother could not say he loved me" (Chapter 12, p. 134).

"When Lucien had said that the world was changing all around us, he could have been writing an editorial for the Richmond Dispatch. Nothing was the same anymore" (Chapter 16, p. 165).

"The Yankees aren't savages, Susan. They're Americans" (Chapter 18, p. 188).

"He had waited a long time to stand up to Mama like this. But he was doing it for me!" (Chapter 22, p. 214).

"I trembled because his words hurt me as much as the blows from Mama's switch" (Chapter 28, p. 273).

"There was forgiveness in that hug, no words were needed" (Chapter 30, p. 302).

"I would take some of each of them North, where the snow piled high in the winter, Tim had told me. North where people had said to their sister states, 'We will not allow this to go on. You have strayed too far from the idea of what this country is about. We must bring you back into line'" (Chapter 33, p. 324).



Topics for Discussion

Who is Hugh Chilmark? Why does he attempt to rescue the American flag in the prologue of the novel? Why does this make him cry? What does Hugh mean when he tells his daughter to always stand up for what is right even if it hurts someone she loves? What did Hugh fail to stand up for? What can the reader assume by Hugh's reaction to the American flag being flung to the ground? Is Hugh a Union sympathizer?

Who is Susan Dobson Chilmark? Why is she not allowed to join a sewing circle? Why does Susan dress up in boy's clothing before leaving the house? Where does she get this clothing? What protection does Susan believe these clothes will afford her? For what reason? Who does Susan meet when she goes to the Spotswood Hotel? Why did she go to this hotel? Who grabs Susan at the hotel and threaten to punish her for thievery? What has Susan supposedly stolen?

Who is Lucien Dobson Chilmark? Why has he refused to join the Confederate army? Why is this frowned on by the women in Richmond? What is unusual about Lucien's relationship with Fanny? What is unusual about Sarah and Nate, Lucien's servants? Why does Lucien warn Susan to stay away from him? What is Lucien concern in Susan's relationship with him? What reason does Lucien give Susan for his leaving home seven years prior? What does this situation say about Lucien to the reader?

Who is Charlotte Chilmark? Why does Susan suggest her mother is crazy? What does Charlotte do that makes people think she might be crazy? Why does Charlotte refuse to take privates from the Battle of Manassas into her home? Why does Charlotte insist on officers? Why does Charlotte hit Susan for begging her to take in the privates? What does Susan do in response to this action? What does helping the wounded teach Susan about the war?

Who is Lulie Ballard? What does Lucien take Connie and Susan to see Lulie? What is Lucien's connection to Lulie? Is this an honorable connection? How does Susan feel about Lucien's connection to Lulie? How does Lulie feel when she learns Susan's desire to take her silk dresses? Why does Lulie and her girls react as they do? Why would no one want Lulie and her girls to help with the war effort? Why does Lucien call Susan a hypocrite for asking for Lulie's help but refusing to tell anyone about it?

Who is Timothy Tobias Collier? Why does Lucien introduce Susan to Timothy? What does Lucien hope Susan will learn from Timothy? What does Susan learn from Timothy? What kind of relationship do Susan and Timothy have? How does Lucien feel about this relationship? Why does Susan ask Timothy's help in giving the hot air balloon to the Union? Why does Timothy agree to help? Why do Susan and Timothy refuse to heed Lucien's warnings about their plans for the hot air balloon?

What are hot air balloons? Why did the Union begin using hot air balloons at the beginning of the Civil War? What did they use them to do? Why did the Confederacy find it difficult to get the materials to make their own hot air balloons? Why did they need



silk dresses to help build the balloons? What did they use the dresses for? What other uses did Susan find for her silk dresses?