



RAIF WOLFE'S

This, Your Forlorn Soldier

This brief excerpt from the short story and stage play by Raif Wolfe provided courtesy of MeDius² Productions and Raif Wolfe. For more information and/or interest please see the contact page of this Web Site.

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Fallen heroes, like fallen trees, lay quiet about the field; welcoming death in an awkward display of their motionless disposition. Oh so many fallen angels. Wounds burst fully open, offering revealing confirmation of how viciously they were felled. Those tall, straight trees that managed to remain upright and erect, scratching at the mist in the skies just above them; creak as they sway ever so slightly in the nearly vacant breeze.

This war, this enraged battle of brother versus brother – men in gray or blue uniform that clash by means of wood and steel long guns and ruthless cannons that spit spheres of unsentimental demon's blood across mud slopped fields – is alleged to be for freedom, for righteousness, for country, and in a cynical madness that I know not to be true unto myself – for God.

What freedom is it that we speak of? Who has been dispossessed of their liberty and who is their denier? So many have died for something I vaguely – just barely – pry from a long since tattered remembrance. What, pray tell, does the shade of a man's skin or uniform have to do with that same man being found deserving for this particular consideration? This so-called freedom.

We put up borders where there are no boundaries, no satisfactory confines, just blurred arguments that are settled with plentiful blood before paltry ink sets down upon parchment by eloquent gentlemen who have come to reflect prudently and christen the issue settled. So many lives spent to tip a quill.

And if we dare lift our tongues and invoke the hallowed name of God during these undertakings – undertakings that he no doubt is ashamed of us for pursuing – this senseless butchery; how do we then possess the boldness to speak of such uppity things as stealing away from another of his children something that we did not provide them — but God himself had? Their very lives...

Still, we have it in our hearts to pilfer their existence for an end that we cannot truthfully give particular reasons for. I possess knowledge of neither him nor his. Had I come upon him on a different day, under a different circumstance, I may perhaps have shook his hand and profited a new acquaintance.

The only words that I speak which embrace the Heavenly Father during this August day, is in hope that through his infinite power and glory, he gaze down upon my repentant soul and forgive me for slaying so many of his other sons.

Pride stripped of me, love shorn from me, my home so far away in a direction that I am not presently on familiar terms with, I stand this Virginia field, this wooded land, and breathe so slight that my breath dare not fashion a cloud of fog in the cool morning air so as to have me be discovered by a watchful picket.

I fear for my very being, that same verve that had so carelessly and easily been ripped from the bodies of all those littered about me. I am but a vestige here in this soggy grayness. I am the one who is departed. Yet I inhale and exhale the muggy stale air of a skirmish not yet over, not yet convinced to come to an end, not given permission to cease.

My perdition is that I cannot pass this time resting as I wait to be carried away like so many of my lifeless fellows. Everlasting slumber is the boys' solitary saving grace, one that does not bless them, but found them anyway. This sacred soil of carnage said to be covered by their honor. Honor so terribly discolored reddish plum with their blood. No, I must rise up on my weary bones and journey on from this place of my own effort.

My boots, tanned animal hides that must be aching – because my feet tell me so – cannot hike another road even at common time, cannot press on through one more thicket, or run and jump from singing pellets of lead propelled with the purpose to burrow deep into my flesh and mortally tangle my innards. Somehow – these worn and weary boots – like the good soldiers that we are said to be, do neither bellyache nor deny me as they carry me to the next engagement.

I shout with all that I am, though naught comes out from within my mouth. Frozen closed yet not cold at all, but it truly hurts to budge my jowl, and my gashed lips are scabbed with my own dried blood. I hold my musket, fearful to drop it, but with powder and shot being scarce as hen's teeth for several days now, only the blade tipping her muzzle and her brawny butt end serve to defend myself with. Her bayonet is crooked, slightly, and akin to my lips it is layered thick with blood; however it tangles of the blood from an unfamiliar artery, from someone not me.

As we, my company and me, trudge along, what left of us that there be, the ones not yet mustered out, we forget to stoop when a cannon's belch is heard. Most, all, even me; fail to raise the brims of our sorry caps, let alone glimpse from under them to see who had fired, who had been fired upon, and who it was that screamed to announce their wretched demise.

How hath God allowed this to us, of us, by us? Someone please answer my head that thinks so loudly that it splits mine own ears. Though from my scrutiny I reckon it does not even reach those of the others nearby. We march on so tired, hot and hungry that we pretend to ourselves that we have a purpose, that we will be victorious. We tell each other mistruths that there will come a day when we will take a seat, resting on a comfortable chair upon a sun-drenched porch, drinking tall icy glasses of cider and converse about these horrid days with humorous anecdotes.

"Run!" the command is hurled at us like an enemy volley, only to be responded to by our willing yet nonetheless failed effort to do so.

Oh blistered, raw feet, please take me to a place where I can at least die in stillness, finding a half full belly and rumpled cot under my shattered remains. This earnest request, my dream, seems modest in all of its yearning.

Today – the thousands that have died in these fields have left behind congealed crimson puddles in the deep boot and hoof holes plowed by soldier and horse alike. Shards of bone splinter up from underfoot as our steps are taken. We walk amongst the freshest of graves. Those not yet dug; not yet covered – an unfinished cemetery yet to memorialize those who bravely tilled themselves deeply under her soil.

Another blast of ring-making smoke came from up yonder hill. Certainly no Quaker guns are these. Oh please, I hanker to be given the bequest of catching the hasty shot so that it rids me of my hurting, clears my memory of the awfulness which I have witnessed and caused, and permit me to go on to a spot somewhere that is not here. Alas, I am unlucky with death, ill-fated in life. The battle rages on, notwithstanding my opposition to it.

"Charge" he sings out to us from atop his brazen mount, chevrons sewn on his sleeves and slouch hat pulled down on his head which tells me he has been this ground before and draws from familiarity to show us the way to a victorious campaign – or – he foolishly stands it now for the first time, seeing the elephant, and boldly leads us all to our miserable deaths. Haughtiness can be so easily cloaked as bravery on a battlefield where young men seek to impress while dodging death.

Bodies drained, there feels no charge left to be had, no effort that can be made, no strength to push forward and no energy to fuel the very thought, no less the action, yet we still close the ranks and toe the mark. Running – painfully crashing one foot after another into the soft earth – we light out bobbing top-heavy toward the enemy line, whereat we smack upon encouragement when we stumble on and witness their frightened faces.

These faces are all too familiar, too recognizable, as if they may possibly even be our own. Reflections of our panic staring gallantly back at us, daring us to keep on, all set to deny us our bounty. Not yellow bellies at all, but fearful courageous fellows to a man. Brother, could that be my brother or by chance it is uncle, and is that father? Is this someone I know, or don't, but suppose I should, for I have come to kill him, die beside him, or take my last breath because of him? How aloof we are of this personal exchange.

My heart beats like the thud of the cavalry charge, disciplined and swift, but sloshed by the pools of muck. I have come here for deliverance, I suppose. I have come here for all that I believed in some time ago, even if I cannot recall at this very moment what those particulars and foundations be or were.

Years ago, when my father, my brother, me and our friends all joined this fight, we cheered and were merry as we sat around campfires after lengthy days of training, swapping stories of home and of those that we love and had come to fondly pine for. I have not sat next to a fire of such in so long, only the occasional burning house or torched wagon giving ember and recollection. The smoldering bodies accompanying these crackling battlefield bonfires often take away the partiality I once had for such tranquil and doting moments.

In a sound of metal and holler we clash, we merge in a fiery bereavement rendezvous, persuaded that if we prevail we will be rewarded, but death seems a great deal quicker way from this torment. Why is it I dread death so much, yet I discern it to be the easiest manner to shun such consequences from greeting me time and again?

My bayonet has been broken off at its mounting in the initial frenzy and falls peacefully to the ground. How selfishly it has found serenity amongst this scuffle without even offering me an invitation. I bid it farewell as it is finally given respite from the scores of battles it had come upon, the lengthy list of names it had slain being endless. Dear friend, why have you forsaken me in this moment, hardened steel that you are? I speculate if you ever just the once felt my anguish from all that we have caused together. I believe you to have the horse sense to do so.

Oddly, at this jiffy my hand clenches my pocket, and I feel the letter that I had not yet completed, but it spoke of free time and of awaiting a scuffle that seemed anxious to steer clear of our gathering regiments. Today that letter is of no value. It would be an unforgiveable account that I cannot pray hard enough to live to correct. The quarter pound of meat and pound of loaf issued per man just three days ago now seems so distant that the angst deep within my belly can be acknowledged even amidst this conflict.

My eyes rise up, look athwart, and see myself looking back at me. Young, but aged, battling, yet fatigued, so much so that my movements are slowed, and with a sudden flash I have shot myself, or so I believe that to be the way it has come to pass, as I unexpectedly come to rest on the flat of my back.

The sky looks suddenly different. I consider that the blue is making it through the red filtered haze that now nestles in my eyes. I ache for your forgiveness, oh God in heaven. I trust that I will entertain it,

for all that I know at this breath is that you are the only glory, the only power, and the only path that I should have ever followed. Tomorrow will not come for me, neither will tonight if I am truly privileged, but you will, my Lord. I know thee as kind and gentle.

As I look at me scurrying away, or he that I appear like – and he like me – I beg you to please pardon him as well, your son who hath fetched me to this. He was of the same mind as me, a hoodwinked warrior following a belief that causes men to wage war, to slaughter each other, only to find out that we will all depart this life someday no matter if our purpose is won or lost. Some give up the ghost sooner than others and some more justly than the rest.

Liars speak of painless death, where is my undemanding departure from this sanguinary battlefield? Pain runs unbridled amongst all my parts, through each of my thoughts and the length of every nerve that has managed to survive till now.

My boots will march that ultimate pathway, the one that brings me home to you. Blue uniforms or gray, butternut and soiled, or clothes of a farmer – all bleached with scarlet from the wickedness that we so willingly shared – Yanks and Johnny's will line my way.

Forgive them; forgive me, for not any of us will ever forget this tragedy we took part in. Save our souls, each of us, from the injustices that we have caused upon each other. Let us learn to love each other like we love you, and know each other to be good men, regardless of what we are, who we have become, and what we have done.

We must realize that we are all sons and daughters of God, and accept our differences in a manner less brutal and spiteful. Perchance this war was unavoidable, the hand of providence being rendered to this happening, and in our small minds we only perceive this one dreadful approach to resolve things. I know that we all have just causes and must stand for them, but with candid words that seem so plentiful at this instant, I question if we could not have talked like enlightened citizens and avoided such murdering. If a zeal more fervent than anger, that of love, could not have conquered our dissimilarities more hastily and with a less calamitous outcome. This is kept hidden away in the future.

Whilst I suck desperately my final chunk of smoky air, I beseech of thee our God, maker of all men, of all that believe, of all people regardless the colors we are – or wear – please unlatch your gate and grant your hospitality on this, your forlorn soldier, your son.