

The Bystander

by *Mary Cernoch*

Across the span of time, my race of indigenous, steadfast beings have encountered countless acts of bloodshed and have had the inability to stop them. We have never picked up arms or weapons, yet have stood on battlefields as bystanders looking on as people maim and decimate one another. It is not as if I would refuse to help; however, my permanent stance cannot allow me to assist others in times of distress. I did not come to reside here in this place as a nomadic traveler; rather, I was dropped here as a dormant seedling in the beak of a ravenous raven who became frightened of the dark clouds billowing across the sky and the echoes of thunder in the vast heavens. Fortunately, I was released in a vast field which descended onto the banks of a shallow, crystalline stream. The water flowed gently over the smooth pebbles that lined the shallow bottom, while rushes and cattails blew quietly in the wind. It was a peaceful abode that was immediately to my liking, and since I lack the ability of movement without others' assistance, I began my process of germination.

As a youthful sapling, I became a witness to the horrific deeds of mankind and can recollect the story as if had only occurred yesterday. It was deep into the summer month of July, and I was about to culminate into my daily midafternoon slumber when a young lady of about seventeen wandered into my midst. She was a beautiful young maiden with deep auburn hair swept into loose curls and eyes of pale green. She had a worrisome air about her, as if she was planning to meet someone. As I pondered why this foolish girl had left her chores in the middle of the broiling day, I saw a man running across the field towards her. He was a tall, broad-

shouldered man with dark brown hair, clear blue eyes, and in a grey uniform. When he finally reached the span of my branches, the man gazed into the female's misty eyes. The couple soon embraced and immediately began discussing their future together after his return from the army. I learned that the man's name was Charles and the woman's was Rebecca. They planned to return to Annapolis after the end of the war, marry, and start a life together. The two sat underneath my twisted branches in the shade of my swaying leaves and talked about their dreams and desires. Before they parted ways, Charles drew a pocket knife from his pants and began to carve his name and Rebecca's into my flesh. I was flabbergasted he had maimed me in such a way, but then looked at the lady's face and saw how that small cut into my body had made her unconditionally happy. Then the couple went their separate ways, and I soon drifted off into my nap.

Weeks went by after that strange meeting, and I thought little of it. However, I began to see men dressed in grey or deep indigo uniforms march across the field, though never at the same time. These men looked wearisome and had little hope as they trudged through the tall grasses. I began to develop an understanding of why they were clothed in such a manner and thought that humans were simply machines of annihilation that would eventually erase their existence. However, I paid little heed to the wandering troops, for I was growing into a strapping wooden tower that bent slightly in the trunk region. From my branches hung leaves that resembled moss and swayed delicately almost to the ground. People often referred to my ethnicity as the ones who "weep," yet I never knew why they labeled us as sad. Willows were known as mystical beings that had wondrous powers given by the moon and water. Ancient groups of people, such

as the Celtics and Greeks, believed that our essence contained healing properties; they would strip off the bitter outer layer and crush it into medicine that would help the people fatigued with fevers or colds (Kendall, par. 5). In Greek mythology, a member of my kind was fashioned into a wondrous lyre that Apollo played with fervor. Yet, the weeping analogy still puzzled me, until I beheld that grave day.

September 17, 1862 started off as a typical autumn morning. I swayed gently in the wind as I awoke from my night's rest and woke up to a startling image. One hundred thousand men, clothed in grey or navy, lined opposing sides of field. Bayonets, muskets, cannons and Gatling guns were stationed on either side. Generals Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and James E. Longstreet had divided up the Confederate army and were stationed at different areas of the field while Union Major General George B. McClellan led his forces with the help of Generals Ambrose Burnside, Joseph Hooker, Joseph Mansfield, and Edwin Sumner (National Park Service 2). Plumes of black powder began to spill across the field as the men marched in waves, firing in square squadrons. Cannons fired as dirt and blood spattered up into the air. The bullets from the Gatling guns were never-ceasing rounds of fire that hit men and sent them spiraling to the ground. Bodies of the wounded and dead were left sprawling on the ground covered in the dirt, blood, and mud of the cannon's blast. This literal "hell on earth" went on for what seemed like an eternity. By the time eight hours had gone by, fifteen thousand troops were hurt or dead, yet the battle raged on until there were twenty-three thousand casualties (Battle par. 2). I tried not to watch the gore of this murderous day, but I was hit by a stray bullet so I observed in agony as sap began to flow. In amazement, I recognized a face in the field of blood. It was Charles,

barely recognizable by the black dust of cannon fire and mud spatter, charging toward a man in blue. The navy-clad man grabbed his rifle and took aim at Charles, sending off a bullet that lodged in his left rib. Charles gasped for air in agonizing pain as he fell to his knees. Then, as I thought he was surely dying, he grabbed his pistol from his belt and shot at the man who had blasted him with artillery. The man in navy stumbled backward and fell on top of the mangled bodies that littered the ground. As Charles lay there fading, he took out a folded picture from his pocket and kissed it as he closed his eyes for the last time. I then understood my fate as a willow and wept.

Since that bloodbath, I have not looked at the human race the same. I often wonder what has become of Rebecca and how she took the eminent news of Charles' death. The thought often crosses my mind about how Charles died so bravely fighting for what he thought was right, even if it was inhumane. Time has since progressed, and all men are now considered free, but I will never be able to condone the horror of that day, so I weep for the outlook of mankind as I hold my steadfast position on the banks of Antietam Creek.

Works Cited

"The Battle of Antietam." *Civil War Trust: Saving America's Civil War Battlefields*. The History Channel, 2011. Web. 11 Nov. 2012.

Kendall, Paul. "Mythology and Folklore of the Willow." *Trees for Life*. Caledonia Wild! Summer 2000, 5 July 2012. Web. 11 Nov. 2012.

National Park Service. "The Battle of Antietam." United States Department of the Interior, n.d. Web. PDF File. 10 Nov. 2012.