

## Wilderness House Literary Review 13/2

Geoffrey Craig  
**THE VOLUNTEER**

*Time: December 12, 1862*  
*Place: Fredericksburg, VA*

**Y**ou can call me Louis Pratt although, as Shakespeare said, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." I'm fond of Shakespeare, having been the best pupil in my school, small as it was, and even carried my pocket-sized, leather-bound edition of Hamlet during yesterday's fighting – my first taste of battle. Tucked firmly in my coat, perhaps it was the Prince of Denmark that saved me in that Hell that was Fredericksburg. No, Hell would be a Garden of Eden compared to what I saw yesterday. Men dropped all around me as we deployed to protect the engineers constructing the pontoon bridges to be used in crossing the Rappahannock River tomorrow. Safely entrenched, the Rebs peppered us as if it were a turkey shoot, only easier. Near to fainting at my first glimpse of a dead man, I tried not to notice the corpses littering the ground. The wounded, if anything, were worse: men screaming and grasping their stomachs as blood, unstaunched, poured forth, arms hanging only half tethered to their supposed anchors, jaws smashed and chattering like a Halloween skeleton, men near death begging for water. I gave one a sip from my canteen only to see him die within seconds. A Union officer swayed limply in his saddle as his unguided horse trotted past. I know not whether he was alive or dead nor how he stayed in the saddle, the back of his head smacking against his horse's rump like a drummer rat-a-tatting his instrument.

Bullets flew past my head like angry bees, missing me by God's – and Shakespeare's – grace. The noise was fearsome. The cannonades, with their flash and roar, frightened me to the point I feared I would turn and run or, at the very least, wet my trousers. But I did neither and acquitted myself well. I knelt and fired with my company but cannot say to what effect.

Some among my fellow recruits find it strange that I read Shakespeare during our leisure hours in camp. In addition to Hamlet, who is, I must confess, my favorite, I brought Macbeth and Romeo and Juliet. An incurable romantic, I do love the tale of the star-crossed lovers although, were I the author, they would have lived happily ever after. Macbeth, however, got his just desserts. His murder of Duncan would compare in dastardliness in our times only were General McClellan to shoot our beloved President Lincoln. Coming upon me deep in Hamlet a couple of weeks ago, Sergeant Boyle said, with a mixture of scorn and amusement:

"What's a rough and ready young soldier doing with his nose stuck in a book? Why aren't you gambling away your meager pay with the rest of your shiftless platoon?"

At which point, the Sergeant snatched the book right out of my hands. I jumped up and reached for it, but he was far taller than me and held it over his head.

"Mind your manners, Private Pratt," he said with a half, and only a half, smile. He looked at the book's cover and thumbed through a page or

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two. "Ah, it's that sod of an Englishman. I should throw the damned thing in the fire. Ought to hang every bleeding one of them for what they've done to poor old Ireland."

With that, he returned my precious volume and sauntered off well-pleased, I'm certain, with himself. I may be ready, but rough I am not, particularly in comparison with the louts that populate our camp, swearing as if they knew no other language and arcing tobacco juice in great parabolas that raise little puffs of dust as they hit the ground. No one in my Quaker family would dream of indulging in such a despicable habit. Much, however, as they entertain themselves teasing me for my devotion to Shakespeare, many of my comrades-in-arms beg for me to read aloud as we sit around the fire after a meal of the toughest, stringiest meat I have ever tasted. I ask myself how much profit the purveyors to the Union Army are enjoying from the sale of such low-grade victuals.

I read aloud when asked. How can I deny a little solace to those, myself included, so uncertain at breakfast whether they'll see the evening's campfire? Tomorrow the word is we attack Marye's Heights, west of the town, where the Confederates are protected by stone walls and piled up logs. If today was worse than Hell, my imagination balks at contemplating the morrow. By its end, I could well be a bed for flies and a feast for maggots. My fleshly body, that is, for my soul will have fled this tortured land. Tortured by the curse of slavery, that monstrous practice that has sullied the reputation of the nation I, otherwise, so dearly love. To say that slavery is evil is inadequate in the extreme.

I write these few lines in my diary, which I carry in my jacket along with Hamlet. My candle burns low; I shall soon lie down to rest. Tomorrow I may find more rest than I require. Should that happen, my diary will tell my dear family my final thoughts, which are replete with love for them - whom I fervently pray to see again in this world.

I volunteered shortly after my eighteenth birthday, which seems an eon ago although, truth be told, barely three months have elapsed since that momentous day. I slipped away without telling Father and Mother that I was defying society's conventions and my precious religion to join this fight. I could not face their anger and despair. I know that I have broken their hearts. I can only hope they still love me and will forgive me when, and if, I return. While it goes against my Quaker upbringing to kill my fellow man, I am convinced that slavery has become so engrained in the Southern way of life that only the fire of war can destroy the "peculiar institution". Peaceful abolition has been over and over proposed and the result: the Fugitive Slave Act, by which our weak-kneed Congress put themselves firmly in the hands of the slavers, and the Dred Scott decision, which showed how little hope can reside outside the force of arms.

Which is not to say all my fellow Union soldiers agree. How often have I heard one of them say: "I ain't fighting to free no damn niggers, but I'll be darned if those Johnny Rebs 'r gonna' walk out jes' like that." I would like to argue, but I keep my peace. Every man must see the light for himself.

I grew up on a farm in New York's Hudson River Valley. My family prospered, raising Guernsey cattle for milk, butter and cheese. We also

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grew wheat, barley and oats. Our chickens and pigs were for our own use; and Mother, of course, had a vegetable garden, which we all helped tend. My parents delighted in their four children – two each of boys and girls – and hope to have more as two others died before reaching a month in age. Even in our medically advanced era, the tragic death of infants is an all-too-frequent occurrence. I am the oldest by a year and a half. I must say that my love of books trumped any interest I might have accrued in agricultural pursuits. Rushing through my chores on a fine summer's afternoon, I would climb to the top of the hill behind the farm. From there, I could see a sliver of the Hudson. As I sat reading, the hours melted away. I have always wanted to be a teacher but realize that this alone will not afford me a comfortable living. I may find myself growing vegetables and raising chickens despite my predilections.

As you can imagine, Father and Mother are ardent Abolitionists. I cannot imagine a Quaker who is not. Mother read "Uncle Tom's Cabin" aloud to the family gathered by the fire – and not just once. Our farm was a stop on the Underground Railway. If ever I needed convincing, I had but to listen to the stories runaway slaves told at dinner. Yes, they ate with us. Father and Mother believe that all men are created equal. They consider Thomas Jefferson a hypocrite of the first order and that our Constitution is deeply flawed. Sadly, there are abolitionists whose sentiments about the equality of man are less than ideal. They want to free the slaves but shrink from welcoming them as full participants into our society. Some even aver that my family goes too far and have argued tumultuously with Father. He, however, holds his ground; and I am deeply proud of him. I hope someday he will be proud of me.

Let me add that I too hold views not generally approved of: I am convinced that all men and all women are created equal – not that I expect that view to prevail anytime soon. I believe in full rights for women and support the suffragette movement. I will teach accordingly – if I ever get the chance. If it costs me friends, and limits my marriage prospects, so be it. I cannot conceive of spending my life with a spouse who would oppose my beliefs on these matters.

The two runaways I remember most vividly were Eliza and Josephus. They were married, having jumped over the broom, a degrading ceremony but as close to marriage as the heinous Southern slavers allow their human chattel. They grew up on the same plantation in northern Virginia; but not over a year after their marriage, their owner – how that word sticks in my craw – gave Eliza to his newly-wed daughter to take to her husband's plantation about five miles distant. After a time, they heard of several slaves on nearby plantations being sold south, either because they were deemed to be fractious or because the plantations in question had too many slaves and there was a great demand for them in the deep South. God forbid the masters should consider emancipating a few of them. The tentacles of greed are indeed powerful.

Eliza and Josephus feared that if either or both were sold south, they would never see each other again nor would they have a chance to escape. They further feared that any children they would have might easily be subject to the same fate. So they agreed to flee and, after an arduous journey traveling by night and sleeping by day with little to eat except veg-

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etables and fruit stolen from farmers' gardens, luckily found their way to a stop in southern Pennsylvania on the Underground Railway. I will give no further details lest such information be of use to slave catchers, may they rot in Hell. How shocking for me to say, or even think, such a thing. How far I have traveled from my Quaker roots.

Eliza's and Josephus's hearts' desire was to reach Canada where they could live in freedom, marry legally, own a farm and raise a family without the fear of helplessly watching their children snatched from their bosoms and sold no differently than oxen or mules. Eliza and Josephus both attested that their masters were generally kind and refrained from whipping – do you hear, whipping? – their slaves except for the most severe infractions such as running away. Yes, having to risk life and limb to obtain a condition that should be the right of any human being from birth. Or so stated Mr. Jefferson, that keeper of and trader in slaves. So much, I say, for kind masters.

"So, Josephus," my father asked, "would you have run if they hadn't separated you and Eliza and you hadn't feared being sold?"

"No sir. We was tolerably content. 'N our master told us fearful stories of life for the colored in the North. Hard work. Terrible food. No care if you got sick. 'N when you can't work no more, out in the street you go."

"Yes, sir," Eliza agreed. "We had good victuals and a cozy cabin with the walls chinked agin' the cold. 'N Josephus kept that cabin after I got moved."

"We got to visit from time to time," said Josephus. "Not that we liked it much but it were tolerable. Course when we heard them stories of slaves around being sold South, we got real worried and decided we had no choice. Life weren't life without each other and 'sides neither of us had any thought to work on one of 'em cotton plantations down south. That's a hard life sure enough."

"You made the right decision," said Father. "No man should live in bondage. You could stay right here in the Hudson Valley except for that despicable Fugitive Slave Law. It's too dangerous these days. You'll be safe in Canada and, if you save, can buy yourselves a piece of land to farm. You want to practice modern farming with judicious crop rotations and the right fertilizers. Now let me..."

Father loved to talk about farming. I got bored pretty quick and started daydreaming about the book I was reading, "Ivanhoe" by Sir Walter Scott. I could scarce put it down. Eliza and Josephus left the next morning, hidden in a wagon loaded with vegetables for market. I did not fail to see the irony in that situation. Happy to have them on their way, I never expected to encounter this warm couple again in my lifetime. Not more than a week later, however, I saw two runaways – a man and a woman – approaching from the north, led in chains by two slovenly-looking men, wearing ill-fitting trousers, ragged coats and shapeless, broad-brimmed hats. The runaways had not even that protection from the piercing sun. Standing on our front veranda, I watched them coming along the road. As they drew closer, I recognized Eliza and Josephus. They walked with heads down and did not acknowledge me, perhaps to protect us. It was late afternoon, and we had just finished milking. I was going to slop the pigs and then read before dinner. Outraged, I ran to tell Father.

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"We must do something," I demanded.

"There is nothing we can do," he countered. "The law is on the side of the slavers. If I interfere, it will not only go hard with us but will also jeopardize our ability to help other runaways."

"But they sat at our table," I said, tears starting to well up.

"Hold your peace," Father said and put an arm around my shoulder. "That is a command."

I went back to the veranda and watched the two unfortunates disappear around a bend. The war started less than a year later, and I volunteered towards the end of the summer of 1862.

So here I am, determined to do my part, no matter how insignificant, in winning this war. Slavery must end and the Union re-united. My country should be a beacon unto the world but cannot while the "peculiar institution" persists. I would welcome back those Southerners who repent of their ways and acknowledge the common humanity shared by ourselves and the colored race. I hope to live to see that day, but I am far from optimistic. I dread the morrow. I do not want to die. I am afraid of what lies ahead and pray God give me strength and courage.

A final word, for all it matters. My name is not Louis Pratt but rather Louisa.

### *Epilogue*

Louisa Pratt fought heroically in the assault on Marye's Heights and was killed on December 13, 1862. Sergeant Boyle found her body and, astonished at the long hair (undone from her cap) that marked her as a woman, arranged for her diary and volumes of Shakespeare to be sent to her family.