

The dirt was under his finger nails. It was ground into the skin of his face and matted in his sweaty hair. He didn't mind the dirt, it brought his mind back to the farm and made him reminisce about easier times tilling the fields with his father.

The dirt didn't bother him, nor the meager rations he shared with his comrades. The acrid smoke and the lice are what bothered him. It was the seemingly endless charges into a hail of bullets and debris that made the dirt take on a horrific new meaning though. That and the stench of rancid blood and fear mixed together.

Sitting in the shallow trench he dozed off slightly. Amazing how he could sleep in the maw of Hell, but thirty-six hours of constant war could drain anyone.

"They are falling back lads. Make sure your weapons are loaded; the whistle will sound any moment." The Marshal called. He knew it meant another charge up and over. Push past the bodies of fallen friends and daemon barbed wire. How can any man be expected to do this? The shrill call of the charge sounded and he was on his feet, Hotchkiss in hand.

Time compressed and the only sounds he could hear were the the whooshes and whistles of bullets as they whizzed passed his ears. The Adrian helmet he wore (a parting gift from a French comrade who was since killed in battle) didn't cover his ears at all, so each bullet whispered his name as it passed.

The helmet had earned him the nick-name "Frenchy", even though he was American. His fellow soldiers always looked for "Frenchy" when they were on the field because he would often be far ahead leading the charge with pure guile, but no rank.

He was a common soldier like the rest but distinguished himself with his intense will to win. "The sooner this is over, the sooner I can get back to my father and brother on the farm" he often said. He couldn't imagine that he would never see them again.

Something was wrong this time. The enemy wasn't retreating all the way to their fortifications and trenches. They held the line strong and fired offensively, not covering any retreat. It must have

been a ruse.

First his arm felt a scorching tear, then his leg and as he tumbled forward the strap of his Adrian slipped and the helmet tipped off his head. A warm, wet, hard sensation tossed his head back and he fell to earth at last, his face turned toward the sky. Though smoke blotted out the sun all he could see was a gentle blue sky with soft puffy white clouds. He could hear the distant sound of running water and the joyous laugh of his brother, James. These were the last things he knew before his eyes closed for the last time.

It was a grey day, that 25th of June and no one expected it to be quite so chilly. A breeze had come off the river and it drove the clouds inland. James sat by his window praying the rain would go away before it ever properly started. A few spatters on the windowsill were all it seemed to manage right now and this brought a smile to the eight-year-old boy's face. He brushed a few brown locks back out of his eyes and bounded down the stairs.

"May I go outside?" He asked his mother.

"Dear, it's about to rain."

"Oh no. I wished the rain away." He responded in a voice so honest and cogent.

"'Wished the rain away' did you? Well then; why don't you just 'wish' the crops to grow for me then I wouldn't have to break my back putting food on the table for us?" His father called from the kitchen. "You'd do better leaving the rain right where it was. We need that rain." He finished with a huff as he stormed passed his son.

Mr. Morrow was not normally the kind of man to dash his boy's fantasies, but things had been so hard lately. Not a farm, up nor down the river, was doing very well the past few years and his was no different. To complicate matters; his health was failing and James was still too young to work the long hours needed to make the farm run.

“I just wanted to play outside.” The boy muttered dejectedly as he trudged back up the stairs to his room.

The rain had come on now. It rolled in with a ferocity not welcomed by those of faint hearts. In truth this was not the rain Mr. Morrow had hoped for. It meant he would have to tend the fields to make sure it did not wash the young plants away or snap the older stalks. While rain was necessary, a farmer is trapped in a dichotomous struggle with the elements.

He pulled on his rain boots and jammed his hat down tight on his head. The wind had picked up as well; this was going to be a big one. Too early in the season for a storm like this, the river would surely surge and overtake the old weir.

Many, many years ago the farmers in the area built the weir to hold back the river for irrigation, but it had become neglected as of late and no-one could spare time from the fields to rebuild it. It was a good deal back from the farms in the area and the overgrown scrub greenery that flanked the wide ribbon of water obscured it from most people’s memories; Not from James’ though.

His older brother had shown it to him the year before he had gone off to war. It was a war from which the young lad did not return. That was a blow that affected James greatly and their father even more.

The rain kept coming down and it made the room feel like it was closing in on James. “If something doesn’t make you comfortable then you should fix it or move on” his brother had always told him. There was no fixing the gloom that hung in his room like a thick fog in the valley, so he decided he was going to help his father tend the fields, guarding them against wash out and heavy winds.

If his mother knew what he was doing she would surely stop him, so he slipped down the stairs like a cat at midnight. He plotted a course directly by the kitchen and into the mudroom.

The kitchen was large and warm. It's pantry door was open and Mrs. Morrow busied herself in the cabinets pulling items from the sparse shelves and making mental note of each, calculating how long the supplies might last. Knowing her stock could help her stretch their meager stores a little longer, if the farm didn't turn for the better things might get even tighter.

James slipped passed while her back was to the door and quietly pulled on his boots and rain slicker, almost squeaking as the cold top of his boots touched his calf. Cautiously he opened the doors, hoping his mother would not notice the typical creak of the screen door. He only paused a moment to be sure he could slip away, gently replacing both doors and then vanished into the driving rain.

He made his way along the path to the fields. His father would certainly be on the far side of the expanse of land, where the crops were the youngest and most prone to wash out. Drainage ditches sectioned off squares of the field like a patchwork quilt. The ditches were swollen and not draining as they should, leaving the water to flow back into the fields. Even here, on the edges of established growth, it could turn the soil to loose mud and the shear weight of the stalks could topple the plants to the ground like wet matches shaken from a box.

"Why isn't the water flowing to the river like it should?" James asked himself. He needed to know the answer. Both his father and brother always taught him that there was a reason for everything. One just needed to find that reason.

Curiously, Mr. Morrow had forgotten that lesson as of late. He seemed content to battle on in an endless struggle with the farm. Of course, his days were filled with repetitive toil and his nights filled with worry. There were nights James could hear his father talking to no-one, as if he were talking in his sleep but that could only be true if he were to sleep, which he did so infrequently as of late. James had decided he was arguing with nature it's self. James wished he could be more help. He wished his young frame could do more. So he decided that he would find the solution to this problem on his own.

He followed the ditches toward the river. He thought there must be something damming up the small canal but as he came closer to the mouth of the ditch where it met the river the cause became murkier than the slippery mud beneath his feet. The river was so high. No wonder the ditches weren't draining.

Without warning the embankment James was standing on, surveying the river, gave way. The rain soaked ground had become slick and soft. A large area washed into the river taking James with it into the rushing cold waters. Normally James was a good swimmer but the swollen river was moving so swiftly he could barely keep his head above water.

It was a battle he was losing. Torrents turned him and tossed him round and round and he finally lost sight of the shore. Fighting on he would catch glimpses of it, but then get tossed in a new spiral. As he fought the raging water he gulped for air but only swallowed muddy river with every gasp.

Briefly he glimpsed a branch coming down stream, but it was propelled by an angry river and it turned into a dangerous obstacle. James felt the branch strike his temple and the grey day went even darker. He only half felt the river take hold. Almost ready to allow the river to take him James was jolted by a solid tug. Something, or someone was pulling him free of his watery embrace. He could hold onto consciousness no longer and could not make out the soaked and creased face of his father as he was hoisted to the embankment.

Mr. Morrow carried the sagging body of his child to the house. The rain hid the concern on his face. The mud could not slow his steady pace.

When you are a precocious seven year old it can be difficult to sit still, especially when every bird chirping is calling you to play. Beatrix, as all children do, found it extremely hard not to fidget. Her foot tapped the leg of the table rhythmically.

THUMP THUMP THUMP

“Bee, finish your breakfast.”

THUMP THUMP THUMP

“The birds are hungry too, can I feed them my cereal?” she asked to seeming thin air.

THUMP THUMP THUMP

Beatrix’s mother and “Uncle Charlie” were deep in conversation again and paid little attention to her request.

THUMP THUMP THUMP

“Bee. Please stop kicking the table. Must you always wear those blasted boots?”

“Your mother asked you a question Beatrix!”

Uncle Charlie wasn’t an unkind man but since he had moved in both he and her mother took little interest in her unless it was to scold, control or belittle her. She often wished her Poppa had not gone off to France to become an airman two years ago.

Before he left he had given her a pair of rubber Wellington boots. Beatrix’s father knew early on that his girl loved mud and adventure. The two enjoyed many long walks in the muddy fields and he taught her everything he could about the animals in the field and wood. He taught her what berries were good to eat, where animals liked to sleep at night and how to start camp fires. The two were nearly inseparable, that is until he went away.

The letter her mother received, scrawled in French, simply translated “THE PEOPLE OF FRANCE REGRET AND MOURN YOUR LOSS.”

That seemed an eternity ago to the young girl and she was snapped to attention from her reverie by her name being called in an icy tone; “Beatrix! Answer your mother!”

“I’m sorry momma but I so wanted to see James as soon as I could and the fields are so muddy after the rains. He had quite the adventure last night and I thought it best to be ready to go when I could.” Impertinence was typical of the gold haired, booted angel.

“Well go then. Go see your foolish friend. If you think the birds are more deserving of your breakfast then take it too them before you go but don’t think of leaving that bowl outside.”

Though she wanted to bolt straight out the door Beatrix cleared her place setting, drank the last of the milk from her cereal, scattered it for the birds and placed the bowl in the sink.

“Love you mamma!” she called as her boots hit the last stair on the porch. She was at the tree-line before the first bird could touch it’s ample offering. Every step she took was a joyful leap, almost as if she had been set free from a cage. She wasn’t certain why, but she knew this day was the beginning of a grand adventure. One she had to be a part of. The bees, birds and small animals scurrying about, correcting damage from the previous day’s storm halted her only briefly.

“Can James come out?” The gold haired girl asked.

Beatrix was short, but her presence carried greater weight than her actual stature. She was resplendent in her simple blue cotton dress and boots. Her hair pulled back in two simple pony-tails on either side of her oval face she almost looked like a doll. Yet no doll could represent the devil that flickered in her blue eyes. No man could resist such a vision, not even at seven years old. James’s father was no exception. His creased face smiled like parchment touched by a hard quill.

“He is upstairs. If he ‘can’ come out is up to him, though he is strong enough to greet friends.”

Beatrix took this as a welcome.

There was a kindness in Mr. Morrow’s face that few saw. It seemed that only she could glimpse it. Maybe it was in the eyes; two mournful pools locked within a desert of dried sorrow and hard times. A face that tried so desperately to hide it’s true emotions, but could not from her.

She smiled broadly to him and blew a kiss with her passing as she brushed by him and bounded up the stairs. Her boots hit every other

step, though her legs were short. Stopping at the top of the stairs, just outside James's door, she caught her breath.

It was dry upstairs, despite the hard rains that had just fallen. She pushed James's door open to find him looking out the window. He seemed as if he was looking through a veil of time as he gazed out the window. Not looking at anything in particular but everything at once. Almost like he was planning something.

Beatrix smiled to herself because she knew this gaze. She had held it in her own way, waiting for life to hand her an adventure. James was plotting something, whether he knew it or not. He wasn't a clever boy (how many are there really?) but he was smart, as smart as boys can be.

"I hear you had a bit of a scare last night." she said, breaking into his thoughts.

"You could say that, if almost drowning is 'a scare'."

"Well you shouldn't have gone to the river, alone, in the middle of a storm, dummy." Instantly she wished she hadn't said that.

"I didn't think the weather was that bad and... well..." he trailed off but finished coldly with "I won't make the same mistake twice." He meant it. Going to the river was not the mistake, it was how he did it that was all wrong. James wasn't big on admitting he was wrong even though he knew he often was.

Silence invaded the two as they sat in the musty room. 'Where did the moisture come from?' Beatrix thought. It smelled of mold and earth, like the window had been left open through the whole storm and the dampness had seeped into the fabric of the curtains and bed.

After what seemed an eternity James proclaimed;

"I think we should check out the weir."

His statement hung in the air like a cloud of smoke from Beatrix's grandfather's pipe. It danced in the musty air, just like it had been issued from the pipe, like the two could study it and mark its changes. James continued to stare out the window.

"Check out the weir? You have a fever don't you? Should I get your mother?" she asked and after a few seconds "Do you know how to

get there?"

"I'm serious. Something isn't right with the weir. The rains come and they don't water the fields, they just wash everything away. Then the fields dry up. The irrigation trenches aren't working and it seems like no-one notices the problems. Maybe I am being dumb. I just can't help but feel that something is broken somewhere."

"Tell your father, he will help."

"He won't listen, no-one will." James finished with determination.

The two sat in silence for an eternity knowing he was right. Beatrix broke the silence, brushing her bangs back she declared "Well then I guess we should plan an expedition 'Marshal'."

How could anyone argue with such a declaration? Especially from such a determined young lady. The expedition was set then, but James had no idea what to do next. He wasn't the sort to accept leadership of others, though he knew it had to be done. All the plans that had to be made almost overwhelmed him in that very instant. Crashing against his brain like the winds of the previous night that battered the fields.

"I'll gather the supplies 'Marshal'!" Beatrix exclaimed as she headed for the door.

"Wait... We need to, ah, plan..." James trailed off lost in the minutia of planning, but his thoughts were clearly conveyed.

"I'll await your call 'Marshal'." She exclaimed as she paused momentarily by the head of the stairs to salute and then was gone, leaving a slight smell of lavender and cow manure in her wake as she left.