

Civil Wars by Christy Harrington

The day Peter left was one of the worst days of my life. The last thing he said to me before he left was, "Mabel, never forget. I will always be with you, here." And he pointed to my heart. I blinked back tears as he put on his cap and walked into the sunset. I hugged Mama and ran to my room. At age sixteen, Peter went to fight in the Civil War as soon as he was old enough. Mama had given him permission, but was very reluctant to do so. My dad had died in the war towards the beginning and Mama didn't want Peter to turn out like him. I fully agreed.

I hated leaving my family. Their faces when I left almost made me change my mind. But I had to serve in the army. Oh, and the camp was terrible. Beans, biscuits and jerky every day, and there was more mud than in a pigsty. My first few days in the army were boring. Just drills, marching, and more drills. Not the most exciting thing when it comes to entertainment. Then, in June, General Mead made us follow a Confederate army into Pennsylvania. He led us towards Gettysburg, and we ran into Lee's army on July first. The noise was deafening. Cannons firing, rifles shooting, soldiers screaming. I continued to shoot as the soldier right beside me fell.

"Peter," he gasped, then died, never to be heard again. His last word had been spoken to me, and at that moment I realized I was terrified.

I tried to forget about Peter. I wanted him to be the last thing on my mind if something happened to him. But thoughts of my brother came pouring into my head like a waterfall. I asked my mama what to do about it and she told me the best thing to do is remember him.

"If you remember happy times with Peter, those memories will fill your head and no room for sad ones will be left," she would say. But, like most things, it would be easier said than done. My dad had died in the first year of the war, but that wasn't as hard on me as giving up Peter. I hardly knew my dad. He was always away on trips and I only saw him once or twice. But Peter...I had known Peter all my life and giving him away was like giving away the thing that made life worth living. Yes, the next few years would be hard, but me and Mama could do it. Especially with the help of our close friends the Taylors. Mrs. Taylor and Mr. Taylor were older than most who have kids, so Mr. Taylor was too old to fight. But their daughter, Ann, was just my age (eleven), so we could talk about most anything. We tried not to bring up the subject of the war though, since Ann's brother was killed in a battle, and she was still sensitive to the subject. I knew she would have to face the truth sometime, and not hide from it forever. But then, I would too.

When I signed up for the army, I had no idea what it would be like. I went to bed thinking over everything I'd seen that day. Blood, death, and fear were definitely at the top. But there were some other things that weren't so obvious. I'd seen bravery, courage, and through it all, faith. It seemed to me that this war was helping people know who they were and who they wanted to be. I didn't want to be the one hiding in the corner. No, I was going to be strong. But the next day as the fighting resumed, as I shot and reloaded my rifle, and as soldiers fell around me, one word came to mind: run! Unfortunately, I obeyed my impulse. I ran as fast as my legs could carry me. The nearby woods were far enough, and I rested under a large oak. Its branches reached for me and clawed at my clothes, but it was better than fighting. At least, that was my thought at first. Then I started thinking of my thoughts the night before. They floated inside my head: Bravery. Courage. Faith. I found that I was hiding in the corner, and I'd have to go back if I ever wanted to be someone. So I summoned up my courage, got up and walked back to the battlefield. The day was almost done and I realized how much time I had spent in the woods, and that it was all wasted time. But tomorrow I'd show them who I really was. I'd help win this battle, and the battle inside of me. Tomorrow would be better.

A few days after my brother left the Taylors came over for dinner. "So Peter went to join the army did he?" asked Mr. Taylor. "Yes, he did," said Mama. "And we miss him very much." "I do hope he's all right," I added. "Do you know if he's fighting at Gettysburg?" Ann questioned. "I'm not sure, but he probably is," Mama answered. "I wish this war hadn't started," said Mrs. Taylor. "Then no families would suffer." Ann began to tear up, so Mrs. Taylor put her arm around her waist to console her. "Maybe you and Mabel should go upstairs for a while." We went to my room and decided to sew. As I pulled out my needlework, I thought about what had been said at the table. What if Peter was at Gettysburg? Was he still alive?

On July third, Lee attacked our army. We fired at them but they continued to march towards us. We fought for twenty minutes before they fell back. We had won! After three days of fighting, we had won! Hats flew in the air and a cheer went up from the soldiers. That night at camp, though, I heard news that was almost as great as winning the battle. The next day, we would travel through Middleburg! Middleburg, where my sister and Mama wanted so badly to see me. Middleburg, where I had grown up to be the man I had become. Finally, I would see my family!

The next day there was a knock at the door. I opened it, and Ann stood there with a smile on her face.

"Ann! I cried. "I thought you were going to the mill."

"I did! But you'll never guess what I heard!"

"What?"

"The Union soldiers are coming through Middleburg this afternoon!" she answered. I placed my hand upon my heart.

"Today? Mama!" I cannot express how much joy I felt at that moment.

"Mama! Come quick! Oh, Ann, I'm sorry! Do come inside." I grabbed her hand and rushed to the parlor. I set Ann on a soft burgundy armchair and ran for Mama. I came back with her close behind.

"What is it?" she asked, standing by the hearth. For a moment I could not speak, I was so caught up in the thought that I might see Peter.

"The Union soldiers are coming through this afternoon!" I exclaimed. Mama slowly sank into a chair.

"We truly are blessed," she whispered. Those few words summed up all the feelings I was having into one.

Two hours later I saw the army in the distance. I ran for Mama. We stood in the doorway, watching the perfectly aligned soldiers march past. I strained my eyes for Peter. Just when I was about to lose hope, I saw him. He turned towards us and gave us his familiar grin. I smiled back as tears rolled down my cheeks. I didn't try to stop them. My brother was alive. That was what mattered. I knew the war would continue, but when it ended, Peter would come home and we would be a family again. We would be my family.