

[Home](#)

[Summer 2010](#)

[Spring 2010](#)

[Winter 2010](#)

[Autumn 2009](#)

[Summer 2009](#)

[Spring 2009](#)

[Autumn 2008](#)

[Summer 2008](#)

[Spring/Summer 2008](#)

[Winter/Spring 2008](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[Contact](#)

# The Last Enemy Defeated

by *Mark T. Mustian*

The wood was dead now, sawed and straightened, fashioned into boards nailed in place as a prison. His nose jammed against it, pressed by the others, and he would have thought he could smell it—smell the old trees—but he smelled only men and the traces of cows that had stood here before them. The prisoners muttered behind him, beside him, but he heard little of it. Sometimes pain rose, the arm that once was, and he would look to his side to scratch or rub and remember when he saw nothing there, only things—hips, shoulders—attached to others, dirty men. He examined the wood, the grain that showed the life it once held, the knot where a branch forked, the shifts of color. He wondered what happened when a tree became board, whether the branches were burned or ground up or made something else. He wondered this sometimes about his lost arm as well. He envisioned it working, or buried, some place in Virginia he would find at war's end.

War's end—was there end? Birthed beyond him, before him, a storm not seen or yet heard but just felt: Lincoln and slavery, dissension, secession. Boys joining, leaving, boys he knew or knew of. Jim Raleigh, Haydon Miller, Stephen Selvey, Stax Green. He'd been busy, uninterested, owing his apathy to his father's disinterest, his days full of plowing and planting and feeding and milking. Their farm was only ten acres. They raised corn and other vegetables, a few pigs, they leased cows. He knew the seasons, the land. He hunted often with his father. He had never been outside Illinois, only seen a few negroes. He knew no southerners, no slaveholders.

He'd stayed in school until he was twelve. He liked books, the reading and stories; the writing and numbers he abandoned with ease. He continued to read afterward, the *Arabian Nights*, a book of fables someone had given him, sometimes the Bible. He was not religious—his parents were not church people—but sometimes he went with a neighbor, Mrs. Mullin, to the Calvary Presbyterian Church in Fairfield. Mrs. Mullin was a large woman, a widow, with big teeth and blonde whiskers. She talked about Jesus, about the need to accept, the different Apostles and the books of the Bible. She'd taken an interest in young Bartholomew to save him, she told his parents, and they were accepting of this. Church allowed him to see girls and to think sometimes of God—thoughts that would come back in the cruel months ahead. Anita Caldwell, Jessica Leigh, Linda Cotton. He nodded and sweat in his shyness. And then Mrs. Mullin, kissing his cheek in the wagon, her face blank and glistening, her breath ripe. He stopped church after that.

His father had come from the north, from Michigan, a family of loggers. Felling and hauling trees sawed into boards like the ones nailed before him, dead now; his father dead, too. Abel Wirts had hated logging. He left his siblings and moved south, working the land, feeling the soil between his fingers, growing things, watching. He met his wife in northern Illinois. He said very little; she was the talker. She'd come from the west, from a family that traveled up from St. Louis and carved out a few acres. She knew how

---

to farm, how to cook, how to butcher and bake. She too was dead, the illness as swift as spring rain. He could still hear her cough, see her narrowed chest shake as she clutched at her breaths. All dead, now. Dead.

The boards shook, the train moving. Men jostled and cursed. He'd grown used to men, to soldiers and their talk and the stink of their bodies, despite having come from the country and crowds only of trees. He was fourteen when his parents died, convinced he would soon fall to the same shaking illness. He kept working the farm, plowing and milking and making cold meals. Routine numbed and soothed him. Then the sheriff arrived, accompanied by a gaunt woman in a black shawl—an Aunt Margaret, a relative never before seen or heard from—his mother's far family. The court had awarded custody, the matter was done, he would leave with this woman, this Congregationalist who ran a small boarding house in Wheaton, Illinois. Her teeth were stained from the snuff she pinched with long, yellowed fingers. She prayed incessantly. She said she'd been saved by God from the evils of life. She plied him with questions that first day, probing his knowledge of the Bible, the depth of his conviction. She used a horse whip on him that evening when he failed to pray to please her. She loved him, she said, but he had to fear God. He lasted one week.

He hadn't intended to join the army. His plan, to the extent he had one, was to go north to Michigan, find his father's relatives, maybe log awhile, maybe go to a city. He had visions of thick trees, men with great saws. He left on pock-marked back roads, watching as black trains lurched past, gazing into fields of budding wheat and corn. It was spring, the days warming. He checked for the sheriff behind him. Everywhere there was war talk: farmers working at hoes, ladies passing in carriages, men leaning down from the trains. Shiloh, Seven Pines, McClellan, Joe Johnston. People calling out, even as he sought to avoid them, "Hey, son, you going to fight?" "You heard anything new?" "I got a son in the 29th Illinois." He slept the first night in a field.

He heard the bugle call later. His money had dwindled; he was still in Illinois. He'd been thinking about his parents, maybe dreaming—he couldn't reconstruct it. He followed the sound like a dog after meat, into a thin clearing full of soldiers in blue.

Men in his path—who are you? What are you?

Joining, becoming.

He remembered this, later, stretched out on the table. Things had been lost—the battle, the injury—but he remembered this morning, the bugle high in its triumph, the air crisp, the beginning. Had he ever been part of any thing but his family? They stuffed a rag in his mouth when they sawed at his arm, the memory staying on past the screams, the gagged vomit. Dead, now, that memory, that crispness ...

"Hey."

The voice crept between him and the boards, pulled him back.

"You lost your arm."

---

---

He said nothing. The train shook.

A breath blew in. "Where?"

In a field. To a doctor, a god, snapped off like a stick.

"You'd think they send you home after that. Who fixed you up—Rebel doctors?"

He nodded. A hospital in Richmond, through fall and then winter, men dying around him even as he breathed and recovered. His arm bandaged at first then left open to air, the flaps of loose flesh bound and healed to a hardness, a lumpy, clubbed thing that wobbled and hung when he turned. There were other men there, without legs, missing arms, but he ignored them, covering himself. He listened in silence. Some force had sustained him. He still felt the cold, the aches that brought hope he'd been dreaming.

"You know where we're going?"

He shook his head. South.

"Some prison they got there. I hear it's crammed full as a pickle barrel."

He shrugged, the breath on him again, the strange smell of old boots.

"What's your name?"

The youth shifted this time, as far as he could manage. Orange flared in his vision, orange freckles and hair. "Bartholomew Wirts," he said slowly.

"I'm Patrick. McCauley. 154<sup>th</sup> New York Infantry." The man held out his hand before pulling it back. He was thin, his Adam's apple bunched like a ball in his neck. Strands of hair floated above a thin mouth. "Isn't that from the Bible? Bartholomew, I mean."

"Yeah." The man who helped Jesus. He knew little else.

A wail came from somewhere, the coarse sound of sobbing. The battle returned, the guns dark and shrieking, his aunt's voice and whip raised. He had failed them, left them all—he'd left them all in the past.

"Here."

McCauley was holding something up near his face. It looked like tree bark, but then an odor of food followed, of meat, maybe jerky. The youth's hand was caught, pinned by the others.

"Here."

Something poked in his mouth, the oily tip of a finger. The taste of salt followed, sharp as a bayonet.

McCauley chewed his own morsel. "We're gonna come back this way, you and me, Private Wirts. Not in a cattle car, but a great big fine coach." He

---

---

laughed, a tooth missing. His head twitched and jerked. "It takes a lot to kill Patrick McCauley." He paused, like he was thinking on what it did take. "God, but I hate them."

The train shook again, a belch of smoke following and settling in the air. Men coughed into it. Tears formed in the youth's eyes. He brought his hand up to wipe but found only sleeve.

"Thank you," he said, into darkness. He turned his head, shaking, the tears flung away.

The laugh came again, the blunt missing tooth. McCauley held another bite between thumb and forefinger. "Kill or be killed, Bart. It's amazin' what fuels you."

The youth chewed. He ground down with his teeth.

McCauley pointed to the empty sleeve. "Much as I hate 'em, I'll bet that you hate 'em worse." His voice was high, almost mocking.

The youth swallowed. What was hate? Life was life and death everything else with scant room for love or despair or even happiness. Not one bit of it mattered. He tasted the jerky still, his stomach wanting, his lips moist and he licked them to savor the dying flavor. This food then, this kindness: was there not some spark in it, some sliver ...

He could hate, he told himself later. He could live.

---

---

**Mark T. Mustian's** novel *The Gendarme* was published in 2010 by Amy Einhorn Books/G.P. Putnam's Sons, with foreign editions in Spain, France, Israel, Greece and other countries. His short fiction has appeared in *The Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *Stand Magazine*, *Opium Magazine* and other publications. He lives in Tallahassee, FL, where he serves as a city commissioner and practices law. To order copies of his new book or previous books, follow this [Amazon link](#).

---

**Copyright 2011, Mark T. Mustian.** © This work is protected under the U.S. copyright laws. It may not be reproduced, reprinted, reused, or altered without the expressed written permission of the author.