

Shenandoah Autumn

By Ronald Amos
a play in two acts

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*The average earth, the witness of war and peace, acknowledges
mutely;
The prairie draws me close, as the father, to bosom broad, the son;
The Northern ice and rain, that began me, nourish me to the end;
But the hot sun of the South is to ripen my songs.*

"Drum-Taps" from *Leaves of Grass*
—Walt Whitman

STORY OF THE PLAY

In this Civil War drama Charles Knox, a major in the Union army, is in an untenable situation. Two guerilla soldiers, accused of participating in an attack on an ambulance train, have been captured. But these two soldiers are far from being tough killers. One is an affable Irishman who just wants to raise horses, and the other is a local boy who's never been in battle before. Knox makes them an offer that if they give him information about their leader, he will spare their lives, even though he has been ordered to show no mercy. The situation is further complicated by the fact that Knox's men are bivouacked on the St. Clair farm, owned by a fellow West Point grad who is fighting for the South. Mrs. St. Clair is trying to hold the farm together and protect both her daughter and former slave woman since her husband has been missing. The physical hardships and suffering, plus the moral dilemma of war itself, make for an eloquent and stirring drama.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The play is based on actual events. The historical persons portrayed need no introduction. Some of the characters are invented but are composites of people who lived and fought in this part of the Shenandoah in 1864. The Valley war was particularly harsh because it involved civilians, and this phase of it entailed guerrilla tactics, but this did not make the hardship and suffering of the regular soldiers who campaigned in Virginia any less. The citizens of the area had the misfortune to live in a granary of the South and in a strategic cauldron lying between the capital cities of the two governments. General Stonewall Jackson's famous Valley campaign in which he, outnumbered, feinted and jousting with several Federal corps also attracted Union attention to the area. It has long been the misfortune of civilians to live within the geographical and strategic objectives of two warring armies. In some cases, it is better to take up arms than to sit by and do nothing.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(11 m, 4 w)

MRS. ESTHER ST. CLAIR: Whose home and land are the setting; a Virginian.

MRS. AGNES BEAUCHAMP: Mrs. St. Clair's neighbor.

MAJOR CHARLES KNOX: An attorney in civilian life; West Point graduate.

CAPTAIN COBB: Officer of the Provost Guard.

ARTHUR RINKER: Irish immigrant; Union deserter; Mosby raider. Is in his thirties, a sunburned, outdoor man, lean and fit.

DAVID WALKER: Recent recruit to Mosby; seventeen.

PVT. CARLSON: Union soldier.

PVT. MCLEOD: Union soldier.

PVT. HATTON: Union soldier.

STEFANIE ST. CLAIR: Mrs. St. Clair's daughter, a friend of David Walker.

GENEVA: Mrs. St. Clair's colored servant.

GEN. GEORGE A. CUSTER: Youthful and slender, he has long hair, is blond and his features are hawkish. About twenty-five years old, the West Point graduate is the youngest general in the Union Army.

COL. FENWICK: Union Army.

PROVOST GUARD / MOSBY GUERRILLA

SENTRY / LT. MERKLIN

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SETTING

The action takes place in and around Mrs. St. Clair's home outside of Front Royal, Virginia, in the Shenandoah Valley. The stage consists of a central playing area and left and right sub stages. At USL is the front porch and façade of a Virginia farmhouse owned by Mrs. St. Clair. The two sub stages will be used as the soldiers' campsite and the carriage house holding the prisoners.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

ACT I

Scene 1: Late afternoon, September, 1864.

Scene 2: Just after sundown of the same day.

Scene 3: Evening of the same day.

Scene 4: Fifteen minutes later.

ACT II

Scene 1: Just past dawn the next morning.

Scene 2: Later that same morning.

Scene 3: Late that same afternoon.

Scene 4: Just past sunset.

Scene 5: A half hour before midnight.

Scene 6: Pre-dawn the next morning.

Scene 7: Dusk, a day later.

MUSIC SUGGESTIONS

There is music before the curtain, the American folk song "Shenandoah." There is additional music during the blackouts at the scene changes, all period music from the Civil War. Before Act I, Scene 2 there are military drum taps. Before I, 3, there is "The Drunken Sailor;" before I, 4, there is "Lorena." A minor theme, a camp bugle, can be played from a distance during certain scenes.

During intermission a lively rendition of "Dixie" is played, and before II, 1, "The Garryowen," the regimental song of Custer's 7th Cavalry. Before the blackout that divides this scene, we again hear "The Drunken Sailor." Before II, 2, a piano rendition of "Für Elise" is heard. Then before II, 3, "Shenandoah" is played again. Before II, 4, we hear "Aura Lee." "Black Is the Color" precedes II, 5, and is part of the opening dialogue. II, 6, is preceded again by military drum taps, and II, 7, the final scene, is again preceded by "Shenandoah." The curtain call is again accompanied by the sprightly "The Drunken Sailor," and as the lights begin to fade, the play closes with the plaintive dirge-like trill of an Irish or Highland bagpipe.

ACT I
Scene 1

(AT RISE: Late afternoon. The lights go on US as we see AGNES BEAUCHAMP walk up through the yard toward the porch, where MRS. ST. CLAIR is standing.)

ST. CLAIR: Why Agnes Beauchamp. I didn't hear your carriage drive up.

BEAUCHAMP: I walked, you know. It must be close to a mile from my farm to yours. *(Sits wearily on the bench just in front of the porch.)*

ST. CLAIR: Why did you walk, Agnes?

BEAUCHAMP: I had no choice, Esther. This morning the Yankees came to the door and demanded more horses for their army. They took our last draft animal, Neddy, my husband's old sorrel that he had since he was a boy. Neddy is sway-backed and full of rickets. But they took him away. They gave me a worthless voucher for him. *(Rises.)* This voucher won't pull like Neddy, I told that Yankee officer ... good, old loyal Neddy. If my husband had been here, he would have thrashed him, the impudent hoodlum. I've no word from Lex since August. Have you heard from Alonso?

ST. CLAIR: Nothing in four months. *(She looks off to the mountains.)* Then you must make do regarding Neddy, Agnes. We've had no horses here ourselves since early summer when the Yankees took Pitch and Tar Baby. We walk into town for supplies. Our chaise is gathering dust down by the carriage house. Perhaps we can stroll to town together when you need to go in.

BEAUCHAMP: I consider going into Front Royal hardly a stroll. It must be three miles, and I don't have a colored woman to carry my provisions. Not to mention it's undignified on foot.

ST. CLAIR: Steffie and I usually go with Geneva to help tote the packages ...

BEAUCHAMP: Oh, Esther, what's the use? (*Sits on bench again.*) The shelves in Stockwell and Reed are bare, and Mr. Knopf, the butcher, has scant meat that's not horse flesh in disguise.

ST. CLAIR: (*Sitting next to HER.*) ... or what few packages there are.

BEAUCHAMP: Look around you, Esther. There must be five thousand horsemen in your fields and gardens.

ST. CLAIR: Hardly that many, Agnes.

BEAUCHAMP: Not to mention their infantry! They make rude comments and gestures so that a Southern woman cannot pass unmolested! (*SHE rises.*) I drove them off my land! I told their officers this morning I would not abide their presence, their loud and filthy language!

ST. CLAIR: (*With gentle irony.*) So it was you who sent them to me, Agnes.

BEAUCHAMP: I stared this Yankee officer down from my porch ... him and his staff ... the French-looking one with the long blond ringlets. I willed them off my land, and, may God forgive me, I cursed them in language they understood! You could have done the same!

ST. CLAIR: Where would you have me send them ... to the Satterfields? (*Rises.*) The Yankees go where they please.

BEAUCHAMP: But they're cowards! They backed down to one unyielding Southern woman!

ST. CLAIR: I don't have your fire, Agnes. (*A pause.*) You must be tired. Come and sit on the porch. I'll get you some lemonade, or at least what passes for lemonade in our kitchen. (*ST. CLAIR steps onto porch.*)

BEAUCHAMP: Besides, I had to get them off my land. (*Lowering her voice, joining ST. CLAIR on porch.*) Three guerrillas from Colonel Mosby's battalion are hiding in my barn ... since last night.

ST. CLAIR: Agnes, I wish you wouldn't tell me these things. It frightens me.

BEAUCHAMP: I'm sure Alonzo wouldn't want you consorting with Yankees, opening your house to them, while he's off fighting them.

End of Freeview

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