The Doctor’s Men

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Abstract

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by Owen Knapp

Speech, Junior

Dr. Wilhelm Johannsen sat on an empty crate. Steam rolled from his tin cup. He sipped coffee between puffs on a thick brown cigar. A mist soaked his wool coat.

The front was two miles away, but the cannon fire was distinct and constant. Supply wagons charged past the fire and disappeared in the night. Half-men trudged through the mud. From the fire, the men's faces were hidden in darkness, but the slosh-slosh of their feet was ever present. Ambulance wagons sped past the fire toward the tent hospital.

"Sir?" A soldier saluted the doctor.

"What is it?" Johannsen looked up from the cup.

"Colonel Hall wishes you to return to the hospital, sir."

"Tell the Colonel... tell the Colonel I will go presently." Johannsen rose. "I will take this cup."

"Yes, sir." The cook rose and saluted.

"Well?" Johannsen glared at the saluting messenger.

"Sir?"

"Are you my escort? I don't need one."

"The Colonel simply wanted you to know that an influx of casualties will be coming in from the new assault."

"I have managed so far. I will manage in the future."

"Of course, sir." The soldier's arm dropped. He marched into the mist.

Johannsen also entered the night. The camp straddled a creek north of Fredricksburg. Around the camp, hills shot to the sky. Winter rains had saturated the ground of the valley and made walking hazardous.

Blood, burnt flesh, and gunpowder stagnated the air. Bodies covered the ground. Johannsen groped over bodies. His heavy boot sank into an empty stomach. The flesh
oozed around the boot, but the flesh was beyond feeling. "Orderly!" Johannsen's voice echoed.

A voice answered out of the dark. "Yes, sir?"

"Take this stretcher. He won't be needing it." Johannsen sipped his coffee, dropped his cigar, and continued.

The concentration of bodies increased as he neared the hospital tent. Groups of men huddled around the fires which surrounded it. Their rifles supported sagging bones and replaced mangled legs.

Ambulances congested the pathways to the tent. White uniformed men carried stretchers from the wagons and searched for space to deposit their passengers.

Johannsen sipped his coffee. He had reached the bitter grounds and spat them out. He tossed the remaining coffee into a fire. The fire sizzled and consumed the coffee.

A kettle swung over the fire. Rags and saws bounced in the water. Johannsen dropped his cup into the pot and entered the tent.

Smoke from improvised torches blackened the canvas. Dr. Johannsen's table was the focal point of the tent. It was an old door supported by four mismatched legs. Two leather straps were lifeless on the table. Human appendages were piled at each end. Blood and water soaked the ground under the table.

Johannsen towered over the other men. His eyes peered from caverns in his bloated face. Rounded cheeks and a double chin hid his features. The torches glowed on his shaved head. "Bring in another one."

Two orderlies left the tent.

A private approached him. Johannsen dropped his coat into the private's waiting hands.

Johannsen waddled to the table.

The private returned with Johannsen's rubber apron. Blood crusted its black surface. The apron slid over his head. The private tied it. The string disappeared into rolls of fat.

The orderlies returned. They rolled their passenger onto the table. Unconscious, the remains of a man quivered. His right cheek was missing and grapeshot riddled his legs.

Johannsen motioned to his assistant. "Clean the cheek."
The assistant obeyed.
Johannsen turned to the legs. Blood had united the uniform and skin. Johannsen's large hand squeezed the legs. Green and yellow liquid flowed from them. His hands ripped the uniform from the legs. "Gangrene."
The assistant looked up from the cheek. "Sir?"
"We will amputate. Forget that."
The assistant placed the straps around the man.
"Chloroform."
"None, sir."
"Tighten the straps." Johannsen wiped his bloodied hand on his apron. "Tighter." Blood slithered down the apron and stained his blue trousers. "Tighter."
"Sir?"
"My shirt."
A private rushed to remove Johannsen's shirt. The Doctor's longjohns and suspenders were exposed.
"A cigar."
An orderly put a cigar in Johannsen's waiting hand. Johannsen bit off the end and spat it on the ground. The orderly's match was ready when the cigar was in position. Gray smoke curled around Johannsen. "Saw."
An orderly rushed out to fetch a saw.
Johannsen pushed the sleeves of his longjohns up his flabby arm. The white cotton absorbed blood from his hands.
Ashes fell on the table.
"Saw, sir."
Johannsen grabbed the saw. He leaned over the body. His free hand pressed on the man's stomach. "Bullet for it to bite." The saw steamed from its "sterilization." "Hold its head."
The man's eyes opened. Push and pull. The blade hit bone.
The patient tried to scream. The orderly shoved the bullet into the man's mouth.
Push and pull. The straps strained.
Push. Pull.
Blood streamed to the table.
Push.
The bullet fell out.
Pull and . . .
The man screamed.
Push.
The straps relaxed.
Johanssen removed the blade. He set the saw on the table and took the cigar out of his mouth. Ashes floated onto the body. Johanssen blew a smoke ring about his head.
“Sir?”
“Yes.”
“A telegram came while you were operating, sir.”
“Read it.”
“It’s marked personal, sir.”
“Towel, sir?”
Johanssen dried his hands on the white towel and dropped it to the ground. His boot stomped on it as he reached for the telegram. “Give it to me. Orderlies, the body.”
The orderlies slid the body onto their stretcher.
The assistant scalded the table. Blood and water cascaded to the dirt floor.
“I will be outside.” Johanssen stuffed the cigar into his mouth and left the tent.
Johanssen’s hand fumbled with the envelope. His swollen fingers removed the paper.

DR WILHELM JOHANNSEN
ARMY OF THE POTOMAC
CORPS II
7TH MICHIGAN INFANTRY
FIELD HOSPITAL, 9TH BRIGADE
DOCTOR
REGRET TO INFORM YOU OF DEATH OF WIFE AND CHILD IN CHILDBIRTH STOP MOTHER AND CHILD DID NOT RESPOND TO TREATMENT STOP SYMPATHIZE WITH YOUR LOSS STOP

DR. JOHN CULVER
MERCY HOSPITAL
WHITEBEAR MICHIGAN
The fires burned. Johannsen crumpled the telegram. Ambulances clogged the roads. Stretchers surrounded the tent. Johannsen tossed the telegram into the fire. It sizzled and consumed the paper. Supply wagons charged to the front.

Johannsen blew a smoke ring above his head and returned to the tent.

Poem

by Adrian d'Silva

Poly. Sci., Junior

Frustration
born in blood
stained sheets
drip drip drip
and then again
like Burke
as we look
for
garbage cans