

We're two weeks into June. Another busy night. From inside the tent we hear the ambulances come in, the confused shouting and near-panic outside, the sounds I once dreaded. The first stretchers are brought in and laid on the groundsheet. The smell of blood and filth drowns out the paraffin stink, groans and shrieks of pain fill our ears but we just get on with the routine. Cut away uniforms, pull off the casualty centres' rough dressings, clean and drain wounds – thank God there isn't much pus now the armies are on the move and not locked in trenches. Then take a clean swab soaked in disinfectant, place it in the wound, bandage it securely. Dressing finished, doctors take over. The next soldier is waiting. Hour after hour it goes on, head wounds, chest wounds, stomach wounds, leg wounds. Every soldier looks the same, and all of them like Archie. One man dies as I put his new dressing on. Another comes in: at first I think he has a black mask on his face. Then I see the entire lower part of his face is shot away. A sudden dreadful vision: could Archie have been like that? I can do nothing for him: the stretcher bearers pick him up and take him to theatre, though he'll have no hope there. I am past all feeling by now: these poor creatures are just jobs to do.

Another stretcher is brought in and placed in front of me. I look down and have a presentiment that this one will be different. A voice inside says, "It's not Archie, none of them are, and they never will be."

The boy has fair hair and I guess he is about my age. I take away the blanket which covers him. There is a rough dressing on his shoulder: there must be a bullet there. But there is a much bigger, bloodsoaked dressing on his thigh. I cut away the rest of his tunic to make sure there are no other wounds. Even in the light of the lamps I can see that what isn't dark with

blood is grey. He's German. He's conscious and his face twists with pain. But he manages to smile and for a moment seems to relax.

I take off the dressing on his thigh. The wound is deep, ragged and oozing blood. I prepare swabs and bandages and set to work cleaning and draining it.

Suddenly a fountain of blood jets up, splashes in my face and runs warm down my cheeks. "Oh God," I cry. "His femoral artery's ruptured." I know what to do, though never thought I'd have to. I feel around for the rupture and when I think I've found it press down with my thumbs to pinch the artery closed. If I haven't got the right place he'll die in front of me from loss of blood. It jets again, not so much, then stops. I stay with my thumbs pressed down, shrieking, "Someone help me. Raise his leg." I have to do this so his leg is higher than his heart. "I'm here, miss." Private Jenkins. He takes the man's heel and lifts it. Sergeant Oldroyd watches. "Bloody Jerry," he says. "Leave him be. Let him bleed to death."

I yell at him. "Sergeant, get a doctor. Tell him, *tourniquet*." Sergeant Oldroyd doesn't move. "*NOW*" I scream. He's gone at once. He must be quick, or I'll be standing here, thumbs pressing down, until I can do it no longer and the soldier will die. I despair. It will be my fault.

It seems an age, though it cannot be more than a few seconds. Questions pour into my mind. Why is the wound in his thigh? Bayonet wounds are usually stomach or chest: if the soldiers get here alive, they don't last long. I remember Jack saying how he stuck bayonets into sacks of straw during training and his fear when ordered to fix them before going into battle. Bayonets are horrible. I have a sudden clear, terrible vision of this German soldier facing a bayonet charge. Did he have a bayonet too? Did he plunge it into an Englishman's stomach? Might that man also be

here in the tent? Or did he, with no bayonet, frightened out of his wits, shoot his enemy, who then ripped his thigh open with a last despairing lunge as he died? The thought makes me shiver. But the wound is jagged, not the clean cut I'd become used to with bayonets. Whatever it was, this hospital is full of ordinary, nice men, both allies and enemies, forced to do such things to each other and as I stand here I cry with the pointlessness of it all.

Then a soft American voice says, "All right, nurse, hold on." Captain Stevenson. "Ssrgeant Oldroyd," he shouts.

"Sir," Sergeant Oldroyd answers.

"I want you to lift the end of the bed so the blood can flow to his head. 'When the head is pale, lift the tail,' as they say. "Private Jenkins, find a box, block of wood, anything to rest the end of the bed on so we can keep him stable." Private Jenkins runs off, returns in a moment with what looked suspiciously like a beer crate and Sergeant Oldroyd rests the bed on it.

Captain Stevenson looks at the soldier. "Yes, he needs a tourniquet," he says. "A stick and bandage must do for now. It should stop the blood well enough. Primitive, but it will keep him alive. We'll do better later. I'll take over now."

Thankfully I take my hands out of that terrible gash. My thumbs and both hands up into my forearms are numb. My wrists ache, my hands and forearms are covered in blood, my sleeves and apron are drenched in it, the red cross on the front has disappeared. I step back and see the man's frightened eyes watching me.

"Keep his leg still, Private Jenkins," says Captain Stevenson. "Bandages please, nurse." By the time I've cut them and handed them over they're red too, but Captain Stevenson says, "At least it's all his blood and he's strong and healthy so he'll soon make up the difference." I watch him

working so calmly and neatly, until he says, “He’ll do for now. I’ll give him morphine. Get him up to theatre and I’ll take that bullet out. There may be something that shouldn’t be in that thigh wound as well. It looks more like shrapnel to me. Too ragged for a bayonet wound.” He steps back and said, “Good work, nurse. I think he might be OK. I hope he thanks you.”

I’m trembling. That was the worst thing yet to happen to me, but it’s over and I came through. I take a last look at the German. His eyes are still open and I wonder if it’s gratitude that I see in them. *Will you last the night? I wonder if, when this rush is over, I’ll find you again in the German ward.* All these thoughts pass through my mind as I turn to the next wounded soldier.

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