

Feb. 13, 1945
Germany

Darling,

Greetings from the "Coal Bin," our murky retreat. Life on the front is perking up. My health is gradually improving so that I no longer have to stumble around half drugged with head pounding and ear ringing. We have been back at work for a couple of days. Fortunately cases have come in singly, so we haven't been rushed. This has given our personnel a chance to learn their ropes gradually, instead of being flooded right off the bat. Since this is really the maiden appearance of this platoon, it is best this way. My team is gradually shaping up, and I think we'll be able to give good account of ourselves when the load gets heavy. My only difficult case so far was a museum piece of injuries including chest, multiple belly wounds of small bowel, large bowel, and bladder, and three extremities. He's coming along fine so far.

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Many of my experiences have been those of the turmoil of inner resources, wherein a man's real values are mercilessly tested, and he glimpses something of the person he really is in the conflicts and their resolution as they transpire under the stress of circumstance. But, some leave only questions unanswered, gropings for peace-giving satisfaction that this was right, and just, and human. Such occasions can be extraordinarily moving -- you are left a little awed, and feel as if something beautiful and terrible has happened to you, as if a deep and significant human experience has touched you, but you can't interpret it, or pigeon-hole it's meaning or significance. I have been wanting to write you of one such experience. I hope I can tell it well enough to give a hint of its poignancy. It happened many months ago and it still upsets me. You can consider it the sequel to my letter of the problem faced by a doctor in war. It doesn't answer anything - it merely heightens the dilemma.

One time in Brittany we had been very busy for several days. The boys were badly hurt - and we had put in long hours. Our supplies were perilously low; we had no reserve of blood; we were drawing from our own personnel, and almost all of us had given at least once within the week. This night's arrivals included three Germans, one American. We treated their shock, and after the latter had been operated on, I went to assist the Jerries. (This American boy was a medic who had been ruthlessly machine-gunned while attempting to evacuate a wounded German from between the lines.) Needless to say, our love of Jerries was at an even lower ebb than usual.) One of these Germans was a man about 38 years old; he had a piece of shrapnel through the chest, shattering his scapula, and piercing the lung. He was pale, and cold, and afraid. He was bleeding in his chest, and it stained the dressing and the blanket, and the litter. We had plasma, and we were giving him that. But he was bleeding, and he needed blood, and operation to stop his bleeding, and then more blood.

As you know, I can speak but little German. I asked him where he was from. He came from Vienna. Was he married? Yes, he had been married ten years. He had two children, a boy, and a girl. He had been drafted by the "Germans" two years ago (all wounded Germans have been "drafted" - was he, too, lying?) What had he done before the war? He was a waiter, but at night he played the violin in the Symphony, and so we talked a little. I dressed his wound, and gave him more plasma. But he was bleeding. If, he could have some blood --

I told him he was seriously hurt, that we would have to operate. He smiled, and took my hand. "You are kind, and good," he said. "I have faith that you will do your best."

A man in shock, bled out, a major thoracotomy, deliride his wound, suture the lung. A healthy man can ill tolerate such a big procedure. To operate without blood to give, is to kill. To withhold operation is to watch him die. (Those four bottles of our own blood in the ice-box are for that next American boy.)

And so, I operated.

Doctor and patient? A man and a man? (Hatred, and strife and inhumanity - these are the badge of war!) We gave him every medical care, except the one which could save his life, and without which the rest were as nothing.

And so that doctor (human?) - soldier conflict rages. I think there can be no solution. I think that I am ill-designed to be a soldier doctor. I think that war is Hell. I think -- I don't know what I think.

"You are kind, and good," he said. "And I have faith that you will do your best."

Darling, I don't think I told that very well. It may seem picayune or foolish to you. But to me that experience has been important, and its implications, vital. You must have patience with me.

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