

INTER

DIEBUS, Continued

Argent coughed and drew in large hoarse gasps of air long after he and Merritt pulled themselves from the lock. Curiously, Merritt still clutched the plate he had taken from M and that he had used to help clear Argent from under the scow, which now floated quietly in the lock. The earlier violence of the water rushing into the lock was now reduced to the agitation of the sleet diving into the surface.

The men struggled with cold wet hands to wrestle on their boots. It was only slightly less difficult to button their vests and shrug into rain-soaked coats. Their gun belts lay nearby, as if carelessly dropped from their waists before they had, presumably, dived into the lock to recover the plates. Merritt tossed Argent his gun and belt; Argent dropped it twice before taking firm possession of it. Both men fumbled with numb hands to buckle their belts.

It did not take much searching to find Emmett's large hoof prints in the new mud. Merritt and Argent rode as fast as they could in the freezing mud and driving sleet, but it seemed a long time before they first caught sight of M, perhaps a half a mile away, almost black from the mud that covered her. By contrast, Emmett seemed unnaturally white. M had stopped, and in the strange light of this strange April storm, she looked like a dark specter, sitting atop a phantom horse, daring them to approach and challenge her reality. As they drew nearer, M started to dismount, but then slid down Emmett's side to puddle on the ground near his back legs. The specter, having lost the challenge, sank to the ground where mere men walked.

Argent was the first to reach her. She was barely conscious, but Argent could not immediately say why. She was ice-cold to the touch, but even so, it was not so cold, and she had not been cold so long, as to affect her so severely. He laid her back and only after thinking it necessary to do so, opened her jacket and found blood seeping from a bullet wound near her left shoulder. Argent slid his hand along her back to hopefully find the exit wound. M roused slightly and said to no one in particular, "My shirt is wet."

Merritt, ignoring M, asked Argent, "Can you remove it?"

But M would not be ignored. "No, leave it on - I don't have another shirt." Having delivered this directive, M slipped into complete unconsciousness.

Also ignoring M's protests, Argent shook his head, No. Even with the advent of rain and sleet, the sky still was white, and the moon somehow made its presence known. Argent shifted his body to remove his shadow from M. Simultaneously, he pushed on Merritt's chest until Merritt's shadow, too, was removed. Argent cautiously, almost superficially, probed the wound, then sat back. "I can't feel the bullet. It could be anywhere, could have hit her collar bone and taken an eccentric course. Digging around for it here in the dark could just shift it elsewhere, causing even more damage. I need more light than even this moon can give, and I need something more than a pocket knife."

Argent did not like to give voice to the possibility that M would bleed to death before they reached any safe haven, though surely Merritt had considered it as well. Merritt, however, had developed some strange affinity for Miss Warner, though Argent could not call it romantic. Regardless, he would not give Merritt any cause for despair until it was inevitable.

“We can’t stay here in the middle of the towpath. As M said, those thugs are idiots; they may have forgotten some other step in their plan and are on their way back to complete the crime or clean up after themselves.”

Argent hauled himself up. “Or verify that we did indeed drown. Here, help me lift her up onto Emmett. I’ll ride with her. You ride to the next lock and rouse the tender. We all of us need to get out of this storm. Take my horse with you – I have my hands full.”

Argent struggled to keep pressure on M’s wound and at the same time keep her from slipping out of his embrace while holding the reins and keeping his own hold on the saddle. The sudden cold, along with the drenching in the canal, made his hands clumsy on the reins, yet Emmett seemed to understand his urgency, and they managed a fast walk. Argent dared not ask more of Emmett or M on this miserable night and on this unfamiliar ground that was rapidly turning into a slippery slush. Argent felt the warm ooze of M’s blood track down his wrist and arm to his elbow.

He did not know how long they rode or how far they had traveled when he heard horses approaching rapidly from his front. Argent urged Emmett to slow his pace, then carefully transferred the reins to the hand that pinned M in place. It was not until he attempted to remove his gun that Argent realized how numb his hand had become from both the cold and the fixed position in which he had held it since he and M first started down the towpath. He almost dropped the gun, but he had it ready by the time the horse came close enough to be seen through the sleet and, now, the occasional snow.

Merritt pulled up short next to Argent and shouted over the wind; he was also loud in his excitement. “We’ve stepped into a little luck tonight. There’s a bridge across the canal less than half a mile down the path. From there we cross Old Town Road and continue on to a farm about mile and a half beyond the bridge. We can get M help, real help, there.”

Merritt turned his horse (pulling Argent’s behind), and the group began moving down the towpath, slowly at first. “What about the next lock? Isn’t that closer?”

“About the same distance, but the lock tender will not open his door to anyone. I think he has been abused once too often by canal boatmen insisting he operate the lock during the Sunday suspensions. But he told me about the farm – a doctor that once lived there tended to the needs of the canal people when they passed through here.”

“Once?”

“Died last year, but his widow – the Widow Lambert – is the town midwife.”

“M does not need a midwife.”

“The widow also helped her husband in his rounds and services. The lock tender said she was ‘very useful’ during the war when things heated up around here. Perhaps she has whatever you need to help M.”

“Then let us go meet the midwife.”

The bridge – one of those compromises the canal accepted when negotiating for land from nearby farmers – was perhaps a little closer than Merritt thought, but the farm was definitely farther than the lock tender stated – by Argent’s counting, it was a full two miles from the canal. The farmhouse was, however, dry and warm and commodious, even if the widow was less so. The little group was met a short distance before the farmhouse by a man with a shotgun who demanded to know their business. Once explained (and proven, Argent being required to show the blood still seeping through M’s clothes), they were advanced to the door where a woman stood, clearly roused from sleep but given enough time to appear properly dressed (though her hair still hung in disarray behind her back). She was not surprised at Merritt’s request for aid, but she was not altogether happy to give it.

M was laid on the bed in a small back room of the house. Unlike the two cots in the back room of M’s own house, the bed here was fairly large, leaving room for little else but a night stand and lamp on one side and two tattered chairs opposite the cedar chest at the foot of the bed. She was positioned at an odd angle with her head at one corner of the bed and her feet at the opposite corner. She was filthy from the mud of the canal; the sleet had done little to wash it from her. The two men were also dirty, but they had the luxury of relatively clean vests and coats to cover their time in the lock. All three were chilled and numb from an unexpected cold, unexpected even in the chancy weather of mid-April.

The man who had stopped them outside the house now brought in wood and built up a fire in a room which was clearly little used. The widow lit the lamp as soon as she led them into the room, but it was not until the fire took hold that Argent saw just how much blood M had lost. Even over the black of the muck that caked her clothes, he could see the course of the blood as it had seeped down the front of her shirt and coat. There was blood on her left hand where it had found its way down her sleeve. She was filthy and disheveled, her hair heavy and slick with sleet and mud. She hardly looked human, but, looking at Merritt, Argent realized that he hardly looked much better. Perhaps the widow's chilly reception had more to do with their appearance than with their need for help at such a ghostly hour.

The Widow Lambert peeled away M's coat and the shirt underneath and gingerly probed the wound. Blood was coming at a very slow pace, and even that was discerned only because the widow wiped clean the area around the jagged hole where the bullet had entered, making the blood easier to track. A young woman now came into the room, carrying a leather case. Like the widow, she had the appearance of one who had hastily dressed, obviously woken from the natural hours of sleep. Neither woman showed any excitement, but the younger woman briefly betrayed a disgust at the appearance of the strangers.

The young woman placed the case on the bed next to M, flipped open the lid, and began to pull from it the instruments needed in such a situation. The lock tender may have been mistaken on the distance to the farmhouse, but not on its function – these women had performed services like this before. It occurred to Argent that Mrs. Lambert had a tidy sum of money tied up in these instruments, money that could be had by their sale. Midwifery was one thing but continuing her husband's medical practice could only lead to disaster. Even as Argent was mulling over the presence and value of the surgical instruments, Merritt asked, "Hadn't you better do it?"

Both women looked up at Argent, but it was the widow who spoke. "You have experience in this?"

"Yes." Argent hesitated before adding, "But my hands are numb and filthy besides." The so-called germ theory of disease had appeared in European medical journals for several years now and copied in similar American journals. Earlier, just this year, the theory had found its way into the common newspapers of American cities. The theory seemed to demand attention, though Argent was not convinced that woolen respirators for surgeons, as suggested in these articles, were required to protect patients. And in the heat of battle or its aftermath, it was a selfish luxury to wash oneself between surgeries. Still, it was only courting ruin to perform surgery in such a state as he now found himself. "Are you confident in your own ability?"

The widow returned to laying out her tools as the young woman handed them to her. Without any hesitation, she said, "Yes; the war taught me what my husband would not."

Though M was still insensible, Argent pinned M's legs to the bed, while Merritt did the same with her upper body, practically laying across her torso at an odd angle, pinning her left arm with his right hand. Once again, M roused slightly and tried to struggle against the restraint. More than the pain in her shoulder, the inability to move frightened her and she opened her eyes wide to see a strange woman with a blade poised in her hand. The woman said, "Hold her tight – she will rebel violently at the first cut." M cried out, "Don't," and the woman said sharply, "Turn her face away and hold her." It was then that M heard Merritt; he was above her, calling her name.

"M. Look at me, nothing else."

"Don't."

"It must be done. Look at me, nothing else."

M became frantic. She did not know exactly what was happening – just what was it that must be done? – but she was afraid of her reaction to it. She was afraid she would shame herself by screaming or (worse) cursing. And she was afraid of showing fear to Merritt. A silly thought came to her. "Don't let her cut my shirt. Mrs. Müller gave it to me. It is my birthday gift." The Passion of St. John swirled in her head, like the waters in the lock, and the Roman guards at the foot of the Cross spoke to her. "Don't let them tear it. It is seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. Let them cast lots for it." She pushed them from her mind; she should not listen to them; they were Roman guards and crucifiers. Still, she could not remember if there were seams in her shirt. There should be seams – it seems there should be seams.

"Mrs. Müller will make you a new one. Now, M, lay still if you can."

M looked back at the widow and realized it was not only the shirt she intended to cut.

Merritt gently turned her head away from the woman with the blade and slightly shifted himself so that he was in M's sight. "Look at me, M, nothing else."

M instead stared at the arm that pinned her own left arm. She felt Merritt's hand bear down on her right shoulder. Only her head could move – she would have to keep that still on her own. She bit into Merritt's sleeve and prayed for endurance.

M did indeed react violently at the first cut, but the men held her fast, and she mercifully lost consciousness at almost the same instant.

Argent watched the widow at her work and for the most part approved. She was slower than he himself would have been – the war had not taught her speed, though, to be fair, she would never have worked in an army hospital tent, as he had done, where speed was judged on a par with skill, especially when ether and chloroform were not available. She found the bullet with but little exploration and managed to extract it without much digging or further damage. The widow sutured the blood vessels in a manner unfamiliar with Argent (he couldn't say with certainty that it was *wrong*, just not how he would do it). She then rinsed the wound (a step he would not have even considered), and, finally, packed it with lint. Only then did Merritt and Argent relax their awkward holds on M.

Merritt announced that he would see to their horses, now that M no longer had need of his help, but the young woman assured him that Mr. Darnell – the man who had questioned them outside and then had started the fire in M's room – had already taken their horses to the barn and was seeing to their needs for the night. Both Merritt and Argent were at something of a loss as what to do next – Merritt had made himself responsible for Emmett and Argent had considered himself responsible for Miss Warner, and now both men had lost their responsibilities.

After a brief, but failed, struggle with Mrs. Lambert to stay the night with M, the younger woman, now identified as the widow's daughter, led Merritt and Argent to a room they would share. It was a spartan room, like the one where they had taken M, but there was no fireplace. There was one bed in the room, which they would also share. On this bed were laid some clothes, out of date and style but well-kept. Indicating the clothes, the daughter said, "Mother thought you could wear these while your own clothes are washed." Argent began to protest, "We couldn't possibly ask you ..." but the daughter blushed slightly before continuing, "There is a cistern out back where you may rinse your clothes of the mud and blood," (particularly indicating Argent's mud-stained vest and shirt where M had leaned back against him on Emmett). "These were my father's clothes. They may not fit well, but if the day is fair tomorrow, it should not take long for your own clothes to dry."

The daughter left on this optimistic note, but tomorrow was already today, and the storm outside showed no signs of abating. It had now settled into a steady, pounding cold rain. There was little chance of fair weather any time soon.

Merritt and Argent removed their filthy clothes, careful not to let them soil any of the bedding. After searching briefly for a safe place to lay them, they finally opted to simply drop them in a heap in a corner. Merritt's clothes fell with a thud. Argent spun around at the sound.

"What was that?"

Merritt retrieved his coat from the floor and pulled from a pocket the plate he had carried from the lock. Holding it up for Argent to see, Merritt said, "See, the instrument of our salvation. M found it. We both used it to scrape mud from around you in the lock. I had forgotten that I still had it." As Merritt held out the plate he considered it for the first time, and he cocked his head as he recognized it. "This is one of the plates from that counterfeit den we raided last year on Snake Hill. Weren't all the plates sent to New York, with Whitley?"

"Plates and everything else, except the printing press. That was busted up and used for firewood." Argent took the plate from Merritt and examined it himself. "Maybe this is a copy we didn't know about, but there have been no new counterfeits from this plate since the raid. Where did they get it?"

Merritt merely shrugged his shoulders, unable in his fatigue and numbness to care about old plates. He picked a side of the bed, then got under the covers. "You'll get the lamp?"

The widow's husband's shirt fit Merritt well enough, but Argent found the buttons straining to keep a similar shirt closed across his chest. In the end he opted to sleep shirtless (that is, completely naked). Merritt eyed him warily as Argent climbed into bed next to him but said nothing.

Though the lamp had been extinguished and both men were tired from the late hour and still affected by the several (sloppy and incomplete) administrations of chloroform throughout the evening, sleep evaded them both. After some time, Argent spoke, certain that Merritt was still awake. "The President will need to be informed. We were expected tomorrow. Today," he corrected himself.

"No, you were correct the first time. We are expected tomorrow. Today is Easter. We were to have left Cumberland on Monday. M will miss Easter Sunday Mass."

"I'll return to Cumberland and send a wire."

"I'd like to go back to the lock and look around."

"As would I, but Miss Warner is our first concern, though I would hate to see that trail go cold. How did she come to be there?"

"Apparently, she followed us, and it was lucky for us that she did. But an equally important question is, who were those men, and, why did they attack us?"

"It was not for robbery." Argent felt Merritt's head turn toward him on his pillow, and though he could not see Merritt, Argent knew the question on his face. "As for myself, nothing was taken - not my money, not my notebook, not my pocket gun, nothing. You should check your pockets in the morning."

Merritt agreed, then after a moment, added, "I didn't check my pockets. My gun was fired, though. Emptied."

"I didn't think to check mine."

"I did - yours was emptied as well."

"One of our own bullets struck M?"

"Likely."

Argent blew out a breath; he thought of the shape of the bullet the widow had pulled from M - flattened and misshapen. It had either bounced off a bone or, more likely, ricocheted off one of the walls of the lock. M's wound had looked particularly ugly; the bullet, then, was already misshapen when it entered her body. It had never been the intention of the shooter to hit them as they lay there pinned under the scow, just to empty their guns, as any lawman would do in pursuit of criminals. "They didn't know she was there. What was the reason?"

Merritt had only just come around as he and Argent were being muscled into the lock, but he remembered some of their captors' conversation just prior to that - 'spread-eagled' and 'inept' stood out in his mind. "To ruin our reputation, to humiliate us; it has something to do with that."

Both men chased possibilities in their heads for a few moments. Finally, Argent repeated, "I will return to Cumberland tomorrow." Then he turned on his side, away from Merritt.

"No, not yet; let us wait to see how M does, then we will report to him." Merritt, too, turned on his side, both men staring into the darkness of opposite sides of the room.