

Targets of Opportunity

The battle was done. The doctor sat down heavily in the camp chair, his work in the medical tent finished for a time. He looked across the valley at the rebel army, a thousand long paces away.

A figure was walking slowly from the rebel lines, carrying a white flag. A trooper rode out to meet him, and escorted him toward the camp. As the doctor watched the tableau, he took a small sip from the flask of spirits he always kept in his pocket.

A few minutes later, the general approached. The doctor wordlessly offered the general a drink of his spirits. The general just as silently accepted, then spoke. “The rebel messenger brought a note from his general. Their chaplain has been wounded, and has refused medical aid until all the soldiers are cared for. The rebel doctors are very busy. Their soldiers suffered more than ours today. The rebel general is afraid his chaplain will die. He has asked for our help. Will you go?”

The doctor replied, “Of course.”

The doctor gathered instruments and medicines into his black bag. He mounted and rode out to where the rebel messenger waited. As he rode away from his tent, he passed the unoccupied sniper’s nest. The heavy, long-barreled rifle with its telescopic sight lay in its sandbag cradle, pointed at the rebel lines.

The doctor rode while the rebel soldier walked. As they approached the rebel lines, the doctor saw the rebel general. The doctor noted the general wore a uniform almost exactly like his own, except for its color.

The doctor dismounted in front of the general. The general said, “Thank you for coming. My doctors are working very hard. You did us a lot of damage today.”

The doctor said, “Take me to your chaplain. I’ll do what I can.”

The general led the doctor to a tent. Inside, the chaplain lay on his back on a pile of blankets. He was stripped to the waist, his breathing labored. A private soldier tended him.

The doctor bent over the chaplain. He said, “I’ve come to help you.”

The chaplain took in the doctor’s uniform. “But you’re the enemy.”

“For now I’m not.”

“Then help our doctors treat our soldiers.”

“I’ll offer to do that. But first I’ll take care of you.”

The doctor opened his bag, and selected instruments. He probed the chaplain’s wound, high on the man’s left breast. The chaplain moaned as the doctor found the bullet.

The doctor opened a bottle, and shook some of its contents onto a cloth. He placed the cloth over the chaplain’s nose and mouth until the chaplain’s breathing became shallow. Then he reached into the wound with an instrument and withdrew the bullet. He looked at the bullet a long time.

The doctor cleaned and bandaged the wound. Then he went outside the tent and approached the rebel general. He said, “The bullet nicked his lung. However, he should recover.” The general nodded.

The doctor continued, “Can I be of any further service?”

The general replied, “My doctors are making progress. They are treating the less-seriously wounded now. I do not think they require your aid, but thank you for asking.”

The doctor nodded, and mounted to ride back. The general said, “And thank you for saving my chaplain.”

The doctor replied, “It’s what I do.”

The general said, “The chaplain was ministering to the wounded when your sniper shot him. I suspect he was just a target of opportunity. I doubt your sniper can see his targets very well at this range.”

The doctor replied, “I think not.”

The general said, “Still, it will not go well for the sniper if we capture him.”

“I’m sure he knows that.”

“A sniper must be a man of cold brilliance.”

“I believe that is an accurate assessment.”

The doctor rode back to his lines. As he dismounted, he looked at the sky. There was an hour of daylight left. He walked to the sniper’s nest, knelt behind the rifle, and put his eye to the telescopic sight.

The sniper scanned the rebel lines for targets of opportunity.