

Leipzig 1813

Jesus, that was loud!
Jesus, that was close!
Hans is flat on the ground!
Jesus, that was loud!
Got you in the face you french pig!
Christ, what a flash!
I can't see! Maybe don't want to see!
Jesus, so loud!
I've got to see. Ok I'm clearing. Rub my eyes. Dirt on the heel of my hand is washing away in my tears. It's the powder smoke.
Georg! In the neck! Flat now. Flat!
I've fallen in the mud. I'm down.
They're on the run, but firing our way. As they run, artillery flashes, fires in our direction and clouds of blood fill the flame with steam. Everything before now has been decoration. We have him where we want him, but he has me and doesn't even care about it. I was standing brave and now I lie bleeding. Even the sounds grow faint. I wonder where the pain, where the satisfaction. I'm going cold, blank.

But Wilhelm is not dead. As the Grande Armee is in retreat, deserting Germans Hans and Jorgen pick him up and alternately carry him, switching off as they tire and crouching as they go. It is a shoulder wound; so this is how these exhausted soldiers manage the effort. They manage it because they are Germans looking to do something acceptable. The field is full of them but they carry a Prussian soldier to salvation. They will be thanked by the Prussians, and live. The plan works.

At the field tent an anesthetic sponge is held over the nose; alcohol is poured into the wound. It is mixed with morphine and salicylate. The wound, which was through and through, is cleaned, cauterized, sewn and bandaged with boiled, bleached rag. No better service could have been rendered and Wilhelm recovered with only a minor loss of motion in his left shoulder.

In effect Hans and Jorgen have been accepted by the Prussians because they were German and because they saved Wilhelm. They were issued Prussian uniforms and returned to the swell of the chase that ultimately drove the little fox into a villa at Elba. The Sixth Coalition made him sovereign there. The sins of this selfish lunatic were assuaged with that bit of exile that is hopefully easier on mankind than all the doubt, intrigue, and battle required before definitive execution or even definitive exile. King of an island off the coast of Tuscany! In fact all he needed do was raise the prospect of universal aristocratic overthrow and the volunteers snapped again into file and order, ready for the final rout of them all and ready to die, if needed, for nothing.

Eventually they would put him away on the island of St. Helena 2,000 miles out in the Atlantic, in the pavilion of a British admirer, of course. Just as plans were being laid to re-establish the French Empire in South America, with the help of the British and concurrently plans were laid by exiles from the Grande Armee who

had taken refuge in Texas to re-establish the French territory in the southern US he had sold to finance his campaigns, he died.

In 1840 the French moved him in a black-painted boat, a kind of big wind-blown water hearse, back to Cherbourg and then by land to Paris, where the little freak lies in state under the dome at Les Invalides in an Italian-designed porphyry sarcophagus, and not in a ditch, frozen, bloody, and covered in snow. Children know that he was defeated by Wellington (they were never told of Gebhard Leberecht von Blucher) and politicians distractedly refer to opponents' misfortunes as Waterloo (by now they have forgotten who was involved). Contemporary historians still worry over whether he died of stomach cancer or slow arsenic poisoning, and very little over Leipzig, 1813.