

## The Belgian

by

Brian Keith Day

“Tuck that spade in under the tarpaulin there Epphie. Don’t want its clatterin’ to wake no one tonight,” Basil directed his mammoth companion in the wagon bed behind him. “Easy digging tonight. Rain a week ago and cool, sunny afternoons makes the soil just right.”

Ephraim Jelliff nudged the shovel away from the side board of the wagon box into the folds of the grungy canvas with his foot, ending its incessant clanking in rhythm to the plodding of the black Belgian pulling the buck board. Most people called Ephraim “Big Stupe,” but Basil Gleason called him “Epphie.” Ephraim appreciated the courtesy, so Basil was his bestest friend – his only friend. Basil was finally taking him along on one of the jobs Basil made his pocket money at. When no one else had coin for meat and grog, Basil always did. Epphie worked hard most days picking rocks or shoveling out pits for out houses – any job not suited for the faint of heart, weak of back, or slight of

stomach. He seldom got more than old clothes and a scrap of bread for his efforts, but Basil kept him fed. Basil made the keeper at The Capin's Cabin Tavern let Epphie in to sit on the bench beside him and eat a plate of hot food. Epphie also got a big pot of ale to drink slowly, while he soaked up the heat of the fire to help keep him warm through most of the night in the hay of the stable.

Tonight, he and Basil had harnessed the Belgian to the draft wagon, a half hour after the longest toll of the church bell, and had started out on the road up the hill toward the source of time keeping. A May crescent moon lit their way on a clear, still, night - full of stars.

"We'll not speak much to the church yard," Basil had directed, as he had swung up to the drover's seat and clucked to the Belgian to move on. The Belgian knew the way, so said nothing about the hour. Basil had given him an apple and he smelled more in the lean man's pockets.

Basil always knew what a creature wanted. Epphie had the mind of a child, but he had become a young man. He had taken to leering unabashedly at the young ladies who passed him on the streets. His first hang-lipped gawks had been thwarted by the whack of a stout stick and a "Get along to your task there, Big Stupe!" from the nearest gentleman. When he had slapped the gentleman through a picket fence for applying the stick to him for his amorous gaze, several of the gentlemen had banded together, chased him down, and applied their boots to his backside, head, and private parts. They warned him he would lose his private parts one dark night if he did not forget about his new interest in the fairer gender. Basil had arrived at the chastisement just before damage beyond healing could be done. He had volunteered to monitor and guide the boy to better

manners and judgment. Basil had kept him fed at the tavern every evening since that day. He kept him sheltered in the hayloft of the stable. He nudged Epphie in the ribs when he had stared at the serving maids of the tavern a bit too long and reminded him to close his mouth.

Some of the serving girls let the gentlemen in the tavern hold them for money for a little while – the greater the money the stronger the grasp. Basil knew that Epphie desired this privilege, so he took Epphie to the funeral of Estela Tuttle.

Mrs. Tuttle had been a comely, local, beauty of the parish. Many a gentleman's gaze had followed her movements throughout the passages and byways of the town and she enjoyed their interests. She had cultivated their contemplations for many a year, like sweet currents from the hedge. Her harvest had continued even after her marriage to the handsome and biddable Stanley Tuttle. Stanley didn't have much money, but he had his father's farm - a decent plot of good river bottom. His house was sound, with five whole rooms and a good roof. Most people wondered why a woman with Estela's shapely form and stunning countenance should settle for a man with so little, when she might have had many a wealthy gentleman.

"A woman needs a father for any children that may come," was Estela's answer to any gentleman who might ask the bold question of her choice in husbands. "Stanley has some particular talents that I've come to appreciate," she would often add in a low, husky, voice, "But I *would* enjoy some variety from time to time."

Somehow, Estela got herself drowned in the river. Not that drowning in the river was so unknown. People bathed in the river when the weather was warm, but they seldom actually knew how to swim. April was not a month for bathing and certainly not at night.

Frosts never occurred in May, but frost was still a possibility in the last week of April, especially on a bridge over the little river that flowed through Hayden County. Estela had last stood on just such a bridge, not far from her home, on a dark night, four nights ago - the last night of April. Her dainty boot prints had still been visible in the sparkling frost that had coated the boards of the bridge the following morning. They led off to the water beyond the edge of the boards without hesitation, just at the gap where the railing ended and the riverbank rose to meet the road.

Neither Basil nor Epphie had been acquaintances of Mrs. Tuttle. Certainly Epphie remembered watching her pass on the streets of Mosherville more than once, her golden hair catching the sunlight like the halos of the faded angels painted on the chapel walls, her lips the color of Christmas ribbon. She had been the subject of one of his earliest lessons of the club.

“Then it is appropriate that she may be the means by which you acquire some further knowledge into the mysteries of womanhood,” Basil had commented, when Epphie had relayed her significance to him. Epphie had been reluctant, even afraid, to attend her funeral. “There will be a big bit of coin in it for your help, Epphie. Enough to buy even a big, ugly, brute like you a long hug from a tavern girl,” Basil had encouraged. “Now clinch your jaw and stiffen your spine like a true man for the work to come. Few people will attend the funeral, likely only her husband. We will watch discreetly from the knoll beyond the churchyard.”

“Why must we see a coffin go into the ground?” Epphie asked.

“The Benedict family lost two children to sickness last week. Olsen the Cooper died of it as well. All are fresh graves in the churchyard. I wish to be certain of the correct

burial so that I might find it in the dark. Doctor Barrett cautioned against the graves of those killed by disease.”

“Dr. Barrett! He is the fine gentleman who soothed my blue spots after the beating! He sent you to the river for ice to ease the pain. Is it he whom we are working for?” Epphie exclaimed.

“Yes, it is for him that we do this secretive business. Now that you know this, you must forget he is the man. Dr. Barrett knows more about healing than any other physician in the world, but he knows this at a cost. No one must ever know what he pays, or to whom, for his magical skills. You must help me to be his aide.”

“He fixed my water spout when I thought that it would shrivel and fall off completely,” Epphie replied. “I will do whatever he needs of me.”

“Good, the matter is settled. Perhaps your water spout will benefit even more when this adventure is completed,” Basil concluded. Epphie liked the word ‘adventure.’

“Won’t Mrs. Tuttle’s body be a nasty mess from her time in the river?” Epphie asked, as the Belgian pulled the wagon into the gate of the churchyard.

“Dr. Barrett examined her when they pulled her from the river. He was amazed at how little damaged she was. He thinks the cold of the water killed her before she went under. She may have floated on the surface for the hours between her demise and the finding of her body. It is because of this preserved condition and her youth that makes him desirous of poor Mrs. Tuttle – may she serve his further knowledge well,” Basil explained.

Epphie grew silent again at the thought of Estela Tuttle floating in the cold river, her dress billowing out all about her in the eddies of the chilly current.

“Tie the horse to the gate post and be silent a little longer,” Basil directed, “I will step away for a little distance to listen for sound of any other late night wanderers.” The older man strode into the darkness far enough to blend into the shadows well. He returned after a moment or two. “All is silent. The grave is over here. Bring the shovels Epphie.” Epphie did as he was commanded and followed to the fresh mound of earth. The thin crescent moon and the bright Milky Way cast enough light to dig without a lantern. A spade was as familiar as a spoon to Epphie’s hands. He could dig as well as he could eat in the darkness. “It is all right to talk now Epphie, as long as you do not shout. The digging will take some time,” Basil observed.

“Have you known the doctor all of your life, Basil?” Epphie asked.

“No, I met him in the Spanish Wars. He saved my life. I took a musket ball in the chest at close range. Those who dragged me from the battlefield considered me dead. Sometimes it is hard to determine if life still exists. Glass can be held to the nostrils, a finger placed to the neck for the pulse of blood may tell, but even these signs can be so faint as to seem vacant. The ball had entered my left breast, certain to most to have entered my heart. Doc Barrett knew of a gap, a narrow pathway in a man’s chest, where a bullet might pass without striking the heart. Such a thing had occurred in my shooting. He removed the projectile with clean hands and supervised my recovery. We became close friends. He managed to have me assigned as his aide. On occasion, he needed to practice a procedure, or explore the territory to be operated on - so-to speak. He asked me to help him with these explorations, late at night, in a heavily shrouded tent - with a body pulled from the field.”

Epphie had begun digging after his question to his mentor. “Perhaps you could become a doctor,” he conjectured as he heaved away at the loose soil.

“Ah no! I held the candle steady and looked away. One night, we pulled the cloth back on a young man, more of a boy really, with a blow to the head as his ticket to the here-after. I held the candle steady, as usual, and looked aside as Barrett began to apply his sharp blade to the man’s stomach. All of a sudden, the man shrieked out in agony beneath the scalpel and gripped at his own exposed entrails. I jumped back so hard my candle struck the sun rotted canvas and the tent began to blaze. All the while, this Lazarus is writhing from the table, clutching his bowels. ‘What’s to be done?’ I’m thinking, ‘If we’re discovered at this monstrous practice, they’ll hang us for sure. We might as well burn up with the tent.’ Then, quick as a flash, Barrett cut his man’s throat with the scalpel and holds him still to bleed out. We had just enough time to escape the blaze. Tent fires happen in a military encampment. Soldiers die in their exhaustion. I swore I would never bring the doctor another man.”

Epphie took a pause from his shoveling. Basil stepped down into the excavation and took his turn at the digging. He was older and tired more quickly than his mighty, young, assistant. Soon, he leaned on his own shovel to breath.

“So why are we here tonight Basil, if you swore never to do this sort of thing again?” Epphie asked as he stepped back to the digging.

“The war ended. Barrett and I returned from our duties. Before we left, he came to me. ‘Basil,’ he said, ‘If I tell people what you have done, you will hang. In some backward places, you will be burned as a witch. You must come live near me in Mosherville. I have work for you there.’

‘But if you tell of my misdeeds, you must tell of your own sir,’ I pointed out.

‘I will tell them that I refused your gifts. I am an educated man who has saved many an officer’s life and limb. Rich men’s sons go home alive because of me.’

“So I came to live in Mosherville. Dr. Barrett doesn’t often request such night work as this and he pays well for it. Other doctor friends of his sometimes procure my services in other towns.” He gestured toward the pit with his shovel. “They don’t come out of the ground with blood still idling through their veins, after a few hours in the coffin. Barrett is certain of their demise before they are interred. It is a good living, lad, if you are discrete about it – better than emptying shit holes.”

Epphie dug on in contemplative silence. Basil dug out his pipe and filled the bowl. Soon, the scent of tobacco smoke obscured the smell of the earth. Basil finished the bowl and took his turn at the digging for a short while. “We should be getting close,” he said as he climbed out of the deeper hole again.

“I don’t like this business, Basil,” Epphie commented as he resumed digging. “I watched this pretty lady only a fortnight ago as she strolled down Highstreet. She looked so fine and merry! I don’t think I will like seeing her dead.”

“She will not look the same at all to you, Epphie. Dead is dead to a man or a woman as much as any creature. You’ve seen animals on the kitchen table waiting to be prepared for tavern guests, I think. You have seen a horse that you knew, dead in the yard. This thing we will soon pull loose from the ground is no longer Mrs. Tuttle. She will be completely wrapped in her shroud, most likely. If any of the flesh is exposed, the color will be so different, it shall startle you. This moon is faint. You may look away, as I did when I held the candle for Dr. Barrett.”

Epphie paused at his digging abruptly and stood up still as a statue. “The earth is moving,” he muttered.

Basil leaned down and put his hand to the side of the excavation. “We have disturbed soil that has not had time to settle. It shifts a bit round the coffin at the last. Nothing to worry about, Epphie. Olsen builds a sturdy box.”

“You said Olsen is dead.”

“So I did and he is, but he probably made this coffin. He always had a couple ready in his shop like a good businessman. Keep digging; we’ll soon be finished.”

Epphie picked up the shovel and resumed his task reluctantly. The spade thudded against wood. “I hear noises!” he shouted and jumped out of the grave. “Scratching!”

“Sshhh!” Basil hissed, “I warned you about the shouting.” He cupped his ear to the hole. A woman’s moaning and sobbing could be heard plainly emanating from the exposed boards, accompanied by scratching and knocking. Basil leaned back and covered his face with his hands. “My God man, not again!” he cried softly into his hands.

“Tell me Basil, oh tell me quick! What is happening?” Epphie gasped.

“That blasted doctor has done it again. He missed the queue of life in her somehow. She still lives in there, although I cannot imagine how. I’ve heard tell of this in the past. There is spoken history to this profession, as with all professions. Many years in the past, in times of plague, when burials were hurried because of so many dead and so few to dig, some souls went to the grave along with the vessel of flesh – not yet separate. I told you this often happened on the battlefield. For many years now, physicians and other gentlemen of wisdom had found need of the bodies.”

“Oh Basil, she’s crying to get out! I can hear her clearly now. What must we do?”

“She’ll not get out of that coffin, Epphie. We’ve got a moment to talk, lad. Remember when I told you about the doctor’s words to me at the end of the war – damn his hide for this? Remember how he said I would be lucky if they hanged me – most people would roast me alive? Well that is what they will do with us here in Mosherville for sure. They’ll pile up a mighty pile of dry wood with two stout stakes in the middle – one for you and one for me. They’ll tie us to those poles and all gather round like some kind of big party – a wedding, or a holy day – and they’ll set fire to that heap of logs, and watch, and cheer, and curse our names into the Big Book of Hell Forever, if this woman gets outa” that hole!”

“Whaa!” Epphie gasped and stepped back several passes from his companion. “What do you mean, Basil?”

“We fill the hole back in and go home, Epphie. It is a hard answer I know, but the only one.” Epphie shook his head slowly from side to side. “I’ll start the job, lad,” Basil offered. “We’ll be done much faster than the opening. The earth will cover the sound before long.” He began shoveling the dirt back onto the coffin lid.

“No! No! No!” wailed from beneath the boards.

“Oh stop Basil, stop!” Epphie shouted, leaping into the grave and hurling the older man from the pit, shovel and all. He began tearing at the soil with his own shovel, like a crazed beast starving for food. “I’ll get you out!” he screamed to the boards. “I am digging fast as I can. Just please stop the crying!” The wailing did not stop. Soon, he tore at the clods and wood with his bare hands.

Basil gathered himself up at the brink of the pit and fumbled for his shovel in the dark. Epphie was heedless to him now. Moving to the head of the grave, he raised the shovel over his shoulder in readiness. "Now apply the scalpel with precision when the head is exposed," he whispered to himself.

Epphie's strong fingers soon found the seam between top and side board of the coffin. Mere seconds passed, before the man-child had pried open enough space to jamb both hands into the gap between lid and vessel. With a great, rending "Crack!" he popped the cover from the coffin and the woman within sprang upward to grasp her savior by the neck. Basil could not strike.

"My Love! My Love!" she cried in a high whispy voice, her face buried in the big shoulder, "You have saved me!"

"As white as new milk, not blue at all!" Basil gasped at the sight of the woman's bare back where the shroud dropped away.

"She's cold, Basil, oh so cold! And she grips like a tiger! I cannot breath. Do all women grip so fiercely? Are all women cold as ice?"

"You must get free of her, boy. We must put an end to this," Basil commanded, as he raised his shovel again.

"If women are like this, I'll have nothing to do with them, I swear. I've changed my mind," Epphie whimpered, as he struggled fruitlessly to free himself.

"No love for me? No love at all? I know it now. No mortal man shall ever love me again. I felt it once from a good man and spurned it for the lust of others. Now I shall have neither," she sobbed into the rough collar of Epphie's coat.

“Please let go, Miss Estela. You squeeze me so hard my ribs may crack,” Epphie pleaded. “I’ll give you my coat. You’ll soon be warm again.”

Estela threw back her head and cackled a descending laugh of despair. Her eyes gazed far off into the sky, into the blackness of space between the stars. “I shall never be warm again,” she screamed, “But I shall not go hungry!” Twin crescents, like the moon above, glinted in her open mouth. She plunged the fangs into the thick hide of Epphie’s neck and wrapped her legs round his torso to crush the life out of him. Basil stood frozen like a statue. Her eyes - black pools, rimmed with sapphire - held him transfixed. Gradually, Epphie’s body struggled no more. He seemed to diminish in her clutch to a formless lump in dirty rags. Finally, she withdrew her bite. “Dead is dead,” she said listlessly as she licked the last streamers and drops from the wound, then dropped the emptied lump into the coffin at her feet. Estela climbed stiffly and clumsily out of her grave. “Fill in the hole,” she commanded Basil, in a heartier voice. “His neck was dirty and his blood bitter, but he may rest there forever. I have no more use for one such as him.” Basil complied with her wishes without resistance. His gaze never left her figure standing solemnly at the foot of the grave. When the last shovel of dirt scattered across the mound, she turned her back to the plot. “Be gone. Be gone quickly, before I change my mind,” she ordered the grave robber, her face turned away. Like a musket shot, Basil fled the church yard, and the hill it was on, and the county which held it.

The Belgian wandered the streets of Mosherville in the morning, until someone unharnessed the crazed, exhausted, beast from the shambles of cart that he towed. Two shovels and a canvas became the property of whoever chanced upon them in the ditch or

hedge where they had landed in the Belgian's flight from the cemetery. The horse was of no use to anyone ever again.

The End