

The priest trembled violently when he saw the pistol. He closed his eyes, folded his hands against his chest, and blessed my father in Latin. My father lowered the pistol. The priest opened his eyes...

'I can't shoot anybody dressed up like you, padre,' my father said, weakly.

'Are you badly hurt?' the priest asked.

My father laughed, then said, 'Badly.'

'Come. Later I will report you to them.'

Father Kraus helped my father rise to his feet and, bearing my father's weight, walked him to the door near the vestibule leading to the bell tower, which overlooked the village. They struggled up the narrow stairs and my father's blood stained each step as they climbed. When they reached the small room at the top of the stairs, the priest set my father down. The priest removed his ruined, bloody vestments and made a pillow to support my father's head. Then the priest took his chasuble and tore it into long strips, and tied them tightly around my father's head.

'You have lost much blood,' the priest said. 'I must get water to clean the wound.'

My father looked up at the priest and said, 'Gesundheit.' Speaking the only German word he knew, my father lost consciousness again.

That night when my father awoke, the priest was bent over him, administering the last rites of Extreme Unction. The priest knew that the wounded pilot's temperature had risen sharply and that his injuries were grievous. My father could not see out of his left eye, but he felt the softness of the priest's hands applying the oils of the sacrament.

'Why?' my father said.

'I think you are dying,' the priest said. 'I will hear your confession. Are you Catholic?'

'Baptist.'

'Ah, you have been baptized then, but I was not sure. I baptized you minutes ago.'

'Thanks. I was baptized in the Colleton River.'

'Ach. A whole river.'

'No, just part of it.'

'I baptize you a second time.'

'It can't hurt nothing.'

'I brought food. Can you eat?'

Years later, my father would describe with undiminishable wonder the taste of that dark German bread, that slab of precious, hoarded butter smeared across that bread, and the red wine the priest gave him from the bottle. The bread in his mouth, the butter, the wine, he would say to his children, and all of us could taste it again with him, the wine spreading like velvet in our mouths, the bread, fragrant as earth, softening and melting on the tongue, the butter coating the roofs of our mouths, the priest holding our hands, the smell of the oils of death on his hands, fear making those soft, veined hands tremble. Outside, in the dark, a German patrol had found the wrecked plane and the countryside was alerted that an American pilot moved among them. There was a reward for his capture and anyone found helping him would be summarily executed.

'They are looking for you,' the priest said to my father when the meal was finished. 'They came to the village today.'

'Did they come to the church?'

'Yes. I told them that if I found you I would kill you with my own two hands. It amused them, coming from a priest. They will return - I am certain - to search for you.'

'I'll go as soon as I can travel.'

'I wish you had not come.'

'It wasn't my idea. I was shot down.'

'Ha!' the priest said, 'then it was God who brought you here.'

'No, sir. I think it was the Nazis.'

'I pray to God for you today.'

'Thank you.'

'I pray to him to make you die,' the priest explained. 'Then I feel much shame. And I pray for you to live. A priest should only pray for life. It is a great sin. I ask that you would forgive me.'