

Little Black Bags

BY CLARK PERRY



I was ten years old in 1932, the year my brother lost his leg.

I stood outside his bedroom door while the doctor told my folks the awful news. I didn't know what to think or feel. I just tried to imagine a one-legged Buker. That was hard because this was summer, the time of year when Buker and I would end our long day of farm chores with a race to the creek over the hill. We'd clear the rocky ridge and jump right in, not even stopping to take off our clothes. One long hot run and then a cold splash into another world.

I looked at my bare feet on the hardwood floor. They seemed a thousand miles away.

I heard Pop asking questions. He already knew the answers but was asking for Ma because she didn't understand. This doctor -- Newton was his name -- answered kindly, and I could imagine Pop holding Ma's hand. Doc Travers, retired but still useful, added that if Buker hadn't been out in the woods so long, it might have been different. Buker's horse Solly had thrown him Wednesday morning and come clopping back empty-saddled around sundown. We didn't find Buker until late Friday. He was lucky the mountain cats hadn't found him first.

I took one look at the deep gash in Buker's leg, the bone splintered like

winter icicles, and fought back a surge of bile rising in my throat.

"Lord, it just ain't fair," my Ma said in a voice heavy with grief. "That boy's done the best he could with what the Lord give him. He don't need to be crippled in no other ways."

"Many people get by with only one leg," Newton assured her in his strange and soothing voice. "We don't have any choice. If that infection spreads, it could kill him."

I could imagine my folks looking sadly at this stranger, Dr. Newton, who'd been kind enough to ride in all the way from Huntsville at a moment's notice. We'd also summoned old Doc Travers, whose shaking hands and blurred eyes still let him treat minor ailments, but rendered him fairly useless in cases such as this.

Footsteps came towards the door. Quietly I dashed down the hall of our shotgun shack, bare feet whispering over smooth wood. I ducked into the kitchen, where my Granny was absently polishing the sink, her eyes lost on some old memory lurking just outside the window. She reminded me a bit of Doc Travers. We couldn't let her do what she once did, but she was still useful in her own way. Pop said we had the cleanest darned sink in the county.

Ma appeared in the kitchen door to check on us, then went and sat on the front porch swing. Granny had made a fresh pitcher of lemonade and without my even asking she left the sink, poured me a glass and returned to her endless polishing. I sipped it on my way to Ma.

She was rocking with her head back to look at the stars that blazed beyond the edge of our roof. When I sat beside her she hugged me, sudden-like, not crying but breathing deeply, holding it back.

Her fingers played through my short hair. "Buker gonna be all right, Ma?"

"It don't look good, Bobby. But we got to pray that doctor can help him."

There wasn't a day of my life that didn't have Buker in it. Though nearly twice my age, he was the closest friend I had. My folks had long ago explained to me that when he was two years old, when we lived on another sharecropper farm, Buker had tumbled off the porch and hit his head on the soft spot. That's what afflicted him. He couldn't speak or think too fast, and sometimes he got frustrated when his body wouldn't do what he wanted. But he loved us and we loved him, and that's all that mattered. So we prayed, my Ma and I, sending our hopes up to the heavens above.

Moments later Ma pulled me close again. "What's your Granny up to in there?"

"Polishing the sink. She made some lemonade. Want some?" I offered her the glass.

Ma frowned. "She use sugar this time?" I nodded. "Remember where you hid that salt."

I know it pained Ma to see her Ma go this way. Sometimes Granny would put a kettle of water on the stove to boil and just walk away without another thought. Steam would blossom like storm clouds against the ceiling. Many times we came back from the fields to find the water faucet open wide, the sink a hair's breadth away from spilling, and Granny pattering around in the yard or stirring salt into lemonade. It hurt Ma to see this. Sometimes I thought about her and what it would be like when she got old. But most times Ma just accepted what was happening and was happy in spite of

it. I vowed never to forget that she did that.

Soon Pop and Doc Travers emerged on the porch followed by this strange new doctor. When Dr. Newton first stepped from his carriage earlier that night, a leather bag in each skeletal hand, I couldn't see his body because he was dressed in a black suit. His bald head, large and pale, floated in the air like a balloon. For a moment I thought we were all underwater, or at least someplace other than where we actually were, right here in our front yard. As he Newton descended the porch steps now, lanky as a scarecrow, I felt again that strange sensation.

"Just tell us what you might need," Pop said weakly, "and we'll see that you get it."

"Right now, some water would be very nice," Newton said. The lamp light from the window revealed threads of blue and green veins at his temples. From one angle, he looked older than everyone, even Doc Travers. From another he looked even younger than me.

Pop returned and Newton had his glass of water in three long sips. "Thank you," he said. "It's a good thing you didn't try to splint that leg. It could've made things worse."

"You sure it's the only way?" Ma asked quietly.

"After that leg comes off, I can promise you that nothing further will happen to your boy." Newton turned to one side, as if somebody nearby had called his name. "Did Buker suffer another accident? When he was younger?"

Ma stared. "He hit his head when he was just a baby. How're you to know that?"

"A guess," Newton said. "Sometimes there are telltale signs in the facial demeanor, the droop of the eyes and such. He's suffered enough, ma'am. But he will suffer no more."

Old Doc Travers shifted uneasily. "Guess we better wash up."

"Thank you," said Newton, "but I won't require any assistance."

Travers raised a stubby finger to an ear. "What?"

Newton hesitated, his face eerie and apprehensive. "I will do this alone."

Travers snorted. "What're you gonna do when that boy comes around?"

"It's relatively painless, after a point. I've done this before."

"I had to take a boy's arm off once. It took four people to hold him down."

"He's got morphine," Pop said. "We'll restrain him, too, right?"

Travers stepped back from us all. "You need someone to talk him through it."

"Man's come all the way from Huntsville," Pop said, his voice growing. "He's got hands that work and you don't. So he does whatever he needs to save my boy's life."

Travers stared down at his knobby hands, which trembled even when he napped in our big rocking chair. "My hands ain't what they once was, but my mind is, and I don't think -- "

"Please forgive me," Newton said calmly, waving away the tension with a brisk flick of his hand. "I was raised and schooled very far from here. My ways have offered offense. Dr. Travers, I would sincerely welcome your expertise and assistance."

Travers sighed. The fire was gone, and his great frame sagged forward again. "I'll help any way I can." Ma led them to the kitchen to wash up.

Pop turned as Hank Steele came around the house. The farm hand's thin face was crusted with road dust. He'd just finished walking Shiloh, his old Mustang, and Dr. Newton's sleek black stallion, cooling them down after their hard run all the way from Huntsville. Pop said, "I don't know what you need more. Water for washing or whiskey for drinking."

Hank's crooked teeth beamed out of the grime. "How about I wash up with whiskey?"

"How'd you find this Newton fellow, Hank?"

"Old man Clemson at the general store. Said he's new in town. Just cured the mayor's boy of that nasty influenza." Hank stepped closer, brow furrowed. "He's awright, ain't he?"

"Just strange is all." He looked at me. "We got to gather some wood, Bobby."

"What do we need wood for?"

"Build a fire."

I wiped oily sweat from my brow. "But it ain't cold."

"It's not for that, son. Not for that at all."

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I shouldn't have, but I did. I looked. I looked through the window as Newton removed Buker's leg. Only he didn't do it, and neither did Doc Travers. They were both on the other side of the room when it happened.

It hadn't rained in weeks, and the tall grass was brown and dry. We cleared out a big circle of dirt, dug a little pit and

laid some thin logs over it. Pop lit a fire and had me fetch two pails of water in case the flames tried to jump our circle.

"Is Doc Travers mad at you?" I asked.

"No. Mad at hisself, reckon. He can't do what he used to do."

"That's because he likes being a doctor," I said.

"He's a good one. Helped bring you into this world. Don't suppose you'd recollect that."

I flicked drops of water at him. "Sure I do."

He grinned for the first time in a while. "Sometimes I figure you wanna be a doctor, the way you always ask Travers about them things in his little black bag."

It was true. The things he carried – shiny glass syringes, steel hypodermic needles, packets of powders for every ailment – fascinated me endlessly. On the farm, I knew my way around a variety of useful tools. None entranced me as much as those instruments of healing.

"I'll watch the fire. Go see if your Ma needs anything."

On the back porch steps I turned to look at my Pop. He stood there against the bright orange flames, his back to me, and he seemed suddenly older. His back was slumped in a way that reminded me of old horses put out to pasture, and I knew he was thinking about Buker.

I took a deep breath. Then I darted for the shadows on the far side of the house.

The thin curtains were drawn but they parted with the light breeze. I had to hang from the wide window sill with my fingertips and stretch my neck until it ached, but I could see into the room. There was the big oval mirror on the dresser, and in its reflection I could see

most of Buker lying on the bed. Then I saw Doc Travers on a stool by the door. His eyes were closed and he breathed slowly. For a moment I thought he was just resting.

Buker lay on the bed in his soiled underclothes, which Travers left after scissoring away his trousers. Some medicine may have helped Buker endure the agony that was his right leg, but I had no such remedy myself. I winced again at the sight of his jagged shin bone sticking up through a bloody sheath of split skin. The break was just below the knee, and the skin from there on down had gone bruised and grayish. The foot was swollen horribly and the toenails had gone black. My stomach curdled like old milk but I willed away the nausea.

Dr. Newton turned from Travers, squeezing his thin pale hands as if wringing water from them. He took one of his black leather bags from the dresser and placed it beside Buker's dead leg. Then he opened it and stepped back.

A light cloud of steam curled out of the bag into the air.

Newton peered approvingly into the bag, then turned it on its side. Nothing spilled out. I thought he had pushed it closer to Buker's foot but then realized with a start that Newton's hands were nowhere near the bag. It had moved on its own.

My hands felt like they were about to cramp but I could not let go of the window sill. I watched as the black bag slid across the sheet into full view of the mirror. It turned slightly as it approached Buker's foot and when it did I saw the reflection of what was inside.

At first I thought of strange flowers, then red carnival balloons -- dozens of them, all shiny and tight with air. They

were grouped in the bag like a mouthful of round red teeth. They looked wet and slick as they moved, slowly waving about like the plants at the bottom of lakes and streams. One of them extended itself and lay upon the sheet, where it flattened to get purchase. Then it rose in the middle, pulling the bag forward like an inchworm.

Another long red one reached out and lightly touched Buker's dead foot. It slowly stroked back and forth and I wondered if it tickled. But Buker's toes grew shorter with each stroke of the tongue-like thing. It hit me cold that the thing was eating them away, dissolving them and somehow absorbing the foamy runoff.

Lapping at them the way a deer wears down a salt lick.

Buker's head rolled back and forth and he moaned. His eyes fluttered open, and that's when Newton peeled open his hand.

He tugged the nail of his right index finger and the skin there split open like a pea pod. Beneath the skin, Newton's finger was raw and white, like uncooked chicken. As Newton peeled back each finger, and finally his entire hand, he showed no pain or discomfort. His chilling features were as calm and serene as they'd been when he stepped from his carriage.

His raw fingers split apart and he now bore a fist of large wormlike things. Out of one slid a thin curved needle of bone, which Dr. Newton tasted with a flicker of pointed gray tongue. The taste seemed to please him. He scraped the horrid claw across Buker's neck.

It pierced Buker's skin. Newton exhaled deeply, his entire hand throbbing and pulsating. The wound in

Buker's neck parted and overflowed with a pale yellow liquid that seeped slowly into the sweaty hollow of his throat. His eyes closed and he made not another sound.

I thought of the hypodermic syringes Doc Travers carried in his bag. My stomach was pulled into a knot. I hadn't blinked once and my eyeballs were dry with fear. My hands slipped from their difficult hold just as more of those fat tongues blossomed from the black bag like some ghastly bouquet of flowers.

My feet never touched the ground. Strong arms caught me.

Pop held me, frowning, stern eyes tempered by my helplessness. I could only point at the window. He looked through the window and the hardened expression on his face -- one of resignation, the adult acceptance that in this life there are sights of great pain and suffering, that this is the way of life and one must simply accept it as such -- went slack in the pale light of the window. I grasped the sill and pulled my chin above its edge. Together we looked inside.

The bulging things in the bag had reached the break just below the knee, and all the infection was being licked away. Fat tongues worked at the kneecap, exposed like a small skull there in the red mess.

Newton was sealing the flesh across his hand, smoothing it with his pale dry lips.

Pop dropped soundlessly to his knees and heaved up his dinner in deep retches. "Oh God," he whispered, "what is he doing to my boy?"

He staggered from the window and the sights there. I grabbed him and his hands found strength in my shoulders.

Walking carefully, I led him around the house to the front porch.

Ma and Hank jumped up from the swing and met us on the steps. Together we eased Pop down. Pop trembled and said, "He's killing him. He's killing my boy ... "

"Travers is in there," Hank reasoned. "You just let them do their work -- "

Pop's iron fingers clutched Hank's forearm. "It's done knocked Travers out!"

Hank stood from his crouch. The next thing I saw was the screen door banging shut.

Ma took Pop's pallid face in her hands. "Howard, tell me what you seen in there ... "

He shook his head and grabbed for my shoulder again, lifting himself, navigating the steps. Then he was going through the front door, leaving me behind now that his strength had returned. On the way he withdrew the old axe handle from beside the gun cabinet. Down the hall we heard Hank pounding on the door.

"Move!" Hank stepped aside and Pop kicked against the doorknob. The jamb splintered but held fast. Two more kicks and the door popped open, but no one stepped inside. Pop held his ground but Hank backed himself up against the wall when he saw inside that room.

I darted behind my father and peered in. Newton faced us and his expression was dead, as if he'd lost control of his features. He made no effort to hide the horror that was sucking up Buker's leg, but just stood there, as impassive as a dime-store Indian. Travers remained motionless on his stool, a tiny red hole in his neck.

Pop growled with an intensity that made me shrink from his side. He raised the axe handle above his head and took one step into the room. "You get that damned thing off him."

Newton held up his hands. "Please. Not yet. I'm not finished here."

A small table beside the door held a wash bowl full of hot water. Pop shattered it with the axe handle. Shards of water and china clattered to the floor. "Want this upside your head?"

Newton raised an eyebrow. "Even if it means the young man's death?"

The axe handle wavered. Pop stared at Buker, at those things throbbing on his leg.

"You're killing him now," Pop said flatly. "Them things ... them *leeches!*"

"Merely the manner in which I work. Much more humane than taking a blade to the flesh. And there are certain ... *benefits* to this treatment, as well."

Pop caught sight of the wound on Doc Traver's jowly neck. "What'd you do to him?"

"He sleeps. He shall awaken." Then Newton's eyes cut back to his little black bag, like he'd heard something. The things on Buker's leg were slowly withdrawing into the turned-out bag. We watched in silent dismay as the bag closed itself. Newton fastened it shut and removed it from the bed. Then he reached for the other unused bag and stood there solemnly.

In the lamp light we saw that Buker's leg had been removed just below the upper thigh. The stump was runny with fluids, the flesh folded and twisted like a small bundle of laundry.

"You're frightened. I understand," Newton began. "I want to answer your

questions and assure you that no harm will come to this boy."

Pop didn't move. "We need to cauterize that."

"It would only make things worse. I can leave if you wish."

"Just walk down the hall." Pop said. "We'll talk outside."

Pop backed out as Newton stepped towards him. Newton's tall frame filled the doorway, and we followed him down the hall.

Newton stepped into the den. The first gunshot slammed him against the wall.

There was no blood. I am sure of that.

Newton slid to the floor, looking slightly stunned. The bags fell from his hands. Pop shoved me back towards the kitchen and yelled at Hank to put the gun down. But if Hank heard him, he thought Pop was telling him to shoot again, because that's exactly what he did.

Two more shots, and I knew Hank had the old pump-action rifle my Pop used for hunting small game around the farm. The blasts caught Newton in his upper body. The man's expression remained blank.

Pop shouted again and rushed forward to protect Newton from any further shots. He waved his hands something fierce at Hank, hidden from me around the corner, and for a second I feared Hank would shoot anyway. But Pop, screaming and frantic, stopped him.

Behind him, Newton clawed the wall for purchase, pulled himself to his feet. And unfolded.

His clothes split and tore and fell away like rags. His bald head teetered unsteadily and promptly fell off,

bouncing off Pop's shoulders and hitting the floor with a sickening plop.

As the arms and legs split and flexed from their constraining positions, the torso uncurled like a coiled snake. Its black flesh glowed wetly in the dim light.

Pop, unaware of the thing that now stood above him, stared dumbly at the discarded head that had begun to melt like candlewax. Hank was screaming, my Ma was screaming, I reckon I was, too. The thing was too tall for our ceiling, and it flattened itself along the wall with little discomfort. It seemed to make a gesture towards my Pop, and Hank fired again. Pop cursed and rolled away.

Two yellow-slit eyes glowed through the black gore of its center. If the bullet caused any pain as it tore through the mouth-like hole below, these eyes showed none of it. They were entrancing and, if I were any judge of its emotions, almost accepting of the circumstances in which it had found itself. A wiry limb whipped into view, at its tip one of the needle-sharp bones I'd seen on Newton's hand.

It plunged this deep into itself, all around the gunshot wounds, hissing and sputtering as it administered its own remedy. Other whip-like appendages sprang forth and the figure seemed to be collapsing in on itself, an eternal in-folding that struggled to maintain its primary spider-like shape against the pain. One of the needles slipped free and a jet of yellow fluid spurted over the thing's skin, staining the wall behind.

It rippled and fluttered and, for one strange moment, stood perfectly still. I imagine this was when its own palliatives took effect. Then it flattened against the wall, slid up onto the ceiling and clambered down the hall, past me, past

my Granny who seemed to smile as one of the whips quickly but gently stroked her neck. Then the screen door slammed shut and for an instant I saw the thing that had been Dr. Newton, raised tall in its full form, an impossible shape silhouetted against bright orange light.

Then it was gone.

Hank ran after it. He stopped on the steps and raised his rifle but did not fire.

Pop checked me with a cursory glance. I nodded at him, gulping back tears I hadn't even known were flowing. He squeezed me and hurried to my Granny, who lay sprawled in the kitchen doorway. I helped Ma up from her hiding place behind the couch.

Granny was sleeping heavily. Ma fell to her knees and dabbed the hem of her dress at the tiny hole on Granny's neck.

Down the hall, Hank stood numbly on the back porch, transfixed by the flames. When I pushed the screen door open, Hank whirled, rifle up, the barrel only inches from my chest. By that time the threat of death was a dull and dislocated fear. I think I even raised a hand to wave at him. His eyes focused on me and he lowered the gun. "Jesus," he whispered.

In the den, Newton's head had crumbled to dust where it fell. As I approached, the dust seemed to stir and collect itself into a more solid shape. Then it settled, and didn't move again until Ma swept it up sometime later.

The two black leather bags remained where they had fallen, beneath the yellow stain on the wall. I prodded them cautiously with the rifle. Nothing stirred within. I slid the long barrel of a rifle through both sets of handles and was surprised by how light they were.

Holding them at length before me, I walked down the hall and outside.

Pop followed me to the edge of the fire. My arms were quivering so he gently took my elbow and guided me forward. The blaze was incredibly hot. As I tilted the rifle so the bags would slide off, the one on the end burst its latch. Red tongues, drawn thin and hard by the heat, curled around the gun barrel and fought for a grip, leaving wide grooves in the iron. I shook the rifle hard and they fell off. We watched the tongues burst in the fire and shrivel into long black strips that twisted in the heat.

I slid the second bag into the fire. It too opened, releasing a thick cloud of nightmarish insects, a swarm of strange black butterflies with wide puckered mouths and silver legs as thin and fine as needles. The hungry flames caught them in mid-air and devoured them whole.

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Buker awoke first the next morning. He sat up and rolled off the bed, fully expecting his leg to be there. We all jumped awake at the thud and rushed into the room to find him shouting. "Where's my leg? Where's my damn leg?" He remembered -- and felt -- absolutely nothing.

It took a while for us to notice, but Buker had changed. His mind was faster and sharper now, as if he'd never fallen as an infant.

Travers, who we'd dragged into the big rocking chair, sat up soon after and worked his fingers back and forth in amazement. They were as sure and steady as they'd been fifty years before. He could see clearly with his eyes now,

though the old habit of squinting when he looked at something never left him.

My Granny awoke to the few remaining years of her life with a clear and lucid mind, unfogged by age or forgetfulness. Her bent fingers and toes had straightened and she no longer complained of back pains. She too remembered nothing of the night before.

Hank and Pop rode into Huntsville the next day. They took Newton's horse and carriage but, with no one to claim it, turned it over to the local sheriff. Upon hearing the strange story, the sheriff conducted a search of Newton's house and office. He found only a nice set of travel trunks that bore stamps from around the world. We told him Newton had left our house by the back door, and that was not a lie.

The thing's smoking body was draped across the burnt earth where the fire had been. It still sizzled and popped when we found it that next morning, and the air was acrid and bitter, like metal. By afternoon, it had crumbled to a fine ash and blown away in the breeze.

And I never told anyone in my family how I had stood alone, briefly, that night on the back porch, eyes transfixed by the bright fire, only to be quietly and suddenly lifted by the long, soft fingers of the terrified thing that had hidden on the roof, afraid that it would perish without passing on its talents, its burdens, its sacred if vampiric oath that to help others was the best and most painless way to feed itself. Its fingers held me like the branches of a tree and one of them gently pierced the flesh of my belly and it did not hurt and into me flowed the hot liquid presence of someone or something very, very old,

from very far away, and I curled up like a baby as we merged, our thoughts and bodies as one. Then I was lowered, released, and the near-empty shell of the creature I was to become darted mindlessly for the consuming fire, for the painful liberation that it had sought for many years, but by its very nature had been unable to attain.

My future was at once settled and uncertain: I would become a doctor, of sorts, after all. But my journey was to span greater lengths of time and distance than I was prepared to imagine. Over the years I would creep again and again to my hiding place deep in the woods, where my fingers slowly secreted the fluids that would harden into my own pair of little black bags, their inner systems grown to respond to my ever-expanding thoughts.

But of this I told no one. I carefully maintained my outward little boy appearance, though in those few seconds on the roof I had aged centuries, maybe even eons. I pretended to be deaf, dumb and blind to the knowledge that grew like a happy cancer within me.

And though it took some effort, I was careful to feign great surprise and dismay when, later that fall, dead white skin flaked from the stump and Buker's new leg began to grow.

THE END