

The Little Cripple

By William Allen Johnston

THE annual meeting of the big orthopedic hospital was in progress. Governors, trustees, women's committees, packed the small auditorium to the very doors. Upon the platform in front sat stiffly the entire medical staff, from the four famous consulting surgeons down to the junior house surgeon. At a respectful distance from the latter was seated the supervising nurse, and at a still greater and disrespectful distance lounged defiantly John Schaeffer, inventor of braces for crippled children,—in the words of the enthusiastic house surgeon, "the original orthopedic man of New York and the greatest crank in America."

Two hours had already elapsed, and a soft sigh of content from the audience greeted the conclusion of another report. The surgeon-in-chief arose, glancing apprehensively at the bulky manuscript held ostentatiously in John Schaeffer's hands. Nevertheless, he smiled deferentially, "And now we will listen to the report of—" he bowed courteously—"our brace-maker, Mr. John Schaeffer."

John Schaeffer's chair creaked suddenly and ominously, and seemed fairly to oust him to the center of the platform. He waved his manuscript excitedly in the astonished surgeon's face.

"Brace-maker!" he snarled; "I am a brace-maker! Yah! Scissors-grinder, I suppose! Machinist! Common mechanic! Dot's what I am! You 'ting dot? Bah!" He snapped his fingers and wheeled upon the medical staff.

"Fools! Dunderheads! You, mit your know-not-ting heads and hands—who bungle all dot I do—who cannot do what I do, you 'tink I am a br-brace-maker? So! Den I tell you vot you are!" and John Schaeffer gave his opinion at length.

The audience, stupefied at first, showed sudden signs of disturbance. As Mrs. Henry Goldfogge, Chairman of the Committee on Linen and House Purchases, caught the significance of certain German oaths, the benevolent lines of her face stiffened into those of severe disapproval, and with a heavy rustle of silks she arose and swept from the room.

Miss Sarah Sterling Watts, Chairman of the Committee on Free Beds, beat, also, a swift and mincing retreat, her chin pointed high in the air. Others, not acquainted with the German tongue, but realizing instinctively that the meeting had suddenly become no place for ladies, developed expressions of mild purity and walked out with determined tread.

One of the famous surgeons held his hand discreetly over his mouth to hide a smile; the young house surgeon looked white and scared.

They all listened with rapt attention till John Schaeffer finished. They saw him fling his manuscript to the floor and grind it under his heel; saw him kick his chair off the platform in token of his departure forevermore from annual meetings, saw his huge, ungainly figure disappear violently through a side door. The famous surgeon who smiled behind his hand recovered carefully the crumpled manuscript. "This may prove valuable, gentlemen," said he; and so it did. After reading it a month later before the Academy of Medicine he added emphatically: "This remarkable treatise stamps John Schaeffer for what he is, and should be known, a genius and skilled anatomist; a man without a degree and with little recognition, but one, nevertheless, who has done more for orthopedic surgery than any man, living or dead."

After the incident of the annual meeting John Schaeffer was rarely seen in the hospital wards. When he did appear it was to correct and gloat over the mistake of a surgeon or nurse.

From morning until night he toiled away in his laboratory, a weird room in the hospital basement. Its walls were lined with plaster casts of distorted legs and arms, exhibiting apparently every species of human malformation. With its grizzled, snarling inmate the room looked, for all the world, declared an imaginative assistant, like "the lair of a man-eating lion. Me boss," he averred, "has no heart whatever; as for his brain, if you opened his skull, you'd find it already conforming to the shape of a brace."

Every evening after work John Schaeffer went to a near-by German restaurant and then directly upstairs to a hall bedroom. It contained a folding-bed, a foot-lathe and a large chest filled with tools and bits of brass, steel and leather. Here were his means of relaxation and his chosen environment. "Vot I know, I know," it was his custom to state. "Dere is nothings else."

And then one day there flashed upon this dark, grim, obstinate man a glaring ray of light. Entering his laboratory late one morning he seized a brown paper pattern from his desk and eyed it fiercely.

"Ha!" he exulted, "some fool at work again, eh?" He turned to his assistant.

"Efer see a crooked back like dot? Do you 'tink dere iss such a crooked back? Bah! Vere from dit dis come?"

"Ward Four," the assistant replied laconically.

"So? Den I go and see. Maybe I catch some fool, eh?" The assistant grinned broadly and then promptly regretted his indiscretion. The German turned upon him angrily.

"Vat you doing?—mending braces, or minding my business? Den do it!" he roared and with the ambiguous injunction he slammed the door and hailed an elevator. "Up, quick!" he ordered.

The nurse in Number Four, the bone-tuberculosis ward, smiled easily at the excited German.

"Vot back fits dis?" he demanded. "Vere iss he? Who made it? Now I catch somebody, eh?"

"That's for Johnny Connors, right behind you. Don't you know our Sailor Johnny?"

John Schaeffer wheeled about and faced a little white bed, from the pillow of which a chubby baby face and two large brown eyes regarded him calmly. As the nurse swept down the covers she revealed a tiny form incased from chin to ankle in rigid casts and braces.

"Who said dot?" said Schaeffer quickly, looking at the nurse and doctor. The nurse smiled and nodded at the pillow.

John Schaeffer turned over the tiny form and looked again into two brown eyes. The baby mouth, pressed hard by the stiff brace under the chin, moved crookedly in one corner, and the same calm voice said resentfully, "That hurt."

"So?" queried Schaeffer absently. He still peered intently into the brown eyes, as one making a remarkable discovery. They had long, dark lashes, he noted, which curled up to the eyebrows. The forehead was low and white and swept with golden-brown hair, long and silky. All these things John Schaeffer noted. Surely there was a living form in this brace, a little child with a winsome, patient, manly face and wonderful big brown eyes.

"Vat you look at me so for?" he demanded weakly. "Cause you look so funny—and mad," came the quick response. The doctor chuckled.

John Schaeffer pulled himself together sharply. He was being ridiculed in the enemy's camp. He had come to correct and found himself in error. That was humiliating; now he was laughed at.

He started to go and then turned back. He dragged a chair to the bedside with exaggerated energy. "I will attend to his—brace; you leaf me alone," he added warningly, turning to the bed.

"So, your name iss Chonny Connors? Vell, Chonny, here you go again." This time he felt over the brace with a gentleness new to his hands. A rearrangement of the straps here and there, a skilful twist of the main half-bearing joint, and the brace shifted itself easily. A pathetic sigh of relief rewarded him and he turned the little patient back again. Johnny snuggled down happily in the pillow and smiled gratefully at him. "Shall I sing you a song?"

"A song!" gasped Schaeffer. He looked about him uneasily, but none of the nurses were paying any attention to him. "Sure, go ahead," he said. "Vat you got?"

The mouth struggled bravely with the awkward chin-brace. "Vat," commanded the listener, and reached along the straps behind the head. "Now, so!" he commanded. "How's dot?"

A gay little treble began promptly:

"Vat!" said Schaeffer.

"A new wife," he continued calmly. "I don't like her. She's mean."

"How old are you?" asked Schaeffer suddenly. "Seven years."

"And so little!" murmured Schaeffer looking at the tiny, shriveled body. "You got a fadder? Don't you like him?"

"Yes," said the boy indifferently; then his eye brightened. "I got an Uncle Mart. He brought me here. He's a great man. He's a sailor. I'm going to be a sailor." The eyes grew very solemn. "Easy, mate! Let her go! Brace the halyards! All hands on deck!" He looked earnestly to Schaeffer for admiration. "I can sing a sailor song."

Schaeffer was regarding him oddly. "And you going to be a sailor, eh? You going to be a sailor—and climb up masts and furl sail!"

He looked again at the crippled, wasted body, and apostrophized the wall. "Ain'd it hard! Ain'd it hard!"

His voice rose angrily. "Vat right have people to haf kids—and spoil dem? Ain'd it a shame? Ain'd it fierce? Ain'd it—?"

"Don't look so mad," said the boy.

"I ain'd mad," said Schaeffer earnestly. "I was just 'tinking. Say, I got to go now." He consulted his watch hastily. "Don't your fadder or stepmudder come to see you? No? Vell, I come. I come back to-morrow." He started and turned back. "Say, my name is Chon, too," he said foolishly. "I 'tink mebbe we get along together, eh? Good-py Chonny!"

And the nurse, rising quickly from a screen beside the next bed, watched the lumbering figure go out. "And a little child shall lead them!" she said softly.

John Schaeffer was in Ward Four the next morning, and many mornings after that, as well as many afternoons and evenings. And the frame of the strange friendship became known throughout the hospital and in some byways of the outside world.

Day by day the old German became more gentle and considerate toward others. He was as one walking in new fields and learning new lessons. It was very marvelous and yet very simple. He had rediscovered a human world.

And while John Schaeffer's education in the humanities progressed, the art of orthopedic appliances

game of solitaire, or fashioning wonderful ships, replete with sailing-gear. Or perhaps he sat with rapt attention, his hulking shoulders bent forward, his large hands locked ecstatically, while a baby voice sang:

"Take me back to New York town, New York town, New York town."

Late one afternoon, after a wearisome day in the machine-shop, he hurried up-stairs toward Ward Four and sat down contentedly beside "his boy's" bed.

"Vell," said he, raising his eyes happily to the ceiling, "let's have dot 'New York town.'" He waited dreamily; but there was no response. He turned sharply to the bed.

"Vas ist los? Vat's der matter, eh?"

"Pve-been crying," said Johnny simply. The long eyelashes were wet and the baby face was white and drawn.

John Schaeffer looked about him maliciously. "Has somebody been monkeying mit dot brace already?"

The nurse heard him and hurried to the bedside. "Oh," said she uneasily, "I just went for you. Johnny's been suffering all day and we didn't know it. He never cries out loud. Dr. Frank examined him—here she dropped her voice to a whisper—and says he must have an operation—"

"No!" hissed Schaeffer.

"Sh-h! cautioned the nurse. "I'll send for the doctor."

Schaeffer was already examining the braces. He knew their correct position to the minute fraction of an inch. They were all in place, he noted. He tested the joints; they moved freely and then he looked up into the grave face of the surgeon.

"Take off the brace," said Dr. Frank calmly, "and I'll show you."

A large red spot showed all about the apex of the crooked spine. "Abscess," said the doctor, pointing his finger.

"So?" gasped Schaeffer. "Bad?"

"Very bad," said the doctor. "You see," he added calmly, "there's such a thing as a too artful brace. With a poor one we should have known of this earlier. Now, I fear it's too late."

The old German made no reply. With trembling fingers he pulled from his pocket a tiny pair of nippers and began gently to bend the steel strands all

back—make it nice and straight, mebbe, just like a sailor. It won't bodder any more. Johnny was regarding him solemnly and Schaeffer's eyes dropped to the floor. "Dot's right," he said obstinately. "You leave it all to Chon. I got to go now. Good-py, Chonny."

John Schaeffer plunged out of the rear basement door of the hospital and turned his quick steps toward the avenue. In a few minutes he was fumbling for the bell at the door of a brownstone residence. A white card in the window gave the name of the famous surgeon who had smiled behind his hand.

"The doctor never sees patients at this hour," said the maid doubtfully. "He is dressing for dinner."

"Tell him John Schaeffer wants to see him," said the man simply. "Mebbe he'll come down."

They met in the hall, the great surgeon, bland and gracious in his dinner clothes, the inventor of braces slouching against the wall, and twisting his old soft hat nervously in his big hands.

"Hallo, John!" said the surgeon easily. They had always been John and Robert to each other since they had worked together in the old hospital years ago.

"Ro-ber't," began the other earnestly. "I haf never asked a favor of you. Now I got to—one—a big one." He blinked intently over his spectacles and his voice trembled.

"I haf a little friend in de hospital. He iss bad, very bad. I want you to fix him quick. I trust nobody else. He iss a little boy—and—Ach, Gott! I lof him!" He clenched his hands convulsively, and leaned back against the wall.

The surgeon looked at him curiously. And this was John Schaeffer, the cranky old German!

John Schaeffer misinterpreted his silence. "I haf plenty of money." He pulled several bank-books from his pocket. "Take vot you wish. It iss all for him, anyway."

The surgeon took the books gently from the shaking fingers, and put them back in the pocket. Then he rested his hands heavily upon his friend's shoulders.

"John," said he sternly, "that's the meanest thing you ever said to me, and you've said some mighty mean ones. You didn't intend it, but that hurts." He looked briefly at his engagement book. "I'll be at the hospital to-morrow at three o'clock. Get every-thing ready."

When the little patient was wheeled into the operating room next day, John Schaeffer was at his side, all sprightly attention. "How you like dis funny room, Chonny? All so vite, eh? Now we put you ofer here, so you can 'look right out dot window. So! How's dot? Now we going to haf some fun. You dream you are a sailor, mebbe on a big ship. Den, zip! You come back to New York town! How's dot?"

The nurse came up and whispered in his ear: "His parents are waiting outside. Shall I let them in?"

"No!" he said sharply. "I vill go and see dem."

He found them in the ante-room, a girl, plainly dressed and with a bold defiant face, a young man, pale and stoop-shouldered, who might be an over-worked accountant. They squirmed under his keen scrutiny.

"So you are his fadder and mudder?"

"I'm not his mother," said the girl coldly.

"No," said Schaeffer quickly. "Tank Gott for dot! He has not got your face."

"Dere iss no law," he went on calmly, "to keep bums like you from haffing children, and making dem cripples. But when you neglect, like you haf dis one; dere iss anoder law, vich says you cannot haf der child. He is mine now. I vill fight for fifty 'ousand dollars wort to prove it. He is mine—if he lives! If he dies he is Somebody else's. You don't get hfr no more, anyway. You catch dot? No, you can't get in dot room," he added jealously. "You can wait outside vere you please. Good-day."

When he re-entered the operating-room the surgeon was talking to Johnny and looked up cheerily.

"A stout brain here, John," said he. "Look at these eyes. That's the only chance."

"So you're going to be a sailor," he went on, turning to the boy. "Well, by the time I'm ready to settle down for a rest, you'll be captain of a ship. Will you take me for a long voyage, somewhere?"

The boy smiled brightly, and nodded his head.

"I'll remember that—promise one of these days," said the surgeon. He motioned to the nurse for the anesthetic, and John Schaeffer moved hastily to the door.

"Ven you vant me," said he, "I am ofer dere." He pointed to a room across the area. "Wafe something." And the nurse when she gave the signal, a half-hour later, dropped her arm suddenly and peered intently out of the window. "Upon my soul!" she said, in an awesome whisper, "there's John Schaeffer on his knees, praying!"

The room was very quiet when he stumbled back; and he came in on tiptoe, glancing first at the surgeon, and then at his boy. The little face was very white and still.

The surgeon laid the little arm back on the table and pressed his head to the patient's breast, listening for the throb he had lost in the wrist, and John Schaeffer looked on with dumb horror in his eyes. He could hear the rapid, steady thump of his own heart. If he could give all its strength to another who needed just a little of it. "Ach, Gott!" he whispered, and his dry mouth clacked as he opened it. "Must it be?"

A soft zephyr of Spring, sweeping up from the open court, fluttered the window-curtain gently; it carried lightly the strains of a lusty hurdy-gurdy playing before a tenement-house. A crowd of street urchins took up the gay refrain, and the little cripples sunning themselves up on the hospital roof-garden echoed it back merrily:

"Take me back to New York town, New York town, New York town."

John Schaeffer heard it and great tears welled up in his eyes and dimmed their sight. His boy's own song—a song his baby lips would sing no more! He dashed the tears from his eyes, and saw that the surgeon was holding his patient's wrist again and peering intently at his face.



"YOU BRING MY CHONNY BACK?" HE CHOOED. "YOU BRING MY CHONNY BACK?"

"Take me back to New York town, New York town, New York town," John Schaeffer, his hands on his knees, listened hungrily until the last piping note was sung. Then he gave a vast sigh. "Vell, py golly!" he ejaculated.

After a minute's silence he asked: "Chonny, haf you got a mudder?"

The boy shook his head.

"Nefer had one, I suppose," John Schaeffer tried to smile, but the effort cost him a severe facial spasm. The boy shook his head again. "My father has a wife—"

surged ahead by leaps and bounds. New and intricate braces were invented to rest this and that muscle, and straighten distorted backs and limbs. They were devised and tenderly fashioned for our Johnny Connors, who hoped to be a sailor; but many little cripples will know and revel in their restful and curative magic.

And so, while John Schaeffer spent fewer hours in his laboratory, his importance to humanity was greatly multiplied. When his services were needed in the machine-shop it was a simple matter to find him. He was at Johnny Connors' bedside, helping in a

about the sore spot, lifting them back and relieving all pressure. The little patient sank back restfully in his pillow and smiled gratefully.

"Would you like for me to sing you 'New York town, now'?" he asked faintly.

"No, you ain'd going to sing to-day. You go to sleep now. To-morrow you can sing. Say, whispered Schaeffer earnestly, "did you hear vot dey said?"

Johnny shook his head, and Schaeffer looked relieved.