

M*O*R*E M*A*S*H Excerpt

Hawkeye and The Race With Wooden Leg

There were several hundred people in and around Spruce Harbor, Maine, who could qualify in any location for being known as “local characters,” but of the top five:

1. Mayor Jocko Alcock
2. Wrong Way Napolitano
3. Dr. Doggy Moore
4. Wooden Leg Wilcox
5. Any and all of the former MASH 4077th “Swamp men”

...numbers one and four had the closest bond outside of the physicians. In fact, Jocko and Wooden Leg were joined at the hip, in sort of a financial sense, and as kindred spirits, in the devious “anything for a buck” sense.

Before Hawkeye Pierce had come home they made a better than comfortable living betting *against* the outcomes of most surgeries being undertaken by a group of old doctors who had little or no proper schooling in wielding a scalpel and yet they did it attempting such intricate things as bowel resections, ulcer abatements, Hernia repairs, tonsillectomies and appendectomies along with partial full-lobe lung removals for cancer and even the occasional hysterectomy.

It was a gold mine for them, but it unfortunately meant the patients were dying at an alarming rate.

Hawkeye, and later Trapper John McIntyre and Duke Forrest changed all that and so Jocko and his faithful minion, Wooden Leg, switched sides and started betting in favor of success. They began to make even more money.

Everybody knew what was going on and nobody made a fuss. When a sudden windfall of ready cash became available to build a combination fishmarket and an inexpensive clinic

where people of all ages, genders and religions could go and pay about ten cents on the dollar the main hospital charged—what they could afford and so they actually came in for treatment—people just nodded and re-elected Jocko as Mayor for his fifth term.

Again, nobody questioned why it was that money suddenly came out about five months before each election.

Wooden Leg, or just plain “Leg” and many called him, was a man of great general skill and of slightly below average intelligence. He knew a good thing when it paid him and so he was very loyal to Jocko.

Hawkeye’s first impression of Wooden Leg was that he was like the remoras that hung around the gills of sharks, and if Jocko wasn’t a human analogy of that sort of fish, nobody fit that description.

His second thought was to be a little insulted that the pair of them had been betting against the survival of patients.

His third thought was that he was secretly glad his presence was making them money at the same time it meant husbands (mostly), wives (in too large numbers) and children were living and breathing to see another day.

When the subject of financing a low-income clinic to service the larger part of the population who could ill afford the costs of a real hospital stay, or for those needing what was coming to be known as “out patient” treatments, even minor surgeries, and that Jocko was doing it out of the goodness of what he said was his heart but most assumed it was some sort of ploy to either make more money or solidify his position as the Mayor, Hawkeye had to take a step back and look at the long term picture.

He and the other former 4077th MASH doctors could easily each take a day of duties at the clinic and the least horrible of the hospital’s other physicians could be trusted to not botch up splinter removals, or bone settings and would keep their mouths shut and quietly collect a bit of extra cash each and every week.

Of course, it wasn’t too long after the doors opened upstairs and the fishmarket set out its very first box of ice-covered

fresh fish that word seeped back to the hospital and to the office of one T. Alfred Crumley, Hospital Administrator.

“Dr. Pierce. A word!” he said as they passed in the hallway outside his office the next afternoon.

“Three or four letters?”

Crumley stopped and held up a hand. “No. A short discussion, in my office, and now.” He turned around and held open the door.

Reluctantly, Hawkeye went into the office and took a seat. “Your nickel, Crumbum.”

“It’s... oh, never mind. The point of this chat is that word has come to me that you, your fellow reprobates and at least one or two of this facility’s more dignified doctors are treating people for free when they should be up here paying for such services. What have you to say about that?” He made a “harumph” sound and nodded once.

After rolling his eyes and taking a breath, Dr. Pierce started saying the little speech he’d come up with in case of such an encounter.

“The average household income here in Spruce Harbor, is just a shade over two-hundred and fifty bucks a month, and for many that is only coming in during the eight or nine months they can clam, fish, lobster or cut down trees. Few have any sort of that insurance stuff to pay anything other than if they die. Veterans head down to Boston for treatment if they are in condition to survive the trip.

“This hospital of ours charges a solid one-hundred-twenty-two dollars for a full day and night stay plus whatever medical professional services they require. That can stretch upwards of five-hundred a day in case of about twenty percent of our guests. In fact, take a broken arm. Up here, they walk out with a bill for about ninety dollars.

“The Finestkind Clinic and Fish Market charges them fifteen. And, if they can’t pay that much, we eat as much of the costs as we can. And, we can do that because of the fishmarket downstairs that funnels all profits into the welfare and health care of the folks who come up our stairs.

“You find a way to treat folks who need help without making them have to sell their cars or fishing boats or homes and find ways to help those in need, and the clinic goes away. Until then, learn to live with it, or the alternative consequences when it is known *you* personally want the poorer segment of the local population to just go away and die because they mess with your balance sheet!”

Crumley was stunned into silence for about fifteen-seconds. Finally, he blinked and said, “But, Mr. Wilcox, an associate of the Chairman of the Board for this very hospital, tells me you and the other doctors are making a killing and taking personal gratuities from patients who can afford to come here but choose to spend less and probably get a lot less by going down to that *place*.”

Hawkeye stood up and towered his six-foot-two frame above and slightly over the desk of five-foot-eight T. Alfred making the man cringe back.

“First, you will refer to the clinic as ‘the clinic,’ not ‘*that place*.’ Second, we have full state licensing and approvals to provide anything from sunburn treatment to cyst removals and even appendectomies should a patient come in and not be in condition to safely be tranfered here. Third, I seem to recall you hiding out the last time the inspectors came almost as if you had something you knew was wrong that might impact this hospital’s certification. Hmmm?”

T. Alfred was now pale. He’d gone a sort of red and then white and now he positively glowed with lack of any color in his face.

“Sur-sur-surely, you can’t be suggesting—”

Hawkeye’s right fist descended quickly and rapped on the top of T. Alfred’s desk. “Not suggesting, Crumbum. Telling you to cut this off right now and just live with the fact that the clinic is going to save a lot of lives that might be lost if we expect people to make a decision about coming in to get help or spend that money on feeding and clothing their kids. Got it?”

“Yes. But I really must insist that you do not use anything from this hospital. No supplies, no nurses and no equipment.”

This got him a nod, but then the large doctor in front of him added, “You keep it inside and we play nice. You wheel it out or toss it out or so much a sign off that something needs to be replaced and we take. If it isn’t worth our bother we’ll go ahead and dispose of it, but it’s our decision, not yours.”

With that, Hawkeye Pierce spun around and left the office leaving behind a very nervous but relieved man.

After leaving the Chief of Surgery, Hawkeye, headed for his office to make a phone call.

“Jocko? You get that miserable sum-bitch Leg down here to my office in fifteen minutes or the next time I see either of your miserable faces I’ll start taking tissue donations. Now, Jocko!” He slammed the phone back down.

Fourteen minutes, seventeen seconds later came a knock on the big windows behind his desk followed by the same opening and two men climbing in over the threshold.

Both were out of breath.

“Wha-what is it, Hawkeye?” the Mayor asked while his companion was bent over trying to breath and rubbing the point where his real upper leg disappeared into the heavy leather cup at the top of his artificial limb.

Pointing at the amputee, Hawkeye said, “Ask that miserable excuse next to you. Ask him about how Crumbum found out about the extracurricular activities of several doctors from this facility who are doing some hours down at the clinic. I was forced to play my, ‘I know you’ve been hiding things from the inspector,’ card just now and I’m in no mood to do anything other than pull his leg off and beat him with it!”

Wooden Leg was nothing if not a complete toad and he began whining.

“He was gonna refuse ta sign the chit to get me a new leg. I mean, what else was I supposed ta do?”

Leg was looking so quickly between Jocko and Hawkeye both men were afraid his head would fall off.

“Leg,” Jocko said feigning innocence regarding any dealings that were less than full on the up and up. “I’m personally disappointed in you. So,” he said obviously leading Wooden

Leg with a none-too-obvious wink and nod, “do you mean to tell us that Crumbum actually accosted you and forced information regarding the new clinic and fishmarket from your normally sealed lips?”

Spotting a lifeline slapping him in the face, Leg nodded. “Yeah. That’s what happened. Exactly.”

“What happened next?” Hawkeye requested, “And don’t you dare look to Jocko for the answer. Look at me and tell me what he asked and what you said. You’ve gotten us into trouble with your flapping jaw.”

Wooden Leg was, as anyone who ever interacted with him, either as dumb as a fencepost, or only as smart as Jocko Alcock was when the two were together.

He tried to look to his side at Jocko, but Hawkeye grabbed his shirt front and pulled him forward and out of any sight of his boss.

“Tell us!”

Wooden Leg did. He told how T. Alfred had offered him a crisp five-dollar bill every week for more than two months to provide any and all information regarding what was going on at the clinic. It wasn’t much but five bucks was twenty beers at most establishments. He’d told the administrator about how the four doctors—Hawkeye, Duke, Trapper and the recently acquired Spearchucker Jones—each took a full day and two other doctors at the hospital took half days on Fridays.

He said he had helped gather up a number of old instruments from the trash bins behind the hospital and had taken them down himself, and even had sharpened the seven scalpels to gleaming sharpness with his whetstone and a little 3-in-1 oil.

“He about blew a gasket when I told him I do ‘em for a quarter apiece. He says the hospital pays a couple bucks per sharpening and I guess he’s right since I collect ‘em and am supposed ta deliver them over ta Portland but I just take ‘em ta my shop and do the work myself.”

Hawkeye was shaking his head. While he hated the fact that Wooden Leg had ratted him and the clinic out to Crumbum,

he had to admire the nerve of a man who would pocket money meant for legally sharpening scalpels he had used himself rather than take them to an authorized lab.

“You really make me angry, Leg,” he told the man. “I ought to chase you down the main street with one of your home-sharpened scalpels and carve you up when I catch you.”

Now, and for a reason Hawkeye found bothered him greatly, the amputee was smiling at him.

“Sure. If ya want ta race, Hawkeye, I’ll race ya. Gimme a five foot lead and I’ll beat ya three straight blocks!”

It did not, to Hawkeye’s dismay, sound like an empty boast. But, after taking a look at the rather poorly-built wooden construction filling the gap between seven inches below the man’s groin and the floor, and narrowing his eyes in the hopes it would help him see what was making the man smile, he nodded.

“Okay. You win and I back off. But, when I win you have to do three things. One, from now on you actually have the experts do the sharpening. Two, you go tell Crumbum you were sort of lying and give him back most of the money you’ve taken. And, three, you never again do anything against the best graces of the Clinic. Deal?”

They shook hands on it.

Three days later, Saturday, Hawkeye Pierce—thirty-six and still in pretty good shape—and Wooden Leg Wilcox—forty-three a man for whom the descriptive “stocky” had been coined and who was a pack-a-day smoker (plus the whole artificial leg thing)—lined up in front of the Bide A-While.

Doctor Pierce was clothed in an undershirt and short, athletic pants while his opponent was clad in a sweatshirt and baggy trousers.

When Jocko approached the start line with what everyone hoped was a blank gun and not his old .45 caliber, he nodded to Hawkeye and winked at Wooden leg.

At that point, Wooden Leg slipped his trousers off to reveal a pair of shorts similar to those worn by Hawkeye, but also a gleaming metallic leg that appeared to have some sort of stout

spring where the upper calf ought to be.

“Protest!” Hawkeye shouted. “He’s got a new leg and it looks like it’ll give him an unfair advantage.”

“More unfair that your challenge against a man with a wooden appendage?” Jocko asked.

“Like it, Hawkeye?” Wooden Leg asked with a huge grin. “Picked it up at the Post Office this morning. Thought it would never get here. Pretty neat, isn’t it?”

The doctor thought it was anything other than “neat” but held his tongue.

With more a smirk than a smile, Jocko had them take their marks, get set, and **BANG!** his gun fired off.

Hawkeye never saw, as he sprinted away, how Wooden Leg took five steps and flipped to his left side.

The new leg and its spring did what had been advertised, namely it gave that leg about twice the running power and five times the spring of a normal wooden leg and twice that of his flesh and bone one.

The main and telling problem arose with step three and him using his real leg that could not keep up with the power or the distance imparted of the new one. His body began to spin in the flesh-and-bone leg direction and was made even worse when he came back down on the spring-loaded leg for step four.

That threw wildly to his left and the real leg just could not overcome the great forces and collapsed under him where he rolled twice and then lay panting and cursing until Jocko stepped over and helped him to his feet.

Having some foresight, Leg had his wife bring his real wooden leg with them and she came over as he unstrapped the metal one. He tossed it to the side and slipped into the old and comforting cup of his old friend.

By the time Hawkeye made it back, bringing along the finish line ribbon, Jocko had already pulled out fifty dollars from his wallet and was heading for the hospital to pay off Leg’s debt to T. Alfred.

He would get the money back by making Leg work even harder at whatever pleased the Mayor and displeased his underling.

The only thing after that was Dr. Pierce noticed the professionally-honed scalpels at the hospital had a little less cutting ability than Leg's ones so he cancelled that part of the bet.

He never did tell Crumbum about Leg's little money making scheme.