

Spook 1781: The invisible life of double James

by

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Based on a true story

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FADE IN:

EXT. SWAMP FOREST - NIGHT (VIRGINIA, MAY 26TH, 1781)

A man is running, tricorn hat, like an arrow, pointing to an immense campsite ringed by dim fires. The man pauses, he's overheating, despite the cold moist air and knee deep water. This is JAMES, he pulls at his frock coat and unfastens a button near the top. The high collar shielding his sweaty dark brown face falls open to reveal the moon's pale blue glow on his smooth square jaw. He begins to move again, now more slowly. Beneath the collar, a mosquito lands. Slap. Red glistening smear glows in his palm. Slap. Slap.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. EDGE OF CAMPSITE AT COOPER'S CREEK - NIGHT

Fire lit guard stations, a rifle shot apart, on a flat dry clearing outside the swamp forest. Bottles clink being tipped and passed.

The night guards in uniforms - tricorn hats, blue frock coats, white knee length trousers - stains at the knees; are mingled with guards in plain clothes, filthy breeches, no knickers, worn through shoes. Bayonets are strewn about.

CUT TO:

EXT. TREELINE OF CAMPSITE AT COOPER'S CREEK - CONTINUOUS

James stares through the trees into the gap between the posts closest to the swamp and the row after row of white tents beyond it. A mosquito on his hand is feasting.

The nearest guard is alone, distracted, he slaps at his bare calves. James moves. SQUISH.

GUARD

Who's there? Anybody there?

INHALE, James becomes a tree trunk. Leaving his post empty, the guard points his bayonet, into the dark trees and at James. A cloud of his breath precede him.

Satisfied, the guard leans himself and musket against the tree; unbuttons his breeches at the sides, spreads his legs wide and with the front flap down, lets nature rip.

James' leg is washed with spray - a nine inch knife blade in his hand - grey steam rises around his eyes - the guard's neck - the knife on it - a trickle of blood as the chin elevates from pressure. He exhales slowly, off hand wraps the guard's torso, cradling the soldier against himself. Full, well defined lips part, breathing in slowly, first time in too long, EXHALE, one sound.

JAMES

Shhhhhhhhhhhhh.

He checks left and right. No one. Off hand moves up and squeezes the guard's exposed neck. The soldier's head rocks to and fro. Glint of moonlight reflects off steel.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. EDGE OF CAMP - CONTINUOUS

The soldier is on the ground at James' feet. A wipe of the blade on the guard and then it's deposited in a sheath, under his cloak, at the small of his back. He bends to muss up the soldier's hair and then removes two animal skin flasks from the entanglement of clothing and inert limbs. A sniff on the first skin, he closes it and places its strap over his shoulder. The second sniff makes his eyes roll. He empties the contents on the soldier's mouth and chest. He drags the body into the swamp, sinks him face first in muddy leaves and returns to the camp. The post is still empty. He moves, in a crouched sprint.

CUT TO:

EXT. INSIDE THE AMERICAN CAMP - MOMENTS LATER

In the camp, hundreds of small tents, in a grid. A group, larger, are set off from the others. James heads for them. He steps into the largest tent. CLICK!

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. INSIDE A TENT - CONTINUOUS

CLICK! Automatically - James' hand greets the musket that is now clogging his enlarged rounded nostrils. Black dust blows off cold steel. His finger blocks the flintlock hammer, a squeeze of blood on dark brown skin. His other hand, gets his knife. He shows the blade and then places it on the floor. They assess each other. No blinking.

The gun man is THE MARQUIS LAFAYETTE a twenty-three year old man-boy, a huge-beaked, French aristocrat, standing a perfectly erect six foot three inches tall his thin stubble free face emotionless to the intruder. James is the same height, but thirty-three, so his trunk is both more thickly sturdy and gently bent.

LAFAYETTE

Don't I know you?

JAMES

Yes sir.

LAFAYETTE

You belong to William, correct?

He nods in affirmation.

LAFAYETTE (CONT'D)

What's your name?

JAMES

James.

LAFAYETTE

Why are you here James and why do you smell so rank?

JAMES

(addressing the gun)

Apologies... I came by swamp way...

With his free hand James delicately pries the hammer of the gun's flintlock out of his skin, released from the gun he steps back. Lafayette re-cocks it and re-points the muzzle at James' head.

JAMES (CONT'D)

...I got something,... a letter.

Lafayette's weapon lowers a bit and his eyes follow. James becomes whole, He has a steady gaze but the rest of him is a mess. His top half is a tapestry of dry leaves and the bottom is covered in gooey green swamp residue. Lafayette blinks and readjusts his view as if to correct the African swamp creature before him. James sheepishly shrugs. Then, he returns the dismayed glare to Lafayette who is clothed only in a bright white nightshirt. Bright pink, hair covered, knobby knees stick out awkwardly. James almost laughs. Sensing the sudden loss of authority, Lafayette shakes the musket at James.

LAFAYETTE

Out with it then?

James reaches slowly inside his coat producing a wax sealed letter. Poker faced he holds it out to Lafayette.

LAFAYETTE (CONT'D)

So what does this say?

JAMES

You ain't safe here. British coming in the morning with everything they got.

Lafayette's gun lowers some; the finger still on the trigger.

LAFAYETTE

confirm these intelligences?

JAMES

You honor your two fathers?

Moving forward, Lafayette raises the gun and puts it to James' forehead. James' hands motion for a pause. Lafayette's teeth clench. The circle of the musket, condenses James' sweat. A drop runs down past James' nose, from lip to lip and then hangs on his chin.

JAMES (CONT'D)

I just done what I'm told.

The drop falls, an escape into empty space.

LAFAYETTE

(slowly, barely audible)
Go home.

Lafayette does not lower his gun.

LAFAYETTE (CONT'D)

If you make it back, inform William that we no longer require his services as commissary.

JAMES

Yes sir, thank you sir.

James backs away and collects his blade as he bows an exit.

CUT TO:

EXT. EDGE OF CAMP - MOMENTS LATER

A blur moves in the shadows. James, hysterical, smiles. Then he smiles again, differently, leaving the dim rhythm of light in the camp behind. He disappears into the swamp.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. EDGE OF CAMP - CONTINUOUS

James runs past the body and the empty flask laid next to it. Shallow breathing softly displaces a leaf at the open mouth.

CUT TO:

EXT. AMERICAN CAMP / GUARD POST - DAWN

Morning mist, jagged shapes cut the orange line of the approaching sun. Stacks of timber and wood materials lay in large rings, inhabited by guards perched lazily, half awake, from the night watch. Pokes of bayonet blades & sabers adorn the tops. One nest is empty.

A crusty eyed guard pokes his companion as he scratches his long graying sideburns. His tricorn wiggles.

GUARD 1

What happened over there?

The other thinner younger and even more frail grins broadly, displaying crooked teeth.

GUARD 2

(voice has a soft whistle)
Ain't seen Philip since midnight,
made water at the swamp.

GUARD 1

...and after?

He inclines his head to put impact to the question.

GUARD 2

Dunno, you think he run off?

GUARD 1

Wouldn't be the first.

GUARD 2

Not particularly original.

GUARD 1

But... damn effective remedy to the vagaries of this situation.

They laugh.

GUARD 1 (CONT'D)

Alright you go on and find him out.

GUARD 2

Why'd I care?

GUARD 1

Cause you're a patriot, committed, to liberty and your fellow man. You gotta to know, inferior soldier, taking a nap, or hell-bound deserter of this continental militia?

GUARD 2

You got anymore of your liquid watchman left?

GUARD 1

Just a taste I was saving. Why?

GUARD 2

I'll give you a full turn up a mine for taking the walk.

GUARD 1

Done.

The bottle's up, after a slurp and burp he's ready.

GUARD 1 (CONT'D)

One, two unhh... I'm up.

Standing, the slightly less than gentlemanly soldier, checks himself with quick pats. One turn, too quick, he wobbles, toward the next empty post. Whoosh Pock! His portly vested stomach pops open, a flesh draw bridge, swung down. He looks down into the cavernous maw of an open stomach. The breath in his lungs comes quickly and he watches the bottom of ballooning lungs, in the empty cavity. Glossy purple-blue of exposed organs and then red tissue.

GUARD 1 (CONT'D)

Shit... whistles we got trouble.

Still staring into himself. He falls forward.

GUARD 2

Casey!...

Immediately he moves to collect his friend but musket fire plunks into the grassy soil at his feet. He's cut off. He clutches his musket, while ducking for protection.

GUARD 2 (CONT'D)

(whispering)

Attack. We're under attack.

(Now shouting toward camp)

We're under Attack! ATTACK!!

He pops over the edge of the post and fires a shot into a wall of red, marching, nearly a 150 yards off but closing the gap in brisk syncopated strides.

(Voice over)

Halt.. Fire!

More musketball rain punctuates the field and guards' posts.

CUT TO:

EXT. ROADSIDE - DAWN

James is still running. Dawn is near. The sky is still starry but the horizon is faintly showing a growing bright line. He stops. He leans against a tree and his eyes water.

CUT TO:

EXT. AMERICAN CAMP / GUARD POST - AT THE SAME TIME

Everyone is now awake, heads poke out of tents.

(Voice Over)

Retreat! Retreat! The British are coming. Fall back!

(Voice Over)

To arms, To arms!

Men run. Others form a line with muskets ready behind the guards posts. 150 assemble shoulder to shoulder. The British march toward them. The camp empties behind the strategic speed bump.

Lafayette stirs, stumbles from his tent and wipes his puffy eyes. He commences in a jig, alternating one foot at a time, balancing, shoving a leg into each boot in a hasty retreat.

CUT TO:

EXT. ROADSIDE - DAWN

James bends to his knees unsteadily. He just can't breathe. His face is strained. Hands move to cover it.

CUT TO:

EXT. AMERICAN CAMP / REAR OF BRITISH ARMY

A stately officer, GENERAL CORNWALLIS, a gentleman of about fifty years sits on horseback, medals gleaming on his perfect uniform. He is flanked by two younger officers. Cornwallis breaks into an abundant smile.

CORNWALLIS' POV

Using a spy glass he reviews the attack and spots Lafayette.

GENERAL CORNWALLIS
The BOY!! to the French Child
First!! Get me the boy.

FACING CORNWALLIS

His arm swings forward. The British cavalry gallops out.

CUT TO:

EXT. AMERICAN CAMP / GUARD POST

(Voice Over)
Fire!

150 shots sting the 200 abreast front line of Cornwallis' 7000 man infantry. Those still standing step over the fallen, kneel and prepare to fire.

AMERICAN OFFICER
Make ready!

Whistles cleans the musket chamber as he wobbles on line. He tears a gunpowder satchel with his teeth and fills the musket barrel. He places the ball. Packs the barrel.

AMERICAN OFFICER (CONT'D)
Aim

The weapon is up, he takes aim, seven seconds have passed.

AMERICAN OFFICER (CONT'D)

Fire!

Whistles can only see smoke. The man nearest him collapses. Tears run but he keeps the motion going. Seven seconds pass.

AMERICAN OFFICER (CONT'D)

Fire!

His face is mud caked with gunpowder and his pants are soaking wet at the crotch. Seven more seconds.

AMERICAN OFFICER (CONT'D)

Fire!

More of the American line fall. The British are on top of them standing 50 feet away.

AMERICAN OFFICER (CONT'D)

Retreat!

The answer from the British.

BRITISH OFFICER

CHARGE!

Bayonet blades follow on the heels of retreating Americans.

CUT TO:

EXT. ROADSIDE - AT THE SAME TIME

James is barely standing - dizzy - face in his hands. He slowly staggers forward.

CUT TO:

EXT. AMERICAN CAMP - MOMENTS LATER

Whistles runs through the camp, British close behind.

CUT TO:

Bullets come from the flanks of the British at odd angles.

CUT TO:

Howitzer cannon fire cuts the redcoats off at the rear.

FROM ABOVE

Half of the American army is hidden in the camp.

CUT TO:

The British run through the camp. They are being fired upon from everywhere.

CUT TO:

Soldiers who left the camp are in nearby trees and at the swamp edge firing away from under the foliage's cover. The British drop like flies, not knowing where to direct fire.

EXT. ROADSIDE - AT THE SAME TIME

James wobbles forward. His pace quickening with each step.

CUT TO:

EXT. AMERICAN CAMP - MOMENTS LATER

The British are caught in a shooting barrel. Whistles falls to the ground and fires at the discombobulated redcoats. The Howitzer fire holds off the cavalry's advance at the ring of the guard posts.

CUT TO:

EXT. BRITISH GENERAL'S REAR POSITION - AT THE SAME TIME

General Cornwallis looks on through his spy glass at the mayhem.

GENERAL CORNWALLIS
 (through clenched teeth to
 no one in particular)
 A trap. It was a trap. How?,...
 we watched the roads all night, no
 communiques and no movement.

Cornwallis shifts in his saddle.

(in a low voice to an officer)
 Call the retreat. The amateurs, by
 effeminate divination, have
 forestalled inevitable defeat.

The orders are shouted forward.

CUT TO: