

FEATURE PAGE

BLACK JACK

We called him "Black Jack." He was a flying officer with the R. C. A. F. overseas on a Spitfire Squadron. Jack reminded me of a 16th century pirate. His habits and even his nick-name smacked of the old sea dogs. Twenty-four hour a day he was a marauder, in the air as a fighter pilot, and on the ground as a man. But what a man!

Black Jack would have been the kind of pirate, if he had lived in the 16th century, who could have watched twenty men walk the plank at his orders without a change of expression, and then would have gone to his cabin for his daily Bible reading and prayers. Jack's conception of a moral life was just as inconsistent as that of his 16th century prototype.

Black Jack got his title, obviously, from his love of a game of chance of the same name which we played continually through the long hours of waiting to go on an escort mission or a fighter sweep over enemy territory.

I didn't get to know Jack very well until I began to play some Black Jack myself. Jack couldn't live without gambling. He insisted that we play the game with no less than a half crown limit. Sometimes that built up to several pounds in a play, especially if the dealer doubles with an ace in the hole and you get five cards under twenty-one. If Jack was drinking, the stakes were always higher. I had sense enough to get out then. Jack kept playing until he had won even if he had to go far into debt at first to do it.

One night I was relaxed in the mess with a glass of port and the latest Punch. Some of the boys had been drinking and shooting crap over in the corner, and I didn't pay much attention until I heard Jack say over the buzz of conversation, "I'll shoot the hundred." I knew that meant one hundred quid or pounds—over four hundred dollars in our money. Another voice came to me, "Shoot boy, you're faded."

I liked Jack and I didn't want him to lose that much at once. I rushed right over to the corner and shouted, "Don't be a fool, Jack, that's a lot of dough."

"So what," replied Jack, and said, "Come to me, Baby," as he tossed the dice against the wall for his coming out throw. The dice tumbled in rebound across the carpet and came to a stop with the one spot on each die showing, a pair of snake eyes . . . "crap" in gamblers' parlance.

"You lose, Jack," someone said in an excited voice.

"You can't always win, I'll get it back sometime," Jack replied as he got up and brushed off his knees. Without even looking begrudgingly at the winner scooping up the pound notes from the floor, Jack suggested to me, "Let's go out cards for a quit. I'm bored with crap. Don't like the game anyway except that it's gambling."

I cut five aces in a row after we had played quite evenly for some time. Jack paid up willingly as he observed, drunkenly by now, "I guess luck's against me, but I'll bet you ten quid that I've got six toes on each foot. . . . yes," he shouted to the officers clustered around the bar, "I'll bet anybody in the bloody mess ten quid that I've got six toes on each foot."

He laid the money on the table, took his shoes off, and crawled to the table top in his stocking feet. Then he shouted his challenge again. Poor

Jack was disgusted when he got no takers for his bet.

Jack was a puzzle to me. He would gamble and drink to excess as I have told you; but he wouldn't smoke. He seemed almost insulted if I offered him a cigarette. When I tried to find out why, he merely shrugged his shoulders.

Like most men of his character, he didn't confine his vices to gambling and drinking either. He seemed perpetually filled with human desires such as his 16th century namesake would have after a long trip at sea. Black Jack just couldn't live without women. We might say the same about most Canadians overseas. But Jack was a pirate.

His animal spirits would not let him stay long in an all male mess. The pubs and dance halls of the nearby town attracted him, not for the beer or the company—just for the women he could pick up there.

Jack's usual procedure was to start drinking early in the evening at the highest class pub in town. If he could pick up a nice girl there, he was very happy. If he had no luck, he would descend to the lower Common Rooms of the pubs where he could mix with the working girls and the lower ranking women in uniform. In such rooms he usually could get a pick-up quite easily. Consequently they were not such a prize. If Jack failed in the pubs he would try the cheaper dance halls and from there as a last resort he would walk down some slummy street. Somewhere he could always find a woman standing in a doorway or walking the streets Piccadilly style, who would proposition him in the usual manner for the usual price.

About four nights per week in this way Jack would run through the gamut of his prospects. He could depend on his last resort so he always enjoyed the spirit of the chase during his evening.

Eventually Black Jack became more than a puzzle to me. He became a challenge. I determined to keep him occupied in town for a whole evening some time to see how much effort it would take to keep him from a woman, and I also determined to find out why he didn't smoke. The question intrigued me because most drinkers smoke at some time or other.

To make the game fair I waited until the next time Jack was going out on the prowl, which was almost every night anyway. I arranged for a double room at the old Bluebell Hotel, and then I went to find Jack.

As I expected I found him at the King's Crown, in an upstairs bar which was quite respectable. I had planned my strategy carefully— it would require lots of liquor and lots of gambling to keep him from a woman.

"Hello Jack," I said as I walked up to the bar beside him, "what are you drinking?"

"Double Scotchies," he replied, "straight. . . I'm in a hurry to get feeling good. I know where there's a lovely popsy I'm going to proposition as soon as I lose a few of my more sober inhibitions. . . . Have a drink on me."

"Let's make it sporting," I replied, "we'll roll for it on the bar." Whereupon I produced my dice and shot for the drink. It had the effect I had hoped for. After twenty minutes we realized that we could roll the dice much faster than we could consume the drinks which we kept

winning or losing. In line with my plans I didn't dare to get drunk. I knew that at the rate we were drinking he could outdrink me.

"Let's shoot for a pound instead," I suggested as we really began to feel the effects of several double scotchies.

"I'll have to go soon," said Jack, "I don't want to get too awful drunk yet."

I began to get worried. I had to keep his mind on the dice and drinking. Just then luck came my way.

"This is a respectable place", growled a voice in my ear, "you can't shoot dice on my bar." It was the manager—a rough ex-captain type whom I had seen before. "Come on lads drink up and get out of here. You damned Canadians will ruin me yet."

Jack wanted to fight, but I discouraged that. "Let's go down stairs to the Common Room, I whispered, "he won't expect a couple of officers to be shooting crap down there." The challenge to Jack's dignity made him momentarily forget his popsy of the night, "yes," he agreed, "we can't let the old goat hamstring us."

I found an uncrowded corner stairs and settled down, greatcoats and all for it was in the winter, for a continuation of our crap game. We had a few beers because no whiskey was served downstairs in this room, and we shot our dice quietly for a half hour for small stakes. Our interest was mostly in spiting the manager. When he didn't show up we got braver.

"Let's really upset this place", I suggested, "let's start a game in the middle of the bloody floor." I had to keep Jack's mind occupied.

"Fine idea," he agreed, "and let's put some real money into it. These poor jerks do well to spend a half crown for beer in a night." The sight must have been shocking or at least surprising. . . . two R. C. A. F. officers in full dress on their knees in the middle of the floor of the Common Room shooting crap for twenty quid a throw. It didn't take long for us to attract the attention of the whole crowd, W. A. A. F.'s, A. T. S. and Land Army girls crowded around us with the erks from our station and a few civilians in the outer fringe. They were enjoying the show, and my plans were working fine. We ever broke up the inevitable dart game. Black Jack loved it. He didn't even mention women.

I was just down eighty quid when our manager friend appeared in the room, beside him I could hardly see a couple of rough looking types. In a minute we were cut the side door in the February slush.

"I'm hungry anyway," I said, "let's go down to the Bluebell for supper." Jack automatically agreed. He was quite put out. "I've never been kicked out of a pub before," he said, "except in London once and I was drunk then." He was drunk now too, and all he could think of was the disgrace of being kicked out of a Common Room of a "scruffy old pub."

We got a good supper and while we ate we still rolled my dice on the edge of the table. After we finished I suggested that we go up to my room for a drink as the pubs had closed earlier at ten.

"Yeah, let's get more to drink," said Jack as we walked upstairs. I was down only ten quid now so I was satisfied. Jack would be too drunk after we got upstairs to do anything but go to bed.

"I'm getting sleepy," I said as I opened the door to my room, hoping

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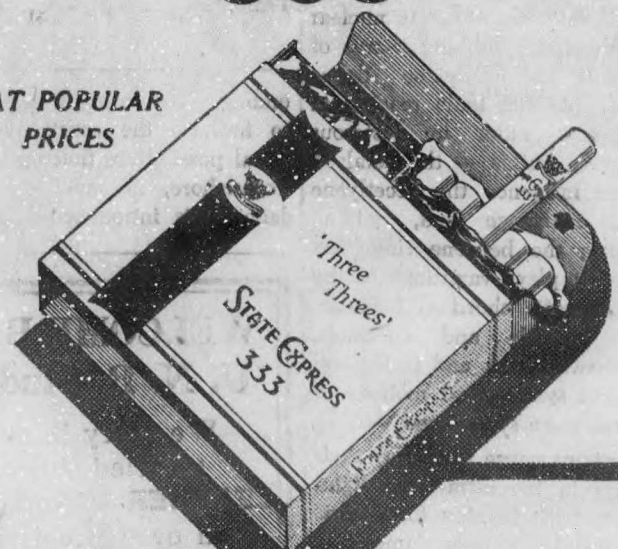
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that Jack would feel the same way by my suggestion. As Jack entered the room he stopped and peered at the empty bed. Then he looked at me wildly as though I had tricked him.

"You're not a woman," he said drunkenly, "I was going to get shackled up tonight."

"Come on in and get that whiskey," I said, "I've got ginger ale and glasses here too."

Jack swore softly, but he entered the room. I thought sure I had won. He wouldn't have any woman tonight. . . . I thought.

Just then as luck would have it, there was a sound of footsteps down the hall. Past our door slowly walked a chambermaid such as can be seen only in small town European third grade hotels. She had long passed the age when she could be over an ugly barmaid, no one would want to buy beer from her. She had drunk too much of it herself and it had piled ugly layers of fat over her whole body including her face. A great mass of tangled hair was piled up on her head in the hair-do peculiar to chambermaid. Her great soft breasts bulged under a dirty gray work smock. As she went by, she curled her lips over a double row of ill fitting false teeth in a lecherous smile at us.

Black Jack started to the door. "Come on, Jack," I said, "here's the whiskey," as I clutched him by the arm.

"There's a woman out there," he grinned, "I'm gonna go see her."

"She's nothing but an old but," I replied desperately, "stay here, I want to talk to you." But Jack pulled away and rushed to the door.

"Jack," I shouted drunkenly, "come back here and have a cigarette with me." I knew that would stop him. It did, but only momentarily, as he said, "you know I don't smoke."

I followed him running down the hall and tugged at his tunic. I would try to start an argument on this touchy subject. That should stop him.

"Jack," I asked, "why won't you come back and have a cigarette with me. Smoking won't hurt you. Tell me. . . why don't you smoke?"

He paused an instant before he pushed me away, "I couldn't bring myself to smoke a cigarette," he exclaimed with his face close to mine, "it's nothing but a damned filthy habit."

I slept alone that night.

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