

American Legion

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Gene stomped his feet and clapped his hands together. It was the middle of August and only forty knots off the coast of that hot little island of Trinidad, but the temperature somehow reminded him of the Arctic Ocean in January. Well, it didn't remind him of the Arctic. How could it? He had never been there. Still it could not be much colder, and except for an iceberg now and then, not much different. That was his only objection to the sea; it was just the same whether you were off the coast of India or the United States. And all this truck about adventure on the high seas. Why he had been sailing on the American Legion for two months and nothing had happened. Of course there was that time in Buenos Aires when he almost got killed by a drunken native, but that could have happened in his home town. The Wops down on School Street were always getting themselves knifed. Yes, the sea was rather a disappointment, but then everything seemed to be a little disappointing if you stopped to figure it out.

Still he was glad he had taken this job on the merchant marine, if it was only to get what he wanted from his parents. Then too, that damn idea to sail was out of his system forever. How sick he was of dirty dishes and brass rails! Any job on land would look better to Gene now. Just to have his feet on good solid ground would satisfy him; his stomach would have a chance to rest too. It had never quite regained its stability after that first bad swell. He just wasn't cut out to be a sailor. Gene was glad he found it out though, instead of going through life wondering.

In another hour the Dog Watch would be over. That name sure fitted anything connected with the sea—a dog's life it was, without a redeeming feature. It sure was hell trying to keep your eyes open on these windy nights. Gene had gotten so that he could almost go to sleep standing up. That was a

bad way to be too, because all of a sudden, he'd hear that damn mate yell. The voice breaking the black stillness of the night always sent shivers through his body. He would strain his eyes for a sign of anything unusual. Always there was a black shadow lurking somewhere along the deck. It never turned out to be anything worth reporting though. God, how he wished something would happen to break the monotony of these awful watches! Nothing terrible of course, nothing that wouldn't turn out all right in the end. Gene was no fool. He liked excitement as well as the next guy, but hell, he also wanted to get home to his family and his girl. He was young and not even dying a hero appealed to him. Sometimes, when the night was as black as this and not even God seemed to be around, he would think a little surreptitiously

about losing his life for a great cause; but the first penetrating rays of the morning sun washed that crazy idea from his head.

My God, what was that! Some one moaned. Now who the hell would be on deck to moan at this hour? Gee, the sea was getting on his nerves! Well that wind could sound human whistling past those stacks. There it was again. It was like a man's voice! What's more it didn't come with the gusts of wind. It wasn't the wind. That damn moan was rising in pitch until it became a inhuman scream! Gene jumped like a frightened rabbit when the first officer clapped a hand on his shoulder and asked,

"Mister Tower, did you hear that?"

"Yes, sir!"
"One of those goddam men smuggled gin aboard at Trinidad, and now he's crazy drunk. The Skipper gave express orders about that stuff. He'll give me hell for letting them bring it aboard. Go get that drunken fool and I'll give him a taste of what I'll get!"

That was excitement for you! The only time anything unusual happened it was because some one got drunk. You could find a million drunks on any street corner at home. There it was again! What the hell was the matter with the guy? It sounded as if he were being tortured. Probably an advanced case of D. T.'s. Well in that case he might as well put in a call for the ship's doctor as he went past the office. These D. T.'s were no cinches, you needed the doc to control the fools. Where had that awful scream come from—Oh yes up on the Poop. Boy, the lad had some nerve drinking his liquor there.

It seemed a mile long, that walk to the Poop Deck. At last he reached the stairs. He couldn't see them, but he knew that they were there because he tripped over the damn things. If that lousy drunk thought he was going to get

any gentle treatment tonight, he was mistaken. Oh, well, he wouldn't know what was going on any how. Why the hell didn't that moon come out from behind the clouds? It was darker than pitch and the drunk had stopped moaning. No, there it was again. God what a wail. Gene wanted to knock him one over the head and put them both out of their misery. It sounded as if it came from near the port; yes, there he was. What did he have on? No ordinary sailor's clothing. It looked like the long flowing robe of an Arab, except that it was all white. And he was kneeling. Well he ought to kneel and pray to God that Gene wouldn't give him a good swift kick.

Gene had his hand outstretched to grab the drunk by the neck. His foot slipped and he threw both hands in the air to retain his balance. It was no use. He went down like an anchor. For a moment he sat there and swore softly. He put his hand on the deck to push himself up and it landed in the midst of some warm sticky liquid. The liquid did not feel like gin either. It felt strangely like—my God it was blood! Gene was scared now. He got up quickly and walked stealthily around the figure. He was a fool to sneak up that way after he had made such a hell of a noise when he fell, but there was something about that kneeling figure that made him act like a hero in a melodrama. He had to lean over close to the body in order to see the face. There was at least a months growth of beard and an inch of dirt covering it; yet Gene could see the guy was a white man.

The white covering slowly began to rise as if under its own power. Suddenly it parted and two outstretched arms took form.

"Help me! In the name of God, don't stand there, help me!"

The voice rose from a weak groan to another piercing scream. Gene thanked God that the doctor broke in on the little drama just then.

"What seems to be the trouble? More liquor aboard?"

"No, doc, this guy isn't drunk, he's sick! What's more he isn't one of our men."

"Help me, Lord! Help me!"
"That scream! If he does it again I'll go nuts!"

"Now then, my boy, take it easy. Carry this man to my office and we'll see what is going on."

Gene did as he was told without thinking about it. If he'd ever stopped to think, he'd have probably made a dive for the rail. There was something about the white clad figure that made him want to go away and hide. Perhaps it was just because he had found him in the dark, and didn't quite understand how he got aboard or where he came from. In the light of the doc's office he would be all right again. Gees, he sure was a baby. His knees were shaking so he could hardly hold on to the human cargo, though it was light enough for a woman to carry.

When he finally got it to the doc's office he laid it on the cot. The doc, damn him, tore off the white covering without giving Gene a chance to leave. This time Gene did run. Straight to the open porthole out of which he emptied the contents of his revolting stomach.

"Come back here, you fool! I need your help. This fellow won't hurt you."

Gene gasped. He could never look at that thing again. It had no ears, its feet were spouting blood like a fountain, one hand looked as if it had been chawed at by a rat.

The doctor had lain a hand on Gene's shoulder.

"It's a pretty rotten case of leprosy, but I need your help."

Leprosy! Instinctively Gene wiped his hands furiously on his pants. He'd die now all right, and not even a hero's death at that! It was too late now to do anything about it, he might as well go back. Anyhow what he felt now was not repulsion, but indescribable pity for a fellow sufferer.


"O.K., doc. What can I do?"
Together the men prepared to bathe the body of the patient.

"Oh God don't touch me! I've been through enough agony. Let me die in peace. Only please listen to what I have to say!"

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Gene stomped his feet again to ward off the numbing effects of the cold. Ten miles from New York and August and yet he was shivering. Thank God this was his last watch for this trip forever. It hadn't been so bad after all though. That sure was a funny thing about the leper. He wouldn't have been lying when he knew he was going to die; yet that was the wierdest tale Gene had ever heard. A nice happy home life, a wife and kids, and then the war. Deserted—afraid to face his family again—escape to South America—and then leprosy. What luck! Funny how he managed to sneak aboard the American Legion. A last desperate attempt to die on his own soil. Gees, it sounded like a fairy tale, but then there was the ring from Columbia University which proved something. Gene would never forget that burial. The night had been so cold and dark, but just as the poor guy went down, the clouds parted. The moon shone down right on the body, just as if it were a sign from God.


Weird. Damn weird. But it sure would make a swell story to tell Gene's kids.



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smoke...*


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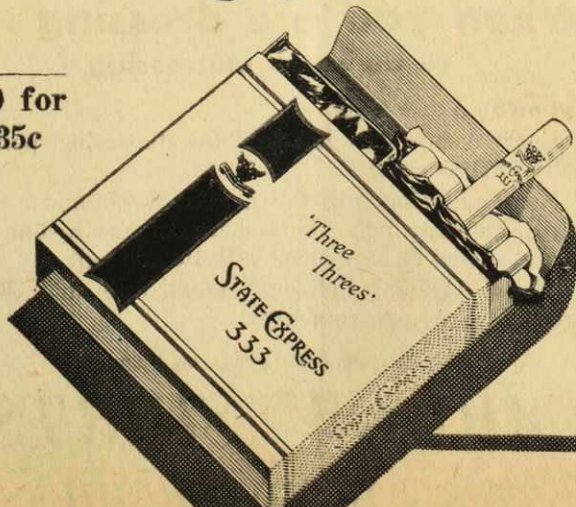
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