

CHAPTER XXIV

“OH, JOY! OH, BOY! WHERE DO WE GO FROM  
HERE?!”

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Kenneth turned his attention further down the rail, where the men were engaged in free and easy banter, an activity that, on past occasions, had proved to be both indecorous and entertaining. In addition to an ever-growing list of grouses, the topics—invariably tailored to shelve lonesomeness, fear, and the unknown—included food, drink, women . . . home, family, women . . . and women. As to women, the Marine Corps was, for the most part, a bachelor’s club. Regular officers and NCOs were allowed to marry, but the Corps’ current policy prohibited marriage for new enlistees. The Corps commanded singularity of purpose. If you joined the Marines, you took the USMC as your bride—warts and all—because while you were serving them, you could serve no other. Bigamy not allowed! The Corps would brook no rival. Answering the call of duty had to be the be-all and the end-all of one’s present existence. *Martial* responsibilities trumped *marital* obligations. The Marines needed men who were willing to risk death to win battles; and an old proverb said: *The whisper of a pretty girl can be heard further than the roar of a lion.* When the bugle blast, real or figurative, called men to stand up, in withering fire, and charge an enemy, there could be no hesitation. Honor and glory are intangibles; the love of a woman is not an abstraction, as such, but a palpable force of the heart, mind, and body; it could thicken a soldier’s thinking on the battlefield at a time when the Corps needed his thoughts to be honed, like a fine sword, to a sharp point of unreasoned action—so that he would move forward and attack at all costs.

Victory in battle often turned on the heroic individual actions of a few stalwart and uncompromised men; divided allegiances could result in lost battles. The cost of leaving a woman and children behind could be, for some, too high



a price to pay. Worrying, even for seconds, about the consequences to loved ones could result in a different outcome in the arena of war. The Corps worried that marriage might remove the blindfold of blind obedience. There is an oft-quoted expression that *Behind every great man is a great woman*. A corollary to that proposition, held by the United States Marine Corps, is that *Behind every great woman is a derelict soldier*. Like oil and water, like science and religion—combat Marines and the institution of marriage did not mix well. Just as the Bible says you cannot serve both God and money, the Marine Corps believes you cannot serve both Corps and family. Besides, a ring through the nose would violate Marine Corps uniform regulations! There was also the matter of broken-hearted lovers. Nothing could be more demoralizing than a lengthy interval without letters from one's inamorata, except perhaps, the letter from a bedswerver announcing she had found someone else. No matter how many deaths might accrue to the Third Battalion of the Sixth Marine Regiment in the days ahead, there would be few weeping widows left behind.

Kenneth could hear Pvt. Rodes talking to fellow platoon members. “Whoeeee!” the Texan exclaimed, waving his toothpick. “It’s been some pretty bum eats up until last night—god-awful tastes and plenty of ‘em. I was just concludin’ how no grub was better’n our grub when they up and serves us one whale of a meal—a heap of meats and gravies and other bully things to eat,” he recollected, smacking his lips at the memory, “and they topped it all off with cee-gars and es-per-esso. I’m a better and wider man for the experience,” Rodes added, his hands assessing his new-found width. “You coulda knocked me down with a feather, but like my Daddy use ta say, ‘Don’t look a gift horse in the ass!’”

Rodes was what the French call a “gourmand” and the Americans call a “gobbler.” What he ate, he devoured, and when he got busy with his knife and fork, plowing into his food, you could nearly see sparks fly—when he was not using his fingers, that is. Kenneth agreed with Rodes’ culinary assessments, such as they were. Throughout the voyage, the galley meals had not been up to sample, while the previous night’s banquet—coming as it did on the final day of the passage and served only hours before the Marines were to put ashore in war-torn France—smacked of condemned men being served their customary “last meal.” The Chief Commissary Steward had pulled out all the stops, turning out a groaning board of consommés and oysters, followed by sliced hams, turkeys with dressing, gravy, and cranberry sauce. The main dishes were sided with potato croquettes, candied sweet potatoes, and asparagus with hollandaise sauce and rounded out by a plum pudding and sherry sauce that could have earned the ship’s Baker First Class a gold medal.

“One meal is all it wuz . . . this service life ain’t what it’s cracked up to be, that’s fer sure,” offered the voice of a Marine Kenneth didn’t recognize. “I got a bone to pick with that recruiter fella if I ever see him again. I ain’t seen a palm tree since ’15, when I joined up back in Savannah . . . the pay is chicken feed . . . they’s always paying you in ‘rears . . . and now I’m ‘bout to be in a war. I got more than I bargained for, is all. If I had my druthers, I’d done it different, that’s also fer sure . . . and I don’t care much who knows it.”

“Oh, for crying out loud, what did you expect, Johnson—the life of Reilly?” asked Pvt. Norton.

“No, not that . . . but that sumbitch swore by Alexander’s beard that I’d see the world . . . and I never left the



country but once—‘til now.”

“That’s your problem right there, Johnson . . . swearing by Alexander the Great’s beard means to swear by nothing at all,” instructed Pfc. Professor Murray.

“Damn! You mean I was took?” replied the ever-ungrammatical Johnson.

“That’s the sum of it,” offered Pvt. Brains Mansfield, the math marvel.

“So, what’s this about Alexander the Great, anyway . . .?” asked yet another Marine.

“—Never mind that . . .” said Pvt. Litchfield, dismissively, as he surfaced through the fo’c’sle hatch.” Anybody hear when we might be going ashore?”

“Deuced if I know,” said Pvt. Workman.

“Prob’ly the second Tuesday of next week,” Pvt. Tennpenny muttered.

“. . . the quicker the sooner,” pronounced Pvt. Tritt. “—I gotta get off this crummy boat.”

“I’m so horny, the crack of dawn ain’t safe,” weighed in Pvt. Sabatini—also known as Casanova—crudely. “I can’t wait to get a look at some of them French feemes I’ve heard so much about. Don’t know as it’s all true what they say, but I mean to find out.”

“Whudda they say?” asked Pfc. Booter Abbott.

“. . . Well, they say they’ve got no “tiny gates” in Paris . . . if you know what I mean?”

“No! I *don’t* know what you mean, Casanova,” responded an irritated Abbott. “You gotta be more pacific—”

“Pussy, Booter! No tiny pussies . . . from too much fucking. A Frenchie skirt who doesn’t like to fuck is about as rare as a virgin whore!” Then, as an afterthought, he added: “They’ve got some other names for it too—for pussy, I mean. *The little Shanghai streetcar . . . the lilac branch in the wheat field . . . the police commissioner’s shaving brush . . .* is that *pacific* enough for you, Booter?”

Abbott just sat there stunned . . . as did the rest of the other young Marines, perhaps conjuring up their own personal images of Casanova’s euphemisms.

Happy Mac McDougal broke the silence. “Well, if that don’t beat the Dutch. Sounds like a helluva place!”

“It is . . . I can tell you that well enough” weighed in Pvt. Thompson, who had visited France often with his wealthy father, and who had already been to the war, serving with a British artillery unit.

Sabatini, who was clearly enjoying himself, asked: “An’ do ya know what they call it when they haul your ashes over here?”

“I’m afraid to ask—” answered Abbott.

“*Le grand frisson*,” said Sabatini, letting it lie there for a moment before repeating more loudly: “*Le grand frisson!*”

“Outa sight!” ejaculated McDougal. “Think we’ll get some time out on the town in Brest?”

“Suffering Caesar!” exclaimed Pvt. Os. “For the life of me, I don’t know who names a town Brest?”

“Beats me,” said Pfc. Smith.

“Same bloody nutters that named a little town in Britain Titty Ho, I guess,” contributed the British-educated

Thompson. “Some of my Eton mates and I made a road trip to that little burg, during my first term, to purloin their town marker . . . made a cock-up of it, too . . . got caught . . . and the master gave me a good caning.” The scholar rubbed his buttocks and grimaced in remembrance.

“Then there’s Lake Titicaca,” said Mansfield, speaking of the famous lake high in the South American Andes. “It’s got body parts and feces in one name!”

“We’ve got some doozy names back in the Quaker State that don’t quite fit the William Penn mold,” chimed in Pfc. Ashburton, “. . . Intercourse and Blue Ball . . .”

“Mutually exclusive names, I’d say!” observed Murray, who seized every opportunity to edify.

“That’s me all over,” complained Sabatini, “as blue as blue can be. I haven’t danced the Paphian jig in what seems like a month of Sundays. I’ve got half a mind to jump this ship tonight. Yeah! Call it a field exercise! Twenty-three skidoo!” Sabatini’s appetite for sex was like that of a well-fed man who, accustomed to a steady diet of fine meals, came to hunger sooner than a man accustomed to being hungry.

“You’re going to do what?” asked Pfc. Cleghorn.

“I might just join you,” volunteered Smith. “You bet your boots, I might.”

“I’m for it.” declared Litchfield. “I’m crazy to get ashore.”

“Ditto,” said Pvt. Tuckalo. “This oughter be good. Yes indeedy.”

“The more, the merrier,” announced the devil-may-care Sabatini. “We’ll have ourselves a corkin’ good time!”

“Barkis is willin’,” moaned McDougal, “but I’m broke as a joke.”

“Me too, y’all” commiserated Trueshot Coleman. “Roll on, payday.”

“That suits me down to the ground,” said Pvt. Notta Niggemeyer, who then enquired of Cleghorn, standing next to him, “Hows about you, Saint? Doncha wanna come along?”

“Do *what*? No, I’d just as leave stay here . . . I don’t see how any good can come of that,” he said skeptically.

“Aw c’mon, Saint. I’m sure we could find you a sarsaparilla . . .” Notta said, addressing Cleghorn’s teetotaling ways.

“Right as rain, we could,” confirmed Smith.

When Saint shook his head, Niggemeyer scoffed, “Oh, I forgot . . . you’re a *holy roller*.”

“An’ I forgot . . . you’re *stupid*,” was the Saint’s *unholy* response.

“Hey, don’t get sore,” objected Niggemeyer . . . stay or go, it makes no never mind to me. Just trying to be inclusive is all. Don’t like to see you oscillating yourself from your buddies.”

“It’s *i-so-late*, you ninny . . .” pointed out Cleghorn.

“That’s what I said . . .”

“Like fun, you did—” said Cleghorn.

“Are you with us, Sampson?” asked Niggemeyer, continuing his poll of the men.

“I sure as fuck am,” answered Pvt. Baumhauer. “A good logger keeps his saw in the wood, doncha know?”



“W-well, you c-c-can c-count me in,” interrupted Pfc. Oral Lee Cline, adding to the empty bluster. No one was going anywhere and they knew it. They were just roosters, strutting their stuff. Spending the night in town was just a figment—or, as Rodes liked to say, a “fragment”—of their overheated imaginations. They were young, there was a pretty good chance they could die in the coming days, and they had a lot of life to pack into a very short time—even if for now they could only live it in their minds. “I w-w-w-wanna ch-check out one of them so called fl-fl-fleshpots.”

“Nix on that, Purple Lips,” said Sabatini unkindly to Cline whose face was significantly covered by a large port-wine stain birthmark.

“Wh-wh-wh-whyever n-not?” asked the marked Marine.

“I’ve got a better chance of angels flying outta my ass than you do of getting some Frenchie to kiss that periwinkle mess of yours,” insulted Sabatini flippantly.

“K-k-kiss my ass!” ordered Cline, the hurt evident in his voice.

“Hey! . . . Casanova, knock that shit off,” admonished Baumhauer, the former lumberjack.

“I’m just saying what’s what—eggs is eggs and all that,” reasoned Sabatini.

“Yeah . . . well . . . you got a bad case of the runaway tongue, and if you say somethin’ like that again, I’m goin’ to *scramble* your fuckin’ eggs,” the timber beast, Baumhauer threatened. “Enough is enough, an’ too much is too much—hear?” When Sabatini didn’t respond quickly enough, Baumhauer, a big man with a big heart for the underdog, threw him a murderous look and shouted: “*Hear?!?*”

There was a pause in the dialogue . . . a palpable silence, in which Sabatini might have been taking the measure of Sampson’s seriousness. Casanova came down on the side of caution: “Yeah, I hear you, Sampson,” Sabatini acknowledged. “I guess I just been ‘board this ship too long—sorry, Purple Lips,” Sabatini added disingenuously. Casanova had a habit of saying whatever crossed his mind—not having a filter to extract the impurities of his thoughts before they became words.

“Don’t worry, Oral Lee,” comforted Mitzie Odwazny, trying to help, but failing miserably—like a man swatting a fly on someone’s nose. “I’ve heard those French whores will take on *anyone* . . . there’s a Lorraine St. Germaine for everybody!” he exclaimed.

Cline, though, accepted Sabatini’s apology and Mitzie’s misguided support readily enough, confessing, “I ain’t n-n-never had a fling, and I’m de-de-de-determined to have one before I g-get t-t-tossed in a fu-fu-fuckin’ grave.” The pun surely wasn’t intentional, but it was certainly apropos.

“Hey, I can give you a hand with that, Cline,” said a sympathetic Ike Jones. “I got a month’s pay comin’ from my dear ol’ Uncle Sammy, and Brest is gonna catch hell if I got anything to say about it.”

“Don’t count your chickens too soon, mutt,” growled Cpl. Gordon, who had approached the confab quietly and was now standing—arms akimbo and ears askew—behind Sabatini, flanked by Corporals Clark and Garrison. The repartee faded to silence.

“. . . And you, Sabatini,” piped in Cpl. Garrison, who harbored a professed dislike for the skirt-chasing Italian, “you

just volunteered yourself for mess duty! Report to the galley and take Swindler's place . . .”

“But Corp . . . I've got mess duty *tonight!*” Sabatini objected.

“Hell's bells! That ain't none of my parade, Private,” Cpl. Garrison barked. “Move out!”

“But Corp, that ain't fair!” Sabatini persisted.

“‘Ain't fair' sounds like an opinion, mutt,” judged Cpl. Garrison. “If the Corps wanted you to have opinions, they'd've issued 'em to you —”

“But Corp—”