

The Pretty

BY KINGSLEY MOSES

A Story

IT DID not often become cold so early in the winter. And the cold itself might not have mattered had not the wind constantly been rising.

A wicked sea was making, for sure; short, chopped-off white breakers spotted the dark slate of the farther water, and the trough of the sea close to shore was a scum of yellow froth. No dories would put out for town today; nor for three days more, like as not. A dull, dry Christmas for baymen.

"Allows to be a hell of a holiday!" old Ryan growled, joggling the glass jug so that the film of milky liquor at its bottom might at least slosh a little. "An' me slavin' the whole week for it!"

That was the dull injustice of this present situation. If a man didn't work he didn't deserve anything: "root hog or die" — that was fair enough. But when, throughout six days, a bayman had been toilsomely raking a winter sea for scallops to provide for his Christmas gin it was manifestly wrong that his industry should not be fittingly rewarded.

"It's this — now — disjointed social scheme," Jack Ryan remembered some editor's pet phrase. "It's the

barriers between the producer and the ultimate consumer." In the lonely shack on the beach Jack seldom missed his newspapers, however late and sodden with salt water they might be when they got there. He could, in fact, no more have endured existence without newspapers than without booze.

But with a Sunday edition to thumb over and over, from Sports to Stock Market; enough alcohol, and warm water from the kettle on the range, even a three-day northeaster was entirely tolerable. Those same Sunday newspapers, tacked layer after layer on the walls, had sheathed the shack within against the assault of the most savage tempest: a snug harbor to berth in.

This, though, was Saturday evening. Tomorrow would be Christmas. And not a chance to stir out of the cabin for God knows how long. By foot it was eight miles to the village; most of the way along a rutted trace so deep in sand that a man sank to his shoelaces at every step. Spotty Sime, who claimed himself to be a Shinnecock, could make it; or any other young and robust native. Spotty habitually did journey

by foot on Saturday nights, for the smallpox-pitted half-breed had an odd dread of the water. But old Jack, like most everybody else who squatted on this barren fluke of the island, always went by the water route; nursing along a rusty marine motor, or just rowing.

Years back, before that German shrapnel had fixed his left leg so that it was a couple of inches too short, and often unreliable, Jack Ryan wouldn't have been feazed by sixteen miles either. But even a mile across sluggish sand was too much now for the old-timer. The damned leg just quit — "like it had gone asleep, yuh know" — as he had tried to describe it to the doctors. "It hurts a while; then it quits hurtin': there's no feelin' at all except a sort o' pricklin'. And if I bear down — blop — she caves on me."

So they had marked him partial disability on that, and put him down for twenty-four dollars a month so long as he lived, and told him that any of the Veterans' hospitals would always be glad to look at the leg if it got worse; and some of them — only medical officers that they were — had actually remembered to salute the enlisted man when they said good-bye. "And I wish I'd made 'em all do just that!" the old soldier used to chuckle after his third warm drink of an evening. The joke of it was he could have made them all do just that: his service record included award of the highest honor — for extraordinary heroism above and beyond the line of duty — which any sovereign nation may bestow.

"A fat lot that gets me tonight!" said Jack Ryan, sloshing the pitiful ounces of liquor across the base of

the glass jug. "You can't drink up a medal — not without you can locate a hock-shop first. Well —" he made his decision — "here's to crime anyhow. Let's drink up what we have and hope for what we haven't. *Trink nur ein glas zu wenig!* as the krauts said. Well, here's *gesundbeit* — and many of 'em!" He grinned at himself in the cracked mirror which had been neatly repaired by two green postage stamps. The 'shine seared gratefully along the inside of his breastbone. He had a cheerful thought that one of the boys might possibly stagger on home tonight with a shot or two left in his hip bottle.

Things might be a hell of a lot worse, after all. He took off his shoes and went to bed.

IF HE had had his usual allowance of alcohol before sleep took him, Jack Ryan would not have waked up until dawn, as was his habit. And if he had not waked up in the dark, urgently desiring a drink, the little brown girl in the shack a quarter-mile distant would undoubtedly have been burned to death; since her father, Spotty Sime, had locked her in securely; and then handled his liquor worse than ever and got into the local lock-up at Sag Harbor for a stay over Sunday.

As it was, Jack saw the unnatural ruddiness of his neighbor's window; and stumped in stocking feet through the ice-sheathed beach grass and crusted sand to the burning cabin. His big fist crashed the window; frame, paper padding and all; and he lunged into the blazing room as he glimpsed the terrified little face peeping from beneath the bed.

The child, reaching for a pan of glutinous condensed milk and water, had evidently pulled off the red cotton table cloth and the lamp upon it. The table was already a bonfire, and the flames were sweeping up the flimsy south walls of Sime's shack.

Tossing the child out the window, Jack looked for a possible pail of water; found not so much as a dipper-full. But on the shelf was an amber-colored quart bottle; and nearly full.

"Salvaged something beside the kid!" Jack laughed. He hoisted himself outside. Bottle and child he took back to his own cabin; glancing behind him only once at the rising fire, whipped up now by the draft sucked through the broken window.

In his own snug sanctuary he wrapped the youngster in blankets; and lifted her to watch the spectacular end of the shack which had been her home.

She genuinely enjoyed the display. With each blazing plunge of rafter or joist she chuckled: "Ooo — pretty!" But in a very few minutes the fireworks were all over. A cherry-red glow on the ground amid the gloomy dunes. Then the wind-driven sleet drenched out even that color.

Softly the child in Jack's arms began a mewing whimper. "Pop — I wan' my Pop. He's goin' tuh bring me a present for tomorra — Christmas present."

"He can rate himself lucky to have anybody to bring a Christmas present to, button!" The whole thing was an accident; but the old soldier felt an unreasonable dislike for Spotty Sime at the moment. "But it ain't Christmas yet: not

till tomorra. When you wake up in the mornin' —" He perceived that, with childish abruptness, Lulie had gone to sleep.

He laid her safely and securely wrapped up on the inside of the bed against the wall. Then took a huge gulp from the salvaged bottle.

WHEN she woke him in the morning by poking at his bristly cheek Jack knew immediately that Sime's liquor must have been of worse than usual quality. He felt sour all through, and his head was feverish. Yet another drink would set him right — for a while anyhow. He poured a tin cup half full and spilled in an equal amount of water. The first big gulp set him beautifully steady.

"Well, how about some breakfast, Lulie?" He pulled on his shoes and lit the fire in his patched-up range.

"Cornflakes," agreed Lulie. "Is it Christmas?"

Jack wondered how such a pretty brat could be any get of Sime's. About five years old, he guessed her. She was wearing shoes, though there were no stockings on her brown legs; but her faded pink cotton dress was fairly clean; and her wiry, reddish-brown hair was tied with a huge black ribbon.

"Yeah, this is Christmas," glancing out the window at the heavy, sullen day; and continuing to scrape together breakfast. Before he sat down to eat, he finished the stiff jolt of booze in the bottom of the tin cup. Then, between them, they put away half a package of cornflakes, smeared with yellow, undiluted condensed milk; and a pound of greasiest bacon rind.

"Pop — when'll he be back?" she said, after wandering round the room for a few minutes.

Jack had the bizarre sense of being not entirely in his own body. It was not the pleasant, drunken lift which good liquor ought to give. He felt irritated, downright ugly. "Bum booze. Sime's would be!" He warped himself about and took a jolt from the neck of the bottle.

Immediately his temper was all right again: his flesh was dry and hot and his head was a little dizzy; but he was, for the moment, good-natured.

"Pop — when'll he be back?" the child reiterated. "He's goin' tuh bring me a Chrismus gift."

"Yeah?" Jack set the dishes in the deep dishpan. He'd go out and pump the pan full presently. Pretty quick. He sat down in his one-armed chair and stared out the window.

Lulie came shyly and put her hand in his. Her eyes were surprisingly large and brown and gentle: that was the colored blood, the red man's eyes are not soft that way. And the eyes were unduly bright, it seemed to Jack Ryan. "Here, yuh aren't goin' to cry, are yuh?"

"He promised," she said, "tuh bring me a pretty."

That came from her Negro mother too. Jack had served one whole hitch at Oglethorpe and a year at Pensacola. Been long in Port au Prince too; but those were French dinges in Haiti. "Pretty" was a Southern States' word.

"Goin' tuh bring you a pretty, eh?"

"Yes." A tear went spilling over the black lashes and trickled down each cheek.

Abruptly the room was in sunlight. There was a rip in the solid clouds halfway up to the zenith. The sun was a yellow disc, and would soon be obscured again as the ragged clouds from below were swept up over it. But the brief warmth brought a corresponding glow to the crippled man.

"Here," he grunted, pulling himself to his feet. He stumped over to the box he had nailed to the wall and fitted with a padlock. He opened his makeshift safe and pulled out a leather case. "Here's your pretty."

On its broad, blue ribbon he hung the Congressional Medal of Honor around the little colored girl's neck.

"You can keep that," he smiled, "till — till — your Pop gets around to bringin' you somethin' for your own Christmas."

"Oo — my pretty!" The bright-polished medal was gripped in both her small hands. "Pretty — pretty!"

"Yeah?" That ugly feeling was in his head again. He stumbled to the bed and stretched himself across it.

THE rusty alarm clock showed quarter past one when Jack Ryan woke up chilled and aching. His very first thought was of the amber quart on the shelf. Thank God there was still a pint or so in it! The angles of the room were askew before his eyes. It wasn't the D. T.'s of course — he hadn't had enough for that. But if you cut off a drinking man's liquor all of a sudden — He pulled himself to a sitting posture and bit his dry lips.

Lulie was in front of him.

"Jack!" she wailed — every one called him Jack. "I — I — lost my pretty!"

He wanted to hit her. That ugly, hating feeling soured him through and through.

"I lost it — in the water. I was tryin' to see myself — leanin' way, way over —"

"In the deep water?" His crazy little pier ran out to a fathom's depth.

"Uh-huh. Off'n the end." Her hands twisted her pink pinafore into a ball as her sleeve rubbed at her salt-rimmed cheeks. Jack had seen her, on calm days, leaning far over the extreme end of his rickety wharf where the flat water served as a befogged mirror. She hadn't known that on a windy day like this the turbid sea would fail her for a looking-glass. And as for going out and trying to espy it himself — in such weather you couldn't see a foot below the surface; much less a fathom. Jack nearly upset the bottle with his nastily shaking hand, gulping the drink.

Better! And you didn't hit even a careless little kid on Christmas, did you! "Well, Lulie, we'll find it — sometime."

Two of the three gentlemen who walked into the shack to wake him were well known by old Jack Ryan. The mayor of the town, Mr. Murgatroyd — the old stiff — had fined him twice. Major Wellen was the hotel man whose estate was a show place of the Island.

Inspiration had come to these two. One hundred and fifty years ago there had been a Revolutionary skirmish hereabouts. The town proposed to celebrate.

General Haines, United States Army, retired, was to be the principal speaker. And an enthusiastic

local newspaper reporter had come galloping to the general with the rumor that there was a Congressional Medal of Honor holder in the township. Rather to the surprise of the mayor — and even of the duration-of-the-War major — the retired general officer had explained just how rare Congressional Medal of Honor men are. "Considerably more consequential than a mere brigadier," the old soldier put it. "He rates a salute from all ranks — army, navy, marine corps."

That was over the bigwigs' heads. But here was good publicity — and the mayor and the major were extensive realty owners. So they essayed this trip to the sand spit.

But they weren't either of them very much surprised to discover that the alleged hero was quite drunk. Everything but the veteran's true distinction had been well advertised throughout the county.

And old Jack, abruptly awakened, was at his ugliest.

"Mr. Ryan," Mayor Murgatroyd opened, "it has come to our ears that you hold the Congressional Medal of Honor."

Jack sourly sat up. His eyeballs were yellowed and dull; his scant hair bristled ludicrously. Most of his thick chest was bare through the unbuttoned woollen undershirt; his trousers sagged low beneath a bulging abdomen.

"What of it?" he suggested.

The three visitors had come in and closed the door to shut off the icy gale. Lulie, behind the range, peered out at them. Major Wellen, whose military commission derived from the construction of miles of emergency barracks in the Middle

West, spied the dusky child and drew the nasty inference.

"We would — ah — like to see your medal," the mayor offered a cue.

"What for?" Old Jack's eye fixed the bottle. He shuffled to it and drained it clean. Then tossed it empty into a corner.

The immaculate Wellen raised his eyes at his friends.

Jack went back and sat down on the bed, running his hand over the dust-colored tuft of hair in the middle of his bald scalp. He was beginning to feel more pugnacious than trembly. The liquor was taking hold.

"We are anxious to see it," the mayor repeated.

"What's that to me?"

The general spoke quietly. "Ryan, I'm an old soldier myself. Name is Haines. I'd be honored to see your medal."

Jack's yellowed eyes inspected the officer. "I'm tellin' you I lost it."

"Lost it! Well, you have the citation; would show on your service record."

"No. Lost them too; years ago." His wallet, with all his papers, had been stolen from him long before while on a bat in Boston. But the medal he had kept safe in the waist-band pocket of his trousers.

"I told you he didn't have it," the mayor muttered. The enthusiastic reporter fool had been — just enthusiastic. "John J. Ryan, you see," he pointed out astutely to the general, "means absolutely nothing. Fifty — a hundred of that name likely enough in the army."

"A man of this type, my dear General, would scarcely have such a medal," supplied the fat, hotel-keeping major.

Jack spoke up at that. "Drag your fat guts on out o' here!"

NEVERTHELESS the committee of three came back just two days later. General Haines had been busy on the telephone with the Chief of Staff's office in Washington.

Also Mayor Murgatroyd had heard from Sag Harbor all about the Shinnecock vagrant whose child might consistently be left in Jack Ryan's care while her father served out his short sentence. Major Wellen had to stomach the chance of again being grossly insulted.

But no answer came to the knock on Ryan's door; though there was a queer whimpering inside, like a lonely, frightened little animal's. The general pushed the door open.

Old Jack had been dead — pneumonia maybe — for all of twenty-four hours. He was stiff in his drenched clothes upon a sodden mattress.

The dark child said, as the gentlemen stood and stared. "But he foun' me my pretty!" She held up the missing medal.

"Where did you get that, little girl?" The general had his soft hat held precisely across his body at salute.

"My Chrismus gift. I dropped it in the water."

"He went out to get it for you?" said Wellen.

Through the open door you could see the sunshine gleaming as if reflected from glass on the bright armor of ice which sheathed the pilings far above high-water mark. The frozen foam lay on the ridges of the sand of the beach like the artful scallops of a meringue.

"He waded — in this weather — in after it?" Wellen could not fathom this. "He went in after it?"

"Sho, I should smile tuh tell yuh."

Erect by the sodden bed, as at an honored catafalque, the general stirred at last to draw from his pocket a flat morocco case. From it he took

a new medal. Around the dead man's neck he hung the spangled blue ribbon, the bronze star on the gray throat.

"My pretty — anuvver!" Lulie hop-skipped forward.

"No, little girl, you have one." The general stopped her gently. "This is Jack's Christmas gift."

Mid-Winter Brood

BY FAITH VILAS

RIME of north wind and dry-blown weed,
Have woven a nest for Snowbold seed.
This brittle brood is hatched in trees,
To the rock and creak of stiffened knees.

Down slant moon-straws star-milk slips,
Chilled white pap for hungry lips.
Hollow boughs thunder against the cold,
And waken fledglings four frosts old.

While shrill winds whistle through rattling grass,
And icicles clatter clappers of glass;
Down from their nests the weirdlings slide
To dance on the crust of the country-side.