The Messiah

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Abstract

CASUALLY, but in thoughtful respect, John Connor leaned against the starboard railing of an American trooper; it was no pleasure trip this, and the cool pungent salt spray, the darkness of an equinoctial stormy night, the leaping porpoises, the turbulent struggling clouds, and the rolling of other ships in the darkness, seemed as if all in life were a fight...
CASUALLY, but in thoughtful respect, John Connor leaned against the starboard railing of an American trooper; it was no pleasure trip this, and the cool pungent salt spray, the darkness of an equinoctial stormy night, the leaping porpoises, the turbulent struggling clouds, and the rolling of other ships in the darkness, seemed as if all in life were a fight. Darwinism exemplified, and magnified.

Private John Connor was young, but he was matured. Perhaps he was a dilletante in thinking; he didn't know—he was too moody. But he was a fighting soldier, in mind as well as body. And he was on the move, and bound for Hell knows where. But it seemed his ethical right that wondrous thought and troubled meditation should creep so, on this moody night, to some recess in his mind.

Someone walked on the dark deck behind him—he could hear the foot-falls; but they fell unnoticed, until,

“Tin-fish been sighted, soldier.”

John neither moved nor turned, but continued watching a plunging dark ship of the convoy.

“I know it, Mac.”

And the foot-falls passed.

It was his first crisis in war: a wolf pack of German subs, perhaps only one sub, but danger. But it was war, and subs attack convoys; and he was mortal man—no hero, but mortal man; and
hearts still skip, muscles tighten, and empty stomachs flip; doubt quirks the brain, breath speeds, palms sweat; solid railings are not solid; the rational brain doesn't rule, and man is passion.

He gripped the railing, too saturated with fear, too chagrined that fear should possess him; too embarrassed that passion should rule.

Oh, hold on soldier; there was a time when you were trained. But days then were sham of battle, when troops were in maneuver, when every model of stratagem of battle and fight was explained to you. When you were drilled and when you were schooled. When sterling moments were given to the bayonet, to the rifle, to camouflage, hygiene, marching, close combat, the carbine, the machine gun, and the identification of aircraft and tanks. When you built Molotov cocktails, dug slit trenches, threw grenades, fired the bazooka, laid booby traps, set fuses, handled the trails, and drove trucks.

You were trained in body to meet every contingency of battle; you were prepared—until warring became routine.

But yes, it was sham—In your home, free country—real war seemed far away: daily at five o'clock, the business of war stopped, and you returned to your barracks, to freedom; to wash, and to write letters, to go to shows, or to a bar, as you pleased. And confidence was yours.

But now you are on board ship, bound for a task you were trained to face.

Slowly a gradual, but too doubtful, confidence was restored to him. And life around him was again a reality—of mighty waves, of water against steel, of leaping porpoises, and rolling ships. The sub had passed.

Oran was a strange place; no less strange than all Algeria, to John. Fantastic shops, narrow streets, veiled women, tales of Cervantes—An Arabian Nights fantasy.

Olives and fig-groves, slow-moving camel caravans loaded with hemp sacks of dates, slim turrets of mosques, bitter hordes of flies, eye diseases, and tales of quivering dervish dances in dark rooms in a dirty native quarter.

Algeria was a land where men were handsome; where olive complexioned women possessed dark expressive eyes, and beautiful features.
December, 1943

Yes, here was a world so colorful, it seemed as peacetime—even these glimpses from G. I. trucks in convoy. It was all real, but still war, and still a job to be done.

But it was not homesickness that John felt when he saw this exotic throbbing life; but the recurring mental problem of adjustment was choking him, and he knew that it would soon face him again in reality. It concerned the learning of how to face the leaving of an unlived life—his life, of youth and adventure, and beautiful happiness. For time seemed, to his youth, an unexpendable beach of sand with an eternity of it to run through Time's hour-glass.

It was a sobering problem that before would have seemed crass, morbid, alien for a youth.

But that was before, not now.

For now John knew that he was drawing closer to death, farther from life, happiness, home, and America.

Strange shops, bizarre women; thorns in flesh, salt in wounds.

And what to do, he thought. Merely, there's time yet, death comes later.

When the eccentricities of troop movement had settled down, three weeks later, Pvt. Connor's artillery outfit had adjusted to the regular routine of training in base camp in preparation on forty-eight hour notice, to move forward into actual battle.

The day had been hot, intensely so, and the cool refreshing night was slow in coming. And John, a small desert himself, he thought, from the day's maneuvers, slumped onto his bed-roll under his shelter-half, wiped the dust and hot sand from his worn G. I. putts and shoes, unlaced them, dumping the sand onto the ground; and removed his cutting, sweaty fatigues.

Sam Reynolds, his Ozark Missourian tent-mate and fellow cannoneer, soon followed him in, saying, "Well, dogface, get the pass lined up for town tonight?"

"Oh, yeah; the old boy gave the o.k."

"Say, Sam, check the mail, will you?" he said as Reynolds rose slowly and headed for the orderly tent.

"O.K., soldier—but she didn't write anyway; some local's been taking her out back home." A tired attempt at humor, that demanded a stab at it in return.

"Quiet, soldier—you're talking 'bout the one I loves."

But Sam was off—to bring back a V-mail letter—"To Pvt. J.
Connor"—which he sailed into the tent, before flopping again onto his bed-roll.

John lifted the letter, but looked at it slowly as the flow of stopped memories gushed back—silly little memories of his Nancy, of her blond hair like his own; of her blue, sparkling, laughing eyes . . . of Mom and Dad. Oh life, he thought, how hard you are to leave. Quick death, how welcome you would be. Sweet: luxury, idleness and peace.

Should he regiment his thought of his life-before, or try to escape by some physical or mental way? How should he stand the facing of death that was sure to come: escape, or atrophy his mind, his soul, his torturing memories? Would there be a savior, would there be a messiah?

It was only a short trip into Oran, and the jeep screeched down a narrow, crooked street, into the native quarter, to the sign marked, “American bar.”

John alighted, and sauntered onto the walk.

“That’s o.k., soldier.”

And the jeep screeched off.

It was a narrow, dark street John was on; and there was a little chapel on one corner, and shops—Jewish shops, or Arabian, perhaps—that lined the side of the queer crooked street; shops full, probably, of heavy beaten silver—and barbaric jewelry—of wide armlets spiked with four dull nails that, he knew, the women wore.

On the sidewalk near the entrance to the bar, sat an old beggar in tattered rags with a basket wrapped in a strip of linen by his side.

“Sidi,” the beggar pleaded, mumbling and pointing to his basket.

But John was not interested in the escape or petty entertainment which snake displays would provide. It was more than that, and beckoning laughter floated out of the American bar, and as a sea swallows an anchor, sucked him in.

It was a smoky, dark, out-of-the-way place; and inside, as Nancy would have said, “simply reeking”—John half expected a dervish dancer to whirl out from behind the screened ante-room in the back, by that dim light leading to a wooden, beaten, stairway, to an upstairs room.

John walked down two carpeted, worn steps and over to the bar, where only one person sat drinking.
“Draw two bourbon and water.” John turned to the blond who sat there alone drinking. “Should order a dozen, but abstinence, you know.”

John looked at her a second time: oh, that flood back of life—of Nancy—she looked so like Nancy.

But blond curls, where Nancy had none. A little taller. The same laughing blue eyes. But more exotic, more fascinating, more mysterious.

“American?” John asked.

“Yes, sure thing,” she answered, smiling a friendly, lush sort of smile that cheered him. She seemed a full breath of clean pure air.

“Where from?”

“Frisco—soldier.”

“Not soldier! John—John Connor.”

“Mine’s Niobe. Yes, Niobe. My father said I looked as though I would cry the rest of my life when I was first born. So he named me Niobe.”

“Oh, I see. I used to like Frisco, Niobe; used to go down to the wharves, and eat in a little place on the end of the pier, called ‘Red Sails.’ Sometimes I went to Chinatown, with an old friend of mine, Freddie Hong. But that was a long time ago.”

John sipped his bourbon soberly, not as he usually did, one full shot in one quick swallow, but meditatively.

And then there were more drinks—more escape—and dizziness. An upstairs room. Soft, moist lips. Darkness. . . But still chaos, and a troubled, turbulent mind. For there was no inkling of a messiah to save him from himself.

Nine o’clock by the hands of his water-proof wrist watch.

“We’ll go forward at twelve,” said the C. O. “Give them hell, and dish it out till we get through. Show them what you’ve got, men; this is your first real fight; but stick to it, men.

“Kill.

“But . . . good luck. And remember if a buddy falls, don’t stop to pick him up. Go on. The medics will take care of him, not you; we can’t afford to lose the power of two, when only one is a casualty.”

John crouched lower in his sandy slit trench—worried, as every man is, he felt, in his first battle.

He was tired. Constant moving this last week; no sleep, con-
tinual digging in. Constant shelling and rushing. Rommel's Army. Hot Tunisian days. Cold weary nights. He drowsed when he could, and thought. He thought as if all of life were but three hours.

Bite and blow, you damnable seething Tunisian sands; cover that rotting corpse, those white, cold hands; that pack, and that body grotesquely curled. Cover all the carnage of a blundering world. Bite and blow, you shifting dunes, unfurl, and cover all; cut into all but our thoughts.

For escape, you cannot, John. You have tried that. Put off, allay, you cannot. You have tried that.

It is only rational peace of mind that you may resort to; to steady those cold nerves, to chain that passion of your heart, to bring honor to your dying, or virtue to your sacrifice.

For soldier, as you lie here chilling in the cold desert night, in the marrow of this foxhole, this ironic sandy grave, listen closely to the far-off dull roar of artillery fire. Look up last and longingly at the pitch black night, and be not idle and impatient till you go forward; but think, soldier, think.

Think that there can be no thought of sacrifice in death; nor can there be thought of reward, but merely death as an emotionless matter, indifferent, of course, or there will be remorse and question in the facing of it.

Then school your mind, atrophy your soul, and your memories. And be not idle. For soldier, "an idle hand and idle mind," ah, "it plays mischief with the thought."

For soldier, you have forsaken the sweet luxury of idleness, of that peace of mind and body you receive when you do as you wish. So condition your body, and kill your soul. You must live, yet forget. Soldier, squeeze out your memory of life, of gaiety or sorrow; choke and strangle your soul; then glide silently to greet death, like a cold corpse dropping deep into cold dark water; without thought or question; without emotion or remorse.

Ah, you grow numb with the cold; you are grated with the sand that has fallen into that grave of yours when you've rolled. Yes, and your mind, it's confused a little still. Oh, it's that eternal fight within you, of body to conquer will; mind against will; that's what it is. A battle of killed or kill.

Soldier, your soul must atrophy; your soul, soldier, must atrophy until it feels not fear nor sympathy, nor any feeling, except that
of evil instincts—of murder, perhaps; of blood, of lifeless forms.

Oh, doubt not. Allow no doubts as to right of purpose, or the intent of those who have chained you to lie naked. Clothe them quickly with some sort of makeshift garment! Breathe, exist, but forget.

Damn your thoughts, and be not idle. For one nice sharp moment of idle time breaks loose the dam of your regimented thoughts, and lets run, unchecked, and rampant, the raging flood of past memories—memories of life and the sacred, even inviolate, past.

Blow, you savage Tunisian sands, blow. And hell, open wider your fiery mouth; you do but mock when man’s at war.

Bestir yourself to action, soldier. You are neither Horatio nor Lancelot, but a soldier in khaki. Confidence is again yours. You may face death without emotion, without fear. Your messiah has come. Onward, soldier, on to Bergundi.

Doctor of Chemistry
Bernice Herrig

YOU should have seen the way she was dressed! I could have screamed, she looked so funny, girls. If Dr. Glazer is an example of accepted German grooming—then I prefer my teachers from New York.” Marie Johnson laid her chemistry laboratory manual on the black-top desk. She shrugged out of her gray Chesterfield and hung it on a wall peg. Rapidly, the pegs were being used until only the few farthest from the door were left to be filled.

In the distance the boats throbbed steadily as they pulled into New York harbor, dumping their cargoes of wide-eyed refugees on the shores of this strange new land. If, by chance, one of the immigrants happened to gaze at the college, a disinterested official would offer, “Those buildings? Oh! Miss Hanson’s school.” Perhaps, he would add, “Of exclusive education.”

“And what did you say then?” Helen Black arched a penciled eyebrow. The girls gathered closer.

“Well—,” Marie snapped open a leather compact and propped