Sergeant Jack

L. A. Kiger*

*Iowa State College

Copyright ©1955 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
Sergeant Jack

L. A. Kiger

Abstract

PERSALES BOUNDED down the steps from the squad room two at a time. As he charged into the hall by the mess hall door he saw that he was first in line. He glanced at the clock and decided that he didn’t have time to shave before supper. This was once when he’d have to do a special job on it...
PERSALES BOUNDED down the steps from the squad room two at a time. As he charged into the hall by the mess hall door he saw that he was first in line. He glanced at the clock and decided that he didn't have time to shave before supper. This was once when he'd have to do a special job on it. Anxiety gnawed at him as he thought of discussing the plans of his approaching wedding to Margie with her folks, but there was an excitement, too. It was something he had teased a lot of his friends about, but now it was happening to him. He teetered back and forth on his heels and grinned to himself. It wasn't everyday you found a girl like Margie. Lost in his thoughts, he fished a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and banged it against the heel of his hand until he could draw out a cigarette.

Other men formed in a line behind him but he was haz ing absently around him. No more two-toned rust-and-dirty-cream walls. No more foot-locker inspections. No more sleeping with fifty snoring groaning men. No more Sergeant Jack telling you when to go to bed or getting you out of bed at five-thirty by playing shrieking tunes on the intercom set.

He was brought rudely from his pleasant reverie by the voice of Sergeant Jack. "Corporal Persales!"
"Yeah?" He could tell by the annoyed tone that it was the second or third time Jack had spoken.
"Answer the phone while I punch chow cards."
"I can't do it tonight, Jack. I got a big date at 6:30 and I've still got to shave and clean up. Next time, huh?"
"You heard me. Answer the phone."
"Aw come on, Sergeant Jack. I've done it a lot of times. Let someone else do it today. This is a very important date. I'll catch it tomorrow or next day." He turned back towards the door and forgot the matter. It would be paradise away from this silly childish boob.

Sergeant Jack stood with spread legs, hands on his hips, and a scowl on his face. "Corporal Persales, I gave you an order."

Henson, fourth in line, stepped out and said. "I'll take it, Jack. I ain't goin' anywhere tonight." Somewhere down the hall a bull-voiced master sergeant bellowed, "For Christ sake, Jack, let him go on his date. It's just chow time now. Quit holding up the line."

Sergeant Jack settled himself, pulled his head down between his shoulders like a bulldog, and said in a grating voice, "Somebody has to answer the phone and I told you to do it, Persales. When I give an order around here it's an order. Now answer that phone."

Persales fidgeted uncomfortably as a growl rose from the rest of the line. From the back of the line came shouts of "Let's eat" and "Get it in gear, Jack," while the men in front, who knew what was happening, were muttering angrily and none too softly among themselves. Henson stepped out and again volunteered to take Persales' place. Jack told him to shut up and get back in line. Persales could feel his face burning and sweat breaking out over his body. His mouth was dry and his palms were sticky. He felt like a fool for holding up the line, but he could only take so much before putting up a stand. He stood defiantly, dragging deeply on his cigarette, and thinking of a hundred logistical things to say to Jack. Nothing came from his tight lips, though. It would seem too much like begging and besides, logic wouldn't work on Jack. He raised his eyes from the glowing cigarette tip and looked directly at Jack.

The turmoil in the hall was increasing. More and more men were tagging on the end of the line and adding their insults and curses. Men afraid to insult Jack openly were using the covering din to call him every name they could lay their tongue to. In the kitchen the cooks were gesturing madly for the men to enter. Over the bedlam the foghorn
voice of the master sergeant boomed, "Cut this squabbling the hell out, Jack, and get moving. I'm hungry."

Jack was shifting on his feet. He glared nervously at the roaring line and made one final effort in a nasty voice, "I ordered you to answer the phone, Persales. Are you going to do it?"

Persales hesitated for an instant. In the uproar he had momentarily forgotten his date. It had become a matter of principles. Was he going to let this fool shove him around? Were the consequences worth the defiance? The instant passed and he said angrily, "No."

"All right," said Jack. "We'll see what the lieutenant has to say about it." He stalked into the mess hall and began to punch chow cards viciously.

Persales left the mess hall quickly. He had not eaten much, but what he had eaten lay heavily in his stomach. Was Jack low enough to tell Lieutenant Thompson? He had a desperate feeling that Jack was when he saw him sitting at the C.Q. desk with a triumphant smirk on his face. "You are ordered to report to the orderly room immediately," he snarled.

Persales entered the door by Jack's desk, and in a barely audible voice mumbled his name and rank to the stiff lieutenant.

"I understand you disobeyed an order of Sergeant Jack's. Is that correct?" he clipped out in an uninterested voice.

"Yes, sir."

"Evidently you don't understand that when Sergeant Jack's in charge of quarters, his orders are to be followed as you would follow mine. If everyone ignored his orders he wouldn't have any authority whatsoever. You are on fourteen days' restriction with extra duty for two hours each night."

There was more but Persales didn't hear it. Where was the justice in the army? Hell, there wasn't any. He didn't even get a chance to give his side. Disappointment and outrage added weight to his undigested supper. He wasn't worried about Margie. She would drive out to see him and he could slip out to see her between the times when he had to
sign in. But what about her folks? They liked him, but what would they think of a guy who got himself restricted just before his marriage?

Damn that stool pigeon, Jack! It was easy to see why he came back to the barracks from his infrequent trips to town with black eyes. Just wait until he caught that skunk alone in town. He'd get more than a couple of black eyes. Persales could feel the blood pounding through his head as he contemplated what he would do to Jack. One of these nights Jack would be making his rounds with his flashlight, like the Green Hornet entering a den of kidnappers, and a mob would take him apart. Just so he could get his crack at Jack first.

Finally the lieutenant droned out, “Dismissed,” and Persales saluted, about faced, and left the orderly room. From the smug look on Jack's face it was evident he had been listening. The blood pounded harder and rage almost choked him.

“Get into your fatigues,” Jack sneered. “You've got two hours of extra duty to pull. You'll find a mop and bucket and broom in the latrine. I want this whole hall mopped before you quit.”

Persales fists clenched and he glared at Jack with red eyes. Just in time he remembered the lieutenant in the room beyond. No use to lose his stripes, too. He spun on his heel and walked off, his shoulders slumping. Sergeant Jack watched him trudge slowly up the stairs. Then Jack grinned, puffed out his chest, and returned to his comic book.