

Death Leaves You Like That

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HAVE you ever seen death? Not dead people, but death? Did you ever see a dog hit by a car, and watch him struggle, and whine, and sob? That is part of death. Have you ever read about a person taking poison and the way he gasped in agony, breath coming shorter and faster until there was no more breath? That too, is part of death. Have you ever smelled the odor of gangrene? No struggle here, just a repugnant odor. Did you ever sit up all night with an old person, all worn out by life, and watch him slowly grow weaker until at last a soft gurgle of the death rattle in his throat tells you he has passed away? This too, is part of death. But even though you have seen all of these things you have not seen death—only a part of it. The struggles of the dog, the agony of the poison, the strangulation of the gangrene, and the gentle passing away of the old person, last but a moment and all is over. Death has been present, and you have felt helpless, but you get over it.

Oh, I thought I had seen death. In Italy I saw masses of little children and adults so weakened by lack of food that they were no more than animals when food was present. I saw a few of them die, but not many. I broke the law and fed some of them, knowing all the time that the small bit I had contributed was no more effective than a single drop of rain on a field of parched corn. But this I became used to, and in time, I even came to hate these people for being hungry.

In Africa I visited a French jail, and saw the jailer step into a cage, and with

his whip, beat the inmates back into a corner while his partner poured slop into a dirty pig trough. I saw these unfortunate Arabs, whose only crime was an intense hatred of the French people and a desire for freedom, fight and claw each other madly, screaming to get at that trough filled with food. Starvation will do that to human beings.

I saw men, American soldiers, being shot by enemy bullets, being torn and mutilated beyond recognition. I heard their pitiful cries for help when they were beyond all human aid. This was not the same as starvation, and was not death.

I did see death. It is indescribable. You don't just see it, you smell it, you feel it, and you hear it. It is in the air and you cannot escape its presence. When you eat, you taste it; when you sleep, you dream of it, and thought is impossible because death alone fills your mind. I was told I would get used to it, but I never did.

I was ordered to report to India by air, and just as we received the approach signal, the major, who was in charge of our plane, stood up and addressed us. "Now, gentlemen, in five minutes we will land and be checked in. A truck will be waiting to take you to your quarters in town. As you know, the town is under strict martial law, and at the first sign of disturbance the MP's shoot first and ask questions later. Conduct yourselves as gentlemen, follow orders, and you will have no trouble. What you see here will at first sicken you, but you will get used to it. The only thing to do is to ignore it. You are here for a specific purpose. Remember that and do only what you have to do, and let all other matters not

connected with your assignment alone." And so I heard it again, over and over, the same old story. "Remember that these natives are little more than animals and death is cheap." Hell, I knew human life was cheap. I thought I had seen death.

By three o'clock I was checked in, bathed, and freshly dressed. I met the chaplain who was to conduct me on a tour of the city. He was a middle aged man; he had a very haggard look. True to army style, he was very friendly and good-natured. He spoke rather fast and with a soft voice. As I expected, he gave me the usual lecture on the usual subject, and cautioned me that I would get used to what I was about to see. He urged me to regard these people as animals. He said I was free to join him in prayer, and felt sure I would need it after I had toured the city.

The tour left me sick. I have never fully recovered from it. Then, for the first time, I saw death.

Of course I had been prepared for this in a general sort of way, but nothing could prepare me for what I saw. I had been wondering about the sickish-sweet smell in the air, and about the low moans that seemed to accompany the smell; but God, no imagination could fathom that horror. We drove most of the way until the road became so clogged with human bodies that we had to walk on for the rest of our tour. On every side people were either dead or dying. They were starved to death. The four MP's guarding us kept the poor devils away by frequent and violent use of their clubs. I really believe they were doing some of these people a favor, because for many of them, a crack on the head killed them instantly and put them out of their misery. For the most part, the natives just lay down and stayed there until they died.

This was death. Struggle? Even as

they were dumped into their graves, I could see a final twist of the body, or flop of a leg or an arm, as they reluctantly yielded to their fate. Agony? What greater agony can there be than to die of starvation in the midst of plenty? Violence and brutality? There is no greater violence, or nothing more brutal, than to be clubbed for asking for a crust of bread.

The government had several hundred wagons and trucks working night and day in the city hauling these dead bodies away, to be dumped into huge pits. On the outskirts of the city I saw huge mounds of these mass graves. Cremation was impossible because the government did not have enough ovens to do the job.

It is said that you can get used to any smell if you smell it long enough; your sense of smell will become paralyzed and you will be immune. This is not true of the smell of death. You never get used to it. I smell it yet. It is sweetish, and very sickening. It hangs in the air, which is very close and damp. You can feel the smell in the air.

That night the cook served us fried chicken, with coffee and cake for dessert. How could I eat when I could hear the constant moans of thousands dying of starvation? The food we were served tasted of the death all around us. I stumbled outside and vomited.

I had but one consolation—my job was a short one—and I could leave as soon as I had finished. It took six days. I came to India a young, tough army sergeant, cocky as they come. I left it old, weak, and nearly broken. For a long time I ate very little and lost a great deal of weight. Finally I recovered, but I will always smell that smell, and hear those moans. Even now I wake up at night in a cold sweat, sometimes screaming that prayer will not stop death. Death leaves you like that.