

Rainy Season

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It was a gloomy, drenched day. The sky was darkening imperceptibly but steadily, obscuring the view from the very small mess hall which huddled in the middle of a muddy waste. The only thing which identified it as a mess hall was the presence of the two soldiers who were sitting over their coffee. To them, it was weather of a monotonous sadness which seemed to have settled upon them, branding them permanently.

Bob picked up an awkward canteen cup with the adeptness of constant use, closed his eyes against the steam from the cup and swallowed some of the hot coffee. When he could feel it finally warming the pit of his stomach, he turned to his friend and asked: "Do you suppose we'll ever feel warm again?"

"God, I hope so," Bill replied. "If anyone had ever told me I'd be this cold when water wouldn't even freeze in puddles, I'd have told them they were nuts."

"At home," Bob said repetitiously, "It gets a lot colder than this, but you don't feel it like you do this cold. It's not so penetrating, and besides there is always heat wherever you go. My joints have frozen up until I feel almost ninety years old."

"I think I know what you mean. We used to go up in the mountains where the snow was several feet deep and the temperature was at least twenty degrees colder than it is here, but the air was not so damp, and you could always build a big fire in the lodge and be warm as toast." He took a big gulp of coffee, spit it out, made gagging noises and banged his cup on the table in disgust. "Cold!" His nose wrinkled menacingly. "A man can't drink out of these

cups. The coffee is always too hot or too cold. Maybe there is a moment when it is just right, but I've never found it."

The anger in his voice was infectious; and Bob hurled his cigarette butt to the floor, threw his mess gear together, arose hastily and hurried out of the mess hall. Devoid of anything human, the shack that was their dining room was nothing but a few sticks of wood thrown together to keep out the full fury of the weather. Small puddles on the floor proved that it was not a success. The only furnishings were four tables and benches similar to those found in most park picnic grounds.

Outside, the two men slipped through the mud toward the three drums of water mounted over nearly-extinguished fires. In silence, they dipped their mess kits in the greasy water and then made a futile pass at them with equally greasy cloths which they both carried for that purpose. When they had completed this operation, they slipped and skated through the mud to their barracks. The barracks was a large red masonry building which looked substantial and comfortable. It was substantial and it would have been comfortable if it had been heated. The building had two floors which were divided into large, long rooms. The room which Bob and Bill entered was furnished with nineteen beds. Their lack of uniformity attested to the ingenuity to which the men had been driven in order to provide themselves with sleeping facilities. In one corner of the room, there was a table with two long benches. Three men were seated at the table, playing rummy or pinochle. Several of the other occupants of the barracks were sitting, reclining, sleeping, reading, talking, smoking, medi-

tating, dressing or undressing.

Bob and Bill hung their mess kits on nails behind their beds which were side by side. Bob removed his coat, peeled a blanket from his bed, draped that around his shoulders and sauntered to the table in the corner to kibitz. Bill repeated the ritual of the coat and blanket, lit a cigarette and joined Bob at the table.

"How about a game of poker?" asked Kenneth Anderson.

"Nickle-and-dime," Bill said. "That's all I got—nickles and dimes."

"Sure," Bob replied.

"Straight draw poker. Nothin' wild," Kenneth announced.

"Right," the other four men said.

They cut for deal. Bill won and riffled the cards. The ante was carefully counted and the game began. They played soberly, carefully, unenthusiastically. It had become quite dark and they were hunched over their cards, straining their eyes to interpret them when the lights finally blinked and came on. The power was weak and the lights were feeble and inconstant.

While they played, the activities of the barracks went on about them, virtually unnoticed by them. Three men sat on two beds in the opposite corner of the room, solemnly stowing away the contents of some bottles of cheap wine which one of them had just brought from the neighboring small French village. The other occupants continued to sleep, read, talk, smoke, meditate; and more and more undressed and went to bed. However, this was usually a defense against the cold and did not greatly change their activities.

The money flowed back and forth across the table. The conversation continued to be limited to the exigencies of the game. They underwent occasional tense, emotional crises when they all became more sober, more careful, more unenthusiastic. There was a halt in the game when the

lights flickered and went off. It was growing late, but the lights had ceased to function due to a power failure, not a curfew. There had been a curfew at one time, but it had been ignored by the men of the base for so long that the authorities had forgotten it, too.

When candles had been lighted, the game continued. Now, the reading ceased. The barracks became, if anything, noisier, for those who still were not sleepy joined the talkers. The wine-drinkers in the opposite corner gained a member. But they were less solemn than before. Their stories were the funniest stories being told in the barracks. They laughed, slapped their legs, rocked, refilled their glasses and ventured another story. As they became louder, there was an ominous threshing in the bed next to them. They ignored it.

Outside, the rain fell nonchalantly. It was a brief reprieve from the vehemence of the weather. The base was quiet. All planes were grounded. Only scattered flights punctuated the moments of good weather in the normal three months of rain.

The card game went on. The four men in the other corner who were drunk were each singing snatches of songs, trying to find one that they could all remember. Finally, one of them got out a book which had come into his possession and which had some of the latest songs in it. They found one that had managed a degree of infiltration from the States and began to sing.

"Long ago and far away,

I dreamed a dream one day,

Long the skies were overcast . . ."

"Can't you guys shut up. It's late,"

The disgruntled voice came from the bed next to the drunks. It was a bed that was constantly occupied by its owner and from which such remarks were always expected. The card players were playing the war away; the drunks were drinking the war

away; the guy in bed was doing his best to sleep the war away.

The drunks replied, each in his own way, and continued to sing. The card players became more intense. Bill held a full house and was betting heavily. Bob and Kenneth were staying with him. Bob, who held three queens, finally got cautious and folded his hand. Kenneth raised. Bill called. And Kenneth spread four treys and a jack.

Bill raved: "Of all the Goddamned luck. Of all the stinking, dirty, Goddamned luck. I never saw the like of it." He raved and banged the table. The rest of the men laughed as Kenneth triumphantly raked in the pot.

"I'll be damned," said the guy who had been threshing in bed. "I never heard such a damned lot of noise in my life."

"Go to hell," the drunks and card players shouted him down in chorus.

The guy got up, muttering to himself: "I never saw such damned, inconsiderate people in my life."

The rest of them watched him go. Then they laughed.

"Who does he think *he* is?" Bill asked.

"Does he think he's a privileged charac-

ter?" Bob asked.

"To hell with him," Kenneth said. Many of his poker games had been interrupted in this way. "He sleeps all the time or a little noise wouldn't bother him. He can go straight to hell."

But the drunks were swinging into action. They had devised a plan. They were busily preparing his bed for him. They worked slowly and deliberately. When they finished, the bed was a master-piece of delicate balance. Quickly, they all scurried back to their places, resumed their singing and refilled their glasses. The card players endorsed the action by resuming their own normal activities.

The man returned. He had had many tricks played on him, but his anger had made him forget again. He threw himself petulantly onto the bed. It collapsed with a clatter. There he lay, shaken and outraged. When he could finally speak, he growled, "You bastards."

The desired effect sent them off into mirthless laughter. The elements had again marshalled their forces. The wind had blown up again; the rain beat with renewed fury. The rainy season was endless.