

# Old Doc Yak

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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He was a man without humor. He seemed somehow aloof, invulnerable. Even his walk was pompous and majestic. He strode with the step of kings and spoke with the voice of an oracle, entirely unaware that his whole being was faintly ludicrous, that those about him were always suspended between laughter and amazed respect.

Someone began calling him Old Doc Yak for no apparent reason, and the name stayed with him. He was a large man, rather portly, wearing a constantly grave expression and given to a pompous manner of speech. His most simple remark was uttered with a sense of earthshaking import, and a listener invariably held his breath in sheer suspense as he began to speak, only to suffer that sense of frustration one feels when an expected explosion fails to materialize.

His conversation was a garden of the baroque in which biological and geological terms flowered in the most unexpected places. Jim commented once that someone must have thrown a dictionary at him and he got all the words but none of the definitions. We listened in amused astonishment as he would stand, head slightly

tilted to one side, an open palm aslant his rather generous stomach, which he would pat affectionately as though in amused approbation of his remarks.

Those were harsh, bitter days. The waterfronts were alive with seamen, all hunting ships. One theme predominated in all our conversations, in all our thoughts, perhaps even in the very pulsing of our blood—how to get by.

No normal brain housed in a warm and sheltered body could possibly conceive of the devious and doubtful schemes contrived to keep soul and body together. Hunger sharpens the wits and renders less effective the moral creeds and codes by which we guide our law-abiding lives. Some of us who were there could even think of the philosophical ramifications of our lives and of our actions. The narrow line that divides the average young man or woman from stealing, begging, or prostitution, is one that has little to do with religion or ethics but only such simple animal necessities as food and shelter. We had been talking of that when Old Doc Yak ventured his one remark.

“I think,” he said, pausing portentously, “that any man who will beg, who will so demean himself as to ask for food upon the streets, will stoop to any abomination no matter how low.”

He arose, and with a finality that permitted of no reply, turned his back and walked away. It was one of the few coherent statements I ever heard him make, and I watched his broad back, stiff with self-righteousness, as he walked away. I watched, as suddenly speechless as the others.

There was probably not a man present who had not at some time panhandled on the streets. They were a rough, free-handed lot, men who gave willingly when they had it and did not hesitate to ask when in need. All were men who worked, who performed the rough, hard, dangerous work of the world, yet they were men without words, and no reply came to their lips to answer that broad back or the bitter finality of that remark. In their hearts they felt him wrong, for they were sincere men, if not eloquent.

Often after that I saw him on the streets. Always stiff and straight, he never unbent so far as to speak, never appeared even to notice my passing. He paid his way with a careful hand and lived remote from our lonely, uncomfortable world. From meal to meal we had no idea as to the origin of the next, and our nights were spent wherever there was shelter from the wind. Off on the horizon of our hopelessness there was always that miracle—a ship—and endlessly we made the rounds in search of work. Shipping proceeded slowly, and men struggled for the few occasional jobs alongshore. Coming and going on my own quest, I saw men around me drawn fine by hunger, saw their necks become gaunt, their clothing more shabby. It was a bitter struggle to survive in a man-made jungle.

The weeks drew on, and one by one we saw the barriers we had built against hunger slowly fall away. By that time there were few who had not walked the streets looking for the price of a cup of coffee, but even the ready generosity of a seaport town had been strained, and shipping seemed to have fallen off.

One morning a man walked into the Seaman’s Institute and fainted away. We had seen him around for days, a quiet young man who seemed to know no one, to have no contacts, too proud to ask for food and too backward to find other means. And then he walked in that morning and crumpled up on the floor like an empty sack.

It was a long moment before any of us moved. We stood staring down at him, and each of us was seeing the specter of his own hunger.

Then Parnatti was arrested. He had been hungry before, and we had heard him say, "I'm going to eat. If I can make it honest, I'll make it, but I'm going to eat regardless." We understood his feelings, although the sentiments were not ours. Contrary to opinion, it is rarely the poor who steal. People do not steal for the necessities but for the embellishments, but when the time came, Parnatti stole a car from a parking lot and sold it. We saw the item in the paper without comfort and then turned almost without hope to the list of incoming ships. Any one of them might need a man; any one of them might save us from tomorrow.

Old Doc Yak seemed unchanged. He came and went as always, as always his phrases bowed beneath a weight of words. I think, vaguely, we all resented him. He was so obviously not a man of the sea, so obviously not one of us. I believe he had been a steward, but stewards were rarely popular in the old days on the merchant ships. Belly robbers, they called them.

Glancing over the paper one afternoon, searching for a ship that might need men, I looked up accidentally just in time to see Old Doc Yak passing a hand over his face. The hand trembled.

For the first time I really saw him. Many times in the past few days we had passed each other on the street, each on his way to survival. Often we had sat in the main room at the Institute, but I had paid little attention. Now, suddenly, I was aware of the change. His vest hung a little slack, and the lines in his face were deeper. For the moment even his pompous manner had vanished. He looked old and tired.

In the ugly jungle of the waterfront the brawl for existence left little time for thinking of anything except the immediate and ever-present need for shelter and food for the body. Old Doc Yak had been nothing more than another bit of waterfront jetsam discarded from the whirl of living into the lazy maelstrom of those alongshore. Now, again, as on that other night, he became an individual, and probably for the first time I saw the man as he was and as he must have seen himself.

Tipped back against the wall, feeling the tightness of my leather jacket across my shoulders, I rubbed the stubble on my unshaved chin and wondered about him. I guess each of us has an illusion about himself. Somewhere inside of himself he has a picture of himself he believes is true. I guess it was that way with Doc. Aloof from those of us who lived around him, he existed in a world of his own creation, a world in which he had importance, a world in which he was somebody. Now, backed into a corner by economic necessity, he was a little puzzled and a little helpless.

Some of us had rented a shack. For six dollars a month we had shelter from the wind and rain, a little chipped crockery, a stove, and a bed. There was a cot in the corner where I slept, and somebody had rustled an old mattress that was stretched out on the deck—floor, I should say. For a dime or perhaps three nickels, if he was good for them, a man could share the bed with three or four others. For a nickel a man got an armful of old newspapers with which he could roll up on the floor. And with the money gathered in such a way we paid another month's rent.

It wasn't much, but it was a corner away from the wind, a place of warmth, and a retreat from the stares of the police and the more favored. Such a place was needed, and never did men return home with more thankfulness than we returned to that shack on its muddy hillside. Men came and went in the remaining weeks of our stay, the strange, drifting motley of the waterfront, men good, bad, and indifferent. Men were there who knew the ports and rivers of a hundred countries, men who knew every sidetrack from Hoboken to Seattle. And then one night Old Doc Yak walked up the path to the door.

There was rain that night, a cold, miserable rain, and a wind that blew it against our thin walls. It was just after ten when the knock came at the door, and when Copper opened it, Old Doc walked in. For a moment his small blue eyes blinked against the light, and then he looked about, a slow distaste growing on his face. There was a sailor's neatness about the place, but it was crude and not at all attractive.

He looked tired, and some of his own neatness was lacking. He might have been fifty-five, but he looked older then, yet his eyes were still remote, unseeing of us, who were the dregs. He looked around again, and we saw his hesitation, sensed the defeat that must have brought him, at last, to this place. But our shack was warm.

"I would like," he said ponderously, "a place to sleep."

"Sure," I said, getting up from the rickety chair I'd tipped against the wall. "There's room in the double bed for one more. It'll cost you a dime."

"You mean," he asked abruptly, and he actually looked at me, "that I must share a bed?"

"Sorry. This isn't the Biltmore. You'll have to share with Copper and Red."

He was on the verge of leaving when a blast of wind and blown rain struck the side of the house, sliding around under the eaves and whining like a wet saw. For an instant he seemed to be weighing the night, the rain and the cold against the warmth of the shack. Then he opened his old-fashioned purse and lifted a dime from its depths.

I say "lifted," and so it seemed. Physical effort was needed to get that dime into my hand, and his fingers released it reluctantly. It was obviously the last of his carefully hoarded supply. Then he walked heavily into the other room and lay down on the bed. It was the first time I had ever seen him lie down, and all his poise seemed suddenly to evaporate, his stiff-necked righteousness seemed to wilt, and all his ponderous posturing with words became empty and pitiful. Lying on the bed with the rain pounding on the roof, he was only an old man, strangely alone.

Sitting in the next room with fire crackling in the stove and the rattling of rain on the windows, I thought about him. Youth and good jobs were behind him, and he was facing a question to which all the ostentatious vacuity of his words gave no reply. The colossal edifice he had built with high-sounding words, the barriers he had attempted to erect between himself and his doubt of himself were crumbling. I put another stick in the stove, watched the fire lick the dampness from its face, and listened to rain beating against the walls and the labored breathing of the man on the bed.

In the washroom of the Seaman's Institute weeks before we had watched him shave. It had been a ritual lacking only incense. The glittering articles from his shaving kit, these had been blocks in the walls of his self-esteem. The careful lathering of his florid cheeks, the application of shaving lotion, these things had been steps in a ritual that never varied. We who were disciples of Gillette and dull blades watched him with something approaching reverence and went away to marvel.

Knowing what must have happened in the intervening weeks, I could see him going to the pawnshop with first one and then another of his prized possessions, removing bit by bit the material things, those glittering silver pieces that shored up his self-vision. Each time his purse would be replenished for a day or two, and as each article passed over the counter into that great maw from which nothing ever returns, I could see some particle of his dignity slipping away. He was a capitalist without capital, a conqueror without conquests, a vocabulary without expression. In the stove the fire crackled; on the wide bed the old man muttered, stirring in his sleep. It was very late.

He did not come again. Several times the following night I walked to the door, almost hoping to see his broad bulk as it labored up the hill. Even Copper looked uneasily out of the window, and Slim took a later walk than usual. We were a group that was closely knit, and though he had not belonged, he had for one brief night been one of us, and when he did not return, we were uneasy.

It was after twelve before Slim turned in. It had been another wet night, and he was tired. He stopped by my chair where I sat reading a magazine.

"Listen," he said, flushing a little, "if he comes, Old Doc, I mean, I'll pay if he ain't got the dime. He ain't such a bad guy."

"Sure," I said. "Okay."

He didn't come. The wind whined and snarled around the corners of the house, and we heard the tires of a car whine on the wet pavement below. It is a terrible thing to see a man's belief in himself crumble, for when one loses faith in one's own illusion, there is nothing left. Even Slim understood that. It was almost daybreak before I fell asleep.

Several nights drifted by. There was food to get, and the rent was coming due. We were counting each dime, for we had not yet made the six dollars. There was still a gap, a breach in our wall that we might not fill. And outside was the night, the rain, and the cold.

The RICHFIELD, a Standard tanker, was due in. I had a shipmate aboard her, and when she came up the channel, I was waiting on the dock. They might need an A.B.

They didn't.

It was a couple of hours later when I climbed the hill toward the shack. I didn't often go that way, but this time it was closer, and I was worried. The night before I'd left the money for the rent in a thick white cup on the cupboard shelf. And right then murder could be done for five bucks. Accidentally I glanced in the window. Then I stopped.

Old Doc Yak was standing by the cupboard, holding the white cup in his hand. As I watched, he dipped his fingers in and drew out some of our carefully gleaned nickels, dimes, and quarters. Then he stood there letting those shining metal disks

trickle through his thick fingers and back into the cup. Then he dipped his fingers again, and I stood there, holding my breath.

A step or two and I could have stopped him, but I stood there, gripped by his indecision, half guessing what was happening inside him. Here was money. Here, for a little while, was food, a room, a day or two of comfort. I do not think he considered the painstaking effort to acquire those few coins or the silent, bedraggled men who had trooped up the muddy trail to add a dime or fifteen cents to the total of our next month's rent. What hunger had driven him back, I knew. What helplessness and humiliation waited in the streets below, I also knew.

Slowly, one by one, the coins dribbled back into the cup, the cup was returned to the shelf, and Old Doc Yak turned and walked from the door. For one moment he paused, his face strangely gray and old, staring out across the bleak, rain-washed roofs toward the gray waters of the channel and Terminal Island just beyond.

Then he walked away, and I waited until he was out of sight before I went inside, and I, who had seen so much of weariness and defeat, hesitated before I took down the cup. It was all there, and suddenly I was a little sorry that it was.

Once more I saw him. One dark, misty night I came up from the lumber docks, collar turned up, cap pulled low, picking my way through the shadows and over the railroad ties, stumbling along rails lighted only by the feeble red and green of switch lights. Reaching the street, I scrambled up the low bank and saw him standing in the light of a street lamp.

He was alone, guarded from friendship as always by his icy impenetrability but somehow strangely pathetic with his sagging shoulders and graying hair. I started to speak, but he turned up his coat collar and walked away down a dark street.

