

Thicker Than Blood

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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He had it coming if ever a man did, and I could have killed him then and nobody the wiser. If he had been man enough, we could have gone off on the dock and slugged it out, and everything would have been settled either way the cat jumped. There's nothing like a sock on the chin to sort of clean things up. It saves hard feelings and time wasted in argument. But Duggs was the chief mate, who wasn't man enough to whip me and knew it.

Bilge water, they say, is thicker than blood, and once men have been shipmates, no matter how much they hate each other's guts, they stand together against the world. That's the way it is supposed to be, but it certainly wasn't going to be that way with Duggs and me. I decided that in a hurry.

From the hour I shipped on that freighter, Duggs made it tough for me, but it wasn't only me but the whole crew. You don't mind so much if a really tough guy makes you like it, but when a two-by-twice scenery bum like Duggs rubs it in to you just because he has the authority, it just naturally hurts.

If we'd gone off on the dock where it was man to man, I'd have lowered the boom on his chin and left him for the gulls to pick over. But we were aboard ship, and if you sock an officer aboard ship, it's your neck.

Sometimes I think he laid awake nights figuring ways to be nasty, but maybe he didn't have to go to that much effort. I suspect it just came naturally. He made it rough for all of us but particularly me. Not that I didn't have my chances to cool him off. I had three of them. The first was at sea, the second in Port Swettenham, and the third—well, you'll hear about that.

Every dirty job he could find fell to Tony or me, and he could think of more ways to be unpleasant without trying than you could if you worked at it. Unless you have been at sea, you can't realize how infernally miserable it can become. There are a thousand little, insignificant things that can be done to make it miserable. Always something, and it doesn't have to be anything big. Often it is the little things that get under your skin, and the longer it lasts, the worse it gets.

Of course, the food was bad, but that was the steward's fault. Curry and rice and fried potatoes for three straight weeks. That was bad enough, but Duggs kept finding work for us to do after we were off watch. Emergencies, he called them, and you can't refuse duty in an emergency. There were men aboard that ship who would have killed Duggs for a Straits dollar. Me, I'm an easygoing guy, but it was getting to me.

One morning at four o'clock I was coming off watch. It was blowing like the bull of Barney, and a heavy sea running. Duggs had just come on watch, and he calls to me to go aft with him and lend a hand. The log line was fouled. Back we went, and the old tub was rolling her scuppers under, with seas breaking over her that left you gasping like a fish out of water, they were that cold.

We reeled in the log line, hand over hand, the wind tearing at our clothes, the deck awash. He did help some, I'll give him that, but it was me who did the heavy hauling, and it was me who cleared the little propeller on the patent log of seaweed and rope yarns.

Right there was the perfect opportunity. Nobody would have been surprised if we'd both been washed over the side, so it would have been no trick to have dumped him over the rail and washed my hands of him. Duggs had on sea boots and oilskins, and he would have gone down quick.

I finished the job, tearing skin from my hands and getting salt into the raw wounds, the ship plunging like a crazy bronco in a wild and tormented sea. Then, in the moment when I could have got him and got him good, he leaned over and shouted to be heard above the wind, „There! I'm sure glad I managed to get that done!“

And I was so mad I forgot to kill him.

The next time was in Port Swettenham. Duggs knew I had a girl in Singapore, but instead of letting me go ashore, he put me on anchor watch. All night long I stood by the rail or walked the deck, looking at the far-off lights of town and cussing the day I shipped on a barge with a louse-bound, scupper-jumping, bilge-swilling rat for mate. And my girl was ashore expecting me—at least, I hoped she was.

We sailed from Singapore, called at Baliwan and Penang, and finally we crawled up the river to Port Swettenham.

It was hot and muggy. Keeping cool was almost impossible, and I had only two changes of clothes for working. One of them I managed to keep clean to wear off watch; the other was stiff with paint and tar. When time allowed I'd wash the one set and switch. The mate deliberately waited one day until I'd changed into clean clothes, and then he called me.

We were taking on some liquid rubber, and down in the empty fuel-oil tank in the forepeak was a spot of water about as big as a pie plate. He told me to climb down fifteen feet of steel ladder covered with oil slime and sop up that water. Aside from being a complete mess before I'd reached the bottom, there was almost an even chance I'd slip and break a leg.

Forward we went together, then down in the forepeak, and stopped by the manhole that let one into the tank. He held up his flashlight, pointing out that dime's worth of water. I had a steel scraper in my hand, and when he leaned over that manhole, I thought what a sweet setup that was.

I could just bend that scraper over his head, drop him into the tank, put the hatch cover on, then go on deck and give them the high sign to start pumping rubber. There'd be a fuss when the mate turned up missing, but they'd never find him until they emptied the tank, and if I knew the old man, I knew he'd never pump the rubber out of that tank for a dozen mates. And just then Chips stuck his head down the hatch and yelled for Duggs.

Time passed, and we tied up in Brooklyn. I drew my pay and walked down the gangway to the dock. Then I turned and looked back.

From beginning to end that voyage had been plain, unadulterated hell, yet I hated to leave. When a guy lives on a ship that long, it begins to feel like home no matter how rough it is, and I had no other.

Six months I'd sailed on that packet, good weather and bad. Around the world we'd gone and in and out of some of the tiniest, dirtiest ports in the Far East. I'd helped to paint her from jack staff to rudder and stood four hours out of every twenty-four at her wheel across three oceans and a half-dozen seas. She was a scummy old barge, but as I stood there looking back, I had to cuss just to keep from feeling bad. Then I walked away.

After that there were other ships and other ports, some good and some bad, but I never forgot Duggs and swore the first time I found him ashore, I'd beat the hell out of him. Every time I'd see that company flag, and they had thirty-odd ships, I'd go hunting for Duggs. I knew that someday I'd find him.

One day in Portland I was walking along with a couple of guys, and I glimpsed that house flag over the top of a warehouse at the dock. Thinks I, now's my chance to get that mug; this will be him.

Sure enough, when I walked down the dock, there he was, giving the last orders before casting off and standing right at the foot of the gangway ready to board. It was now or never. I walked up, all set to cop a Sunday on his chin, and I say, „Remember me?“

He sized me up. „Why, sure! You're Duke, aren't you?“ There'd been a time they called me that—among other things.

„That's me. And you—!“

„Well, well!“ He was grinning all over. „What do you know about that? We were just talking about you the other day, and we were wondering what had become of you!

„Remember Jones? He’s skipper on the IRON QUEEN now, and Edwards—he was third, you’ll remember, he’s with the Bull Line. They’re all scattered now, but that was a good crew, and we came through a lot together. I’ll never forget the night you hit that Swede in the Dato Kramat Gardens in Penang! Man, what a wallop that was! I’ll bet he’s out yet!

„Well,“ he says then, „I wish we could talk longer. It’s like old times to see somebody from the old ship, and we came through, didn’t we? We came through some of the roughest weather I ever did see, but we made it! And they say bilge water is thicker than blood. Well, so long, Duke, and good luck!“

Then Duggs stuck out his mitt, and I’ll be damned if I didn’t shake hands with him!

