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The Man Who was Dead

by Helen Topping Miller

A "DIFFERENT" STORY

NINE hours out from Bermuda where the green waves snarl at the blue like greedy cur dogs, Burke laid himself back in his bunk and gave himself up to the business of dying.

It was hot on the ship. The little stateroom was hazy with heat, and the electric fan beat the dead air, an ineffectual, spinning blur. The open port-hole was a mere circular glimpse of brassy sea and blinding sun, affording no relief.

It took a long time to die!

Burke, prone on his dry, restless pillow, wondered a little at the prolonged labor of it, the enduring weariness, the relentless grip of a shattered body upon a tired and sickened soul. Life had seemed to him so frail a thing—a candle flame flared into nothing by a breath. Why was it so hard to die?

He had seen men die—in fever camps among the gaunt, silent pines, in border fights, suddenly twitching—strangled by floods or smothered by flames. And always death had seemed an easy thing, a hand which sponged out the symbols of the clay as though they were mere handwriting upon the waters.

But now the summer was nearly spent, and since the plum-trees' blossoming Burke had been dying.

Seven weeks in the bulb-farmer's house on the little inlet of glass-blue water—seven weeks which had brought to him each morning a stronger look of doom in the eyes

of Henley—and now nine hours on board ship and still he could not die!

Henley was a fine fellow—a fine doctor. He had fought the strange, bursting pain which swelled and quivered in Burke's breast—fought it with morphia and with strange drugs with long names, even with cocaine. But the gnawing devil who possessed Burke's body was not to be appeased with potions. Great physicians, wise, simple men, had looked at Burke and fingered his pulse and shaken their honest heads. Queer, unwashed quacks, sought out from strange corners of the earth, had worked their blatant exorcisms in vain. But still Henley fought on doggedly.

That Henley loved Jeanne, Burke's strong, beautiful daughter, was a thing the sick man knew well, and also that the miracles which the young doctor wrought were miracles for love. But in Bermuda, Burke had seen the desperate cheerfulness burn out of Henley's face, had seen his hope conquered, heard his voice sink to the dead level of optimism which we accord to dying men and children. Burke saw these things with something of relief. Henley had given up. Now he could die. He was eager to begin it!

Lying there with the thick, warm air over him like a cloak, he experimented, wondering a little how men set about thrusting through this hindering of the flesh. He held his breath tentatively and relaxed on the hot bed, trying to wile his coward spirit forth. But the pain tore at him, beat and shook and rasped him, until his body was taut and dominant again. If only the pain would leave him in peace he could die!

He turned a little on his side and looked at the little bottle with the blue label. It held the drug which Henley had promised to try—the drug which would give Burke at least ten hours of sleep—veronal. At two he was to have it. It was twelve now—he could tell by the hot slant of the sun in the port-hole. At two perhaps he could die!

Of what use was his life? For fifty-five years it had blessed no man—not even himself! How he had wasted it, this little strand of golden thread which had been given him! How he had snarled and tangled it, dragging it into remote and evil places, tangling the feet of innocent folk in the coils of it until now it hung upon him like a loathsome web which he could not shake off.

When he was gone Jeanne would have the money which Burke's canny old mother, looking askance upon her wandering son, had entailed upon his daughter. So long as Burke lived the income was his—a waster's penny spent before it was gotten. But at his death the whole beautiful sum, compounded and plethoric from The nourishing of quiet accumulation, was Jeanne's.

Jeanne would hoard it wisely—Jeanne and Henley. Perhaps, he thought with grim humor, they would build him a monument—he, Burke, the unstable, immured forever beneath one unchanging stone!

The sun slanted up the painted walls, glinted on the futile fan, burnished the plank ceiling. The pain in Burke's chest thrust up and gripped at his throat, wringing his tongue dry, setting every fiber of him on edge. He panted and sweated, picking frantically at the hot sheet under him.

Then Henley came in. Henley was a young man, a little stooped, with tired eyes. In the hospitals back in the States Henley had always been the first to plead for morphia when the patients sweated, gray-faced with suffering. Burke saw compassion in Henley's eyes as he lay livid, with clutching fingers. Henley would give him the veronal now. Then, perhaps, when this rending of the flesh had been subdued, he could die!

With strong, shaking fingers Burke pushed back the hot, rumpled sleeve of his pajama coat. His eyes were eager as he watched Henley finger the blue-labeled bottle

hesitantly. His tongue was like-sandpaper, and speech was gone from him, but his eyes and his snatching fingers commanded.

Henley pushed the hypodermic into the hot flesh. Burke could feel the tingling fibers drinking, gulping at the cool sleep which drained from the merciful needle.

The brazen disk of the port-hole had faded to a cool, blue-gray shimmer when Burke's brain quickened and pierced through the restful oblivion which had possessed him. The air in the stateroom was fresher now, and he could feel the cool stirring of the fan. Was this death—this strange lassitude which overcame him? This weakness which turned his bones to pulp and his body to water?

He could not lift his fingers from the sheet where they lay stiffening. He could not hold his eyelids open. Of their own weight they closed. His skin felt cold and rigid upon his body. Strange-moving currents rushed in his ears.

How keen a man's mind grew at the last! How avid his ears! Burke could hear the voices of the crew on the deck outside, hear the whispering mop of a galley boy in the corridor. He could almost detect the pulse-beat of some one who sat in the room with him—Henley, undoubtedly.

Once the person came to the bunk and felt Burke's pulse. Burke could not see, but he felt the warm wave from an approaching body on his face, the pressure on his chilling wrist. Did his heart still beat, he wondered? How long it took to die!

It was night now. The light above his bunk was burning, he could feel the rays smiting his eyeballs through closed lids. Two men were whispering at the door. One was Henley.

"Practically the end," Burke heard Henley say. "You can hardly detect any heart action with a stethoscope."

Burke's lips were stiff and chill, but the vagabond soul of him grinned. What a joke—to hang about and watch his body die!

Did all men haunt their own flesh like this, he wondered? What a damn fool way to end it! He wanted to be away—to explore whatever came next! And here he floated like a silly vapor with ears agape, listening to the wash of the sea on the port-holes and the tiptoeing of solemn people overhead.

But the pain was gone. All the things of the body were gone, every sensation, every desire. A naked soul was a comfortable thing to live with. Was he dead now?

He must be dead at last!

Men were stepping softly into the room, speaking in hushed voices. They crossed his hands upon his breast. Some one laid a cold, wet cloth over his face.

At last!

But did he have to hang around this husk of his forever?

It was dark, and the heat had gone out of the air. Burke found himself thinking of Jeanne—Jeanne who had always been loyal to her scapegoat father! Would Jeanne care—now that he was dead?

He had never done much for Jeanne. He was sorry now that he was dead. Since her mother's death she had been a wide-eyed, self-confident girl, living a haphazard life with relatives who despised Burke cordially. He had brought her a red dress once from a filibustering trip to Guatemala. He was glad of that dress. It made him feel better now that he was gone!

Strange what ideas the preachers had about death! He had heard one at his wife's funeral, long ago, orating about the gates of onyx and streets of jasper and the swelling music of the spheres. He had pictured death as a sort of torchlight procession into a wealthy and melodious land. And here it was—no change at all! You simply withdrew a little way out of your body and listened to what was going on in the world. What a joke on the preachers!

It was morning now. Burke could hear the clink of crockery in the galley, the scurry of feet above on deck, the quickened purr of the engines. Men were coming down the corridor. He could hear them arguing, Henley and the captain and the ship's doctor.

They were going to bury him at sea—that was it. And Henley was protesting that they were only twenty-four hours out—that the ship carried her own ice. Henley was trying to save him for Jeanne, to be anchored forever under a memorial weight of stone. Burke was glad when the captain prevailed. The sea was free and wide, and no man knew what lay therein. Burke had always loved the sea.

There was no vision left to him, but he knew that they carried him up on deck—carried his rigid body with the soul of him somehow trailing along. He was conscious of the live stir of air outside, of the warmth of the sun, even of the smell of the sea.

They laid him down on a clean-smelling canvas with a linen sheet folded about him. Soon they would sew him in with a lead weight at his feet. They would moor no dragging weight to his spirit, he knew. He wondered where it would go when his body slid, still and stiff, into the sea!

Death was a great adventure. And men feared it!

Why didn't they finish him up? The captain, a stolid English-Lutheran, had gone below to rummage for his service book.

"We now commit his body to the deep—" Burke remembered that much of it.

They were all watching something on the port bow, something which had stolen up out of the salty dawn, something which brought a shrill quality of fear into the voices of the passengers. Burke had heard it coming. His spirit-ears were very keen. He had heard it creeping with a soft crackling, under the surface of the sea.

A submarine!

Men were running along the decks now. He could hear sharp cries, loud commands, the yelp of the megaphone, purring bells, the frightened leap of the engines!

How did a submarine happen to be on this side? And why should it attack this ship—a slow, peaceful boat, loaded with wool and onions? There were not many passengers aboard, Burke remembered—only Henley and himself and a few farmers from the islands, of polyglot nationalities.

They were making the boats ready now. He could hear the tackle rattle in the chocks. The screws leaped breathlessly, flinging the boat forward in great, plunging jerks. But by the low, tense voices of those on deck Burke knew that the under-sea boat was gaining—that it was frankly pursuing them!

Suddenly the ship gave a quiver as though she winced from a blow. There was a sound of ripping amidships on the port side, and a sharp, sulfuric odor and a jar! Then the deck under Burke heaved up with a roar, and dust and splinters fell in his face. He could hear water rushing below.

The engines choked, roared, and stopped. Feet tore up the companionways. There was much loud shouting and the nervous rattle of boats being lowered. Burke heard Henley's voice—even, unafraid. There were plenty of boats, the young doctor was saying, and the New Jersey coast was only a night away!

Then it was still. The ship was rolling, and Burke's stiff body rolled a little way across the shattered deck. The water was washing over him now, and his feet rose foolishly as the waves smote them.

"We now commit his body to the deep!"

How easily his body floated! If only they had got that lead weight fixed, the rites would have been accomplished automatically. The ship must be going down, he could feel

the whirl and suck of the waters. The suction kept him spinning, but still he floated. Death had been withheld from him, and now burial was denied him. Even the sea refused his bones!

The ship was gone now. The sea quivered, but the violent heaving had ceased. The boats were gone. They would not linger near the vortex of a plunging ship to salvage him—a worthless dead man. He was alone. All the face of the moving waters was his.

Then a soft sound of washing waves came to his ears, a liquid, gurgling sound of something rising from the sea. The submarine—he had forgotten it. It was coming up now, creeping near to see what ruin it had wrought. He heard the flip of a screw—voices.

They spoke a language he knew. Burke knew many languages. Now they were shouting. A man plunged overboard. Burke could hear his splashing progress as he wallowed nearer. Then a hand clutched him.

He felt himself towed, inert, unresisting, violently through the torn water. The hull of the under-water craft rose sleek and slippery as the belly of a fish. With a line they dragged him up, bent him double, thrust his stiff limbs through a hatch.

Men bent over him, talking in a tongue that he knew. One laid his stiff hands straight.

"Dead!" he muttered.

But another contradicted him in a tone of authority, rolling Burke's eyelids back with a practiced forefinger.

"This man's not dead," he declared. "He's been drugged!"

They brought a strange steel apparatus and pressed it against his chest. They inflated his sunken ribs and sent a current rending through his spine. And all the while Burke lay and grinned in his soul. Of course he was dead! What fools to try to bring a dead man back to life!

Then suddenly something flashed through his rigid body, snatching his soul rudely out of the restful inertia where it had floated.

It was the pain!

The pain!

He was alive!

He was alive!

As the strained fibers of him vibrated with the returning current of life Burke felt a hot anger surge through him. Meddling fools! Why had they disturbed him—tortured him back to earth—thrust this diseased clay with its pangs upon his tired soul?

He opened his eyes—they came open quite easily now—and looked at the men who stood around him. Kindly men they were with tired eyes, men who looked like the fathers of sons and the sons of fathers. And yet not an hour ago they had sent a peaceful merchant ship careening to the bottom of the smothering ocean.

An old man with a white mustache bent over him. His fingers were on Burke's pulse. His straight, strong lips curved in a smile.

"He's coming out," he said in the tongue which Burke understood. "He's had a stiff dose—combined with acute angina pectoris. I have seen such suspended animation only once—in Freiburg!"

Burke closed his eyes again wearily. Now it was all to do over again—the thing he had thought well done! Again he cumbered the earth, a disgrace to his friends, a blight upon Jeanne! Why couldn't they have let him die?

They were discussing him. Two of them were arguing. He must be put ashore. There was some discussion about the boat. But Burke only lay still, very weary, hating the body with its pangs which he had been forced to reclaim.

The old man gave him something through a hypodermic and the pain lessened. He felt stronger, quieter, even a little hungry. They brought broth in a quill and dripped it

between his set jaws. His lips were cracked and cold, and the salt of the broth stung them. They wrapped him in hot, dry clothes and rolled him in a heavy blanket.

Then they put him ashore. A boat came out from some little cove and crept alongside the bulging belly of the submarine. Two men went into it—two men and Burke.

He did not see where they were going. His eyes were still weary and he kept them closed. But his ears were keen as ever—as keen as when he had thought himself dead. He heard the boat grate on gravel and the voices of men speaking English. He heard the rumble of a motor and the swish of long grass beside the path.

Then the men who spoke English carried him away in the motor. He did not care. If he could not die it did not matter greatly where he went. He wondered vaguely whether Henley was saved—Henley and the captain and the ship's doctor. Henley had given him too much veronal. But he had meant well—poor old Henley. Then, whatever it was that the white-mustached one had given him overcame him and he slept soundly. For the first time in hours his avid brain was still.

When he awoke he was in a hospital. He knew it for a free hospital by the rows of beds and the unironed, coarse garment that he wore. There was an ice cap on his head, and a cool, moist bandage lay lightly over his dry, stretched mouth. Burke lay back with a sigh. He knew hospitals for agonized places, aching with loneliness. He had lain in many from Buenos Aires to Stockholm. All alike they were!

At last they let him go. They gave him strange, cheap clothes which did not fit him. They gave him no money—hardly a civil farewell. The pain was better and he felt stronger. But he was still a sick man—sick and penniless and alone in a strange place. He could not work. He did not know how to beg. That was one scalawag's trade which he had never tried—begging!

He would go back to Jeanne.

Jeanne was loyal. She would take him in and care for him. Then, perhaps, soon he would die and she would be free.

He had a ring left yet—a little cheap ring. He pawned it for enough to land him on the Jersey side, sixteen miles from New York. He could beat his way in.

He had traveled from Bonong to Tampa on a fruit boat once, eleven thousand miles, eating at the captain's table and paying nothing. He knew how to work it. It is proof of Burke's skill that he did work it. He arrived in New York—riding in a Pullman car with money in his pocket. There are still men who ride Pullman cars who think they are clever with cards.

In the city Burke went straight to the little house on Twelfth Street. He had been gone four months. The leaves were off the vines now. The flowers were dead in the window boxes. He could see the light of a fire through the window.

Very softly he closed the little iron gate and climbed the two steps. He could see the room through the half-closed curtains.

Jeanne was there—and Henley. She was sitting on the arm of Henley's chair and they were studying a book together. Burke could see the pictures in the book. It was an automobile catalogue!

Then he remembered. The money! Of course the money was Jeanne's. She had that—the only thing he could give her. The red dress had been so little. He was glad that Jeanne had the money. Then with a start that pained him he realized that now he was alive the money was his again—the income of it as long as he lived.

He had done so little for Jeanne!

If he had died!

He cursed the foreign crew with fervent tongue.

Then came a chilling thought. Jeanne

did not know that he was alive! To Jeanne and Henley he was only an indulged memory, hidden from troubling under a sleeping sea!

To Jeanne he was dead!

He turned away.

Straight down the two steps he went and into the street. The pain surged up quickly in his breast but he fought it down.

He would miss Henley. Henley knew what to do for the pain. But he walked away and did not look back,

At the Grand Central he boarded a fast train, very magnificent. The world was under his feet again, and his face was set upon the old road.

For Jeanne's sake he was dead!

Those gentlemen, the editors, who hold their fingers continually upon the capricious public pulse, maintain that nowadays the people will have nothing but love stories.

Gentlemen, I insist that this is a love story!