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FRENCH LEAVE

by Kurt Nicodemus, U.S.A.

Except for the distant, monotonous whump of Nazi 88's and American stuff beyond the hills on the other shore of the Moselle, World War II was a pretty mild affair for the men on duty at the ponton bridge. The tranquility and also the lazy sun of fall reminded many of them that it was wonderful, after all, just to be alive and kicking. Men sat around blowing smoke and dreams at the sky and G.I. bull at each other. Farther downshore, PFC Larson could not resist: he stripped and waded knee-deep into the river for a bath. He soaped vigorously and fast, hissing at the water's bite. When he was done, he dressed hurriedly and slipped into his slit-trench and yanked his rabbit-fur comforter over his knees. Then he opened a book and began to read.

«How now, and what's the battalion reading these days?»

Garry Larson knew who that was without having to look up. «Bonjour, Lieutenant! Damned if I know.»

«So o.k. — what're you reading?»

«Les Misérables.»

«That fits.»

«How you mean, sir?»

2d Lt Peter Ryan stashed one leg inside Larson's trench and parked his body on its edge. «Hell, soldier, it stands to reason that anybody that'd make like 'October Morn'—sun or no sun—in late fall wouldn't be settling down with something of the order of 'The Perils of Donald Duck'! I spotted your strip-tease from way down yonder, and so did a lot of other people.»

«What they say about me, Lieutenant?»

«You really care?»

«Nope.»

«That fits, too.» Ryan took out cigarettes and shook one toward Garry.

The soldier took it, smiling thanks. He really liked Peter Ryan, as did just about every other man in the outfit. Ryan was friendly and easy-going—but one helluva good man's soldier, just the same. When he gave an order, he managed to make it sound like a bid for a personal favor, and in consequence every last one of his men would willingly have gone all the way to hell and back for him twice a day. «You ever read 'Les Misérables', Lieutenant?»

Ryan relaxed. His red hair flared brightly and just a jot garishly in the sunlight. «Sure. Terrific book. But seems to me you could be lapping up something a lot gayer than that in the middle of this damned lousy war.»

«You've got a point there,» Larson laughed. «But you know what? This book's actually great for my morale! When I get a load of that poor bastard Valjean's worries, I sort of get to thinking that things could be a whole lot worse for little old Larson. Of course, could be I might not think so if I'd wound up in the Infantry instead of the lead-assed Engineers.»

Lt Ryan squashed a butt and lighted up again before he answered. «Maybe so, Garry, but I doubt it. It so happens there're several hundred 'lead-assed Engineers' right in this outfit who aren't taking your optimistic view. But you wouldn't be any different, no matter where you were. I happen to think you've got a lot on the ball, Pvt Larson.»

«How so, Lieutenant?»

«Hell, I know all about you! Maybe you don't know it, but I've been censoring your mail ever since we hit Merry England and La Belle France,» Ryan said with a pointed and very warm grin on his goodlooking face. «Yeah, I know I haven't got any business talking about that like this, but what's so awful about me letting you know that I get a terrific charge out of reading your letters?»

Garry didn't know whether to beam with pleasure or blush at the news. «Do you?»

«Every time! — and here's why: in the first place you don't waste time and ink free postage with endless bitching.» Ryan smoked up a storm as he ranted. «But holy cow, most of those morons who fancy themselves soldiers do nothing but! They weep fat tears of self-pity every night of the week about how war is hell and it should happen to anybody but themselves and how Europe is for the birds and for foreigners and how they're just pining to get home to their Daisy-Mays and their stills in the 'civilized' hinterlands of Arkansas!

«That's the refrain, Garry—and when their 'intellects' (you should excuse the expression) run dry on those items, they pick on the army cooks and the officers and the high cost of black market rot-gut. Hell, as far as the chow is concerned, I'm betting that most of them never ate anything but turnip greens three meals a day before they got drafted! Ha, remember how those cruds griped that time back in England because supply didn't come through, and we had to eat steak twice the same day?» Pete Ryan was grinning with all his teeth showing, but there was real vehemence in his tirade. «Now as for you, you're just the kind of a guy that I'd expect would gripe. You're pretty well educated—a damned sight more than most of the men, our Illustrious Staff included—and you are really a mackerel on dry land among these monosyllabic cruds. But do you bitch?»

«Boy! Do I!» Garry giggled.

«So I guess you wouldn't be human if you didn't,» the lieutenant smiled straight at Larson. «Maybe it's all a question of style. Sure, any fool can plainly see that you aren't exactly in love with the U.S. Army, either, but you don't take it out on the chow or the brass or anybody or anything else. You're making the best of a bad break. Meantime, you're tickled to be here in France, war or no war, and you let off steam chiefly by telling your broads how you miss them and their foam-rubber sacks. Larson, you're a poet! Know that?»

Now Garry really did blush. He got a panoramic vision of the erotica he had been pouring out to his girls for months back. «I'm embarrassed, Lieutenant. Wow, but do I shoot the crap, huh?»

Ryan laughed out loud, his face boyish and warm. «Kiddo, if you think that's crap, then you just don't know what real, home-grown corn looks like! Want a sample? Here's what Wislon (this's between you

and me; swear?) cooed at his better half just the other day: 'I know damn well you don't love me like I love you, so pee on you!' Doesn't that send you, though?»

«Unbelievable!»

«But true.» Ryan fished out the cigarettes again; Garry took one just to be chummy. «So anyway, if what you write is corn, then I'm corny as hell. I'm married, you know, and it's a fact that I miss my wife something awful. So when I get to read one of your pornographic writings, I just about jump out of my hide, I get that horny. But at the same time there's something about your prose that helps me keep the old rocks under control. You follow me?»

«I can't say I do, sir,» Garry blushed anew.

«What I'm trying to say is that the feeling your letters give me is much too nice and noble, somehow, to be wasted in chasing the trollops—which after all is what we stand to get into around these parts,» Ryan frowned, looking intently at the river instead of at Garry. «So I let it ride. But meantime, I don't mind confessing that once in a while I even borrow some of your stuff for my letters home to my wife. You don't mind, do you?»

Larson was a little ill at ease. He had no idea whether he minded the plagiarism or didn't. But he didn't have to answer: the lieutenant stood up and tidied his trousers. «Guess I better be shoving off. See you, Garry. Keep it clean.»

«So long, Lieutenant.»

Early the next morning, Pfc Larson was relieved from bridge duty. That was well in advance of scheduled relief, and he couldn't figure the scoop. But Garry found out why from the Topkick: Lt Ryan had to leave for Paris on official business on that very morning, and he had requisitioned Larson as his driver. Needless to say, Garry was overjoyed. Less than an hour later, Ryan and the soldier were on the high road to La Ville Lumière.

«What a break!» Garry crowed. «Thanks ever so, Lieutenant!»

«I figured you'd buy it, Garry,» Ryan chuckled. «But it so happens that I couldn't think of anybody else who'd know enough to appreciate a chance to see Paris. Tickled to have you.»

Larson felt elated and flattered—and warmer than ever toward Lt Ryan. «Well, thanks to the Army and you, one of my biggest and very fondest dreams is coming true!»

The countryside was just beautiful. As the two men left the front behind themselves, Garry was far more deeply impressed with it all than he had been during the tense, anxious ride east a month earlier. All the songs he had ever heard on the subject of France's sunlit fields crowded into his mind and made him want to sing.

«Drink, Garry?» Ryan was slumped cozily in his seat, clutching a bottle. «I'm in the mood, myself.»

«Don't mind if I do, sir, but just a quarter of an inch, will you? You get me potted, and you'll be doing the driving!» Larson laughed. The lieutenant poured and passed the snorter over. «Say, that's all right! Cripes, us poor E.M.'s should have it so good!»

«To hell! That's what you get for sitting on your lazy ass while I endured the rigors of O.C.S.!» Ryan fumed, clowning. «But don't you really think we officers deserve it?»

Garry looked at Ryan with a comical-wry expression. «Well, you do, anyway.»

«Thanks,» Ryan said, bobbing his head. «I like you, too.» He was taking in Garry with open pleasure; his driver's eyes were on the road. «Another thing, Garry, this trip'll give you tons of local color for that masterpiece you're reading. We can look up some of the spots where Valjean suffered. What's more, we might even find us a guide to take us on the grand tour of the Paris sewer system.»

«Gee, you get good ideas, lieutenant,» Larson cackled. «I'm thrilled at the very thought!»

However, Peter Ryan's conversation wasn't purely intellectual. Whenever he spotted a passing comely Française on the sidewalks, he turned earthier. «Hi, Mamselle, ça va?»

He wan't at all offensive; the ladies invariably beamed from ear to ear and answered. «Bien, merci! Et vous?»

«Boy, if I weren't married!» Ryan chuckled.

Garry threw him a cynical grin. «I don't know why you let that fact stop you, Lieutenant. It isn't stopping most of the married bucks in the battalion.»

And with that, Ryan was off again. «Married pigs, you mean!» he snarled. «Sure, life's a real big snap for pigs, Garry. When you've got the conscience and the strong stomach of a pig, you've got it made, no matter where you happen to be—and so long as there're women around who like pigs. To hell with conscience, let your jock be your guide!»

Garry was startled at that outburst; Ryan wasn't smiling then, but ranting from the depths of his soul. «You mean like Hill?» Larson snickered a little nervously. The man he referred to was a tireless nookie operator who had slipped it to a French collaborator through a barbed-wire enclosure, no less. It was the talk of the battalion, and Hill himself was exquisitely unloathe to confide the details of the feat to one and all.

«Yeah, like Hill—but don't remind me,» Ryan scowled. He took a drink right from the bottle; after he had drunk, the bottle remained poised against his lips as he paused reflectively. «I don't know, Garry, maybe I really ought to admire the guts of hounds like Hill. Like I said, life's a big fat snap for his breed. But what's the use? I'm just not like that. It isn't just that I think too much of my wife to pull crap like that—I also happen to think too much of myself, too. Sex has to be more than just kicks for me—kicks I can get from my fist, too. Know what I mean? I'm not saying that I absolutely have to be in love with a woman I shack up with, but she's at least got to be somebody I can half-ways respect, and somebody with whom I don't lose my self-respect, either. I can't grab just any dame that comes along who's willing to let me stash it.»

«That's because you aren't a pig.»

«Yeah. I guess so.» Ryan lighted a cigarette slowly, deep in thought. «But I sure as hell get awfully lonesome sometimes—lots of times. So

I write home every other night and maybe live a little here in the E.T.O. when I get to censor one of your letters. What about you, Garry?»

«I just look, too.»

Ryan stared at Garry's handsome profile in amazement. «You're kidding! I should think that an attractive young buck like you, with your ability to spout français, would be knocking the mamselles cold and up every day of the week! Und you not even married!»

Larson smiled directly into Ryan's face. «That's because I'm not a pig, either, Lieutenant. I just feel that as long as I don't stand a chance of getting it the way I got used to back home, why bother? Does that make any sense?»

Ryan didn't answer. Instead he held out the whisky bottle. «Come on, have another pull. And for crissakes, call me Pete, will you?»

Garry had the slug. «Sure thing, Pete.»

In Paris the two plowed through an excellent dinner before Lt Ryan rushed off to the offices of the Probo-Marshall. There had been some to-do about quarters in the hotel, for it wasn't S.O.P. for officers and enlisted men to share the same room—to say nothing of the same bed. But Ryan finally clinched the deal by insisting that Garry wasn't merely his driver, but also his attaché and indispensable aide in the vital war business that had summoned him to Paris.

Larson whiled away the interim seeing the sights. He was thrilled to his toes and eyeballs. It was all very exciting—a tumultuous mélange of beauty and history and echoes of countless books which had been bibles to his idealism and of movies he had seen and of dreams he had dreamt.

But to Garry, an experience of the heart was only half a pleasure when he couldn't share it. He regretted that the lieutenant couldn't be with him on that fabulous promenade—or Steve, perhaps. Garry hadn't consciously thought of Steve in a long time. But it had been in his friendship with Steve that he had learned the happy need to share adventures of the mind and the heart. Garry's excitement waned. He returned to the hotel and whiled away the time before Pete's return.

«Was it rough, Pete?»

Ryan reached for his necktie with one hand and for the bottle with the other. «To give you some idea, I don't guess we'd exchange our chicken HQ staff for the one that I just haggled with. Drink?»

«Don't ask!» Larson beamed. «I'm not driving tonight.»

«Get tight if you want, Garry—I just picked up a gallon of the stuff at the officer's PX.» And suddenly, before Garry realized it was happening, Ryan was standing there stark naked, showing his broad, handsome back as he stooped over his bag. «Hey, Kid, what would you like to do tonight? Feel like cruising Pig Alley?» And with that, he swung around, facing Garry.

«I'm game if you are.» Garry took in the lieutenant's nudity casually, and the sight gave him a warm, comfortably disquieting sensation. «But how now, Pete? You in the mood for settling for just kicks tonight?»

«Uh-uh. Not if I can help it. Just thought we might take a look around and get pleasantly plastered in the process,» Ryan grinned. «That sound tempting? You and I aren't likely to be dispatched to Paris every week, me lad, and I'd say it behooves us to make some hay while we can. I'm

for the shower; be right back.» So saying, the lieutenant slung his towel around his groin and departed.

Minutes later, Garry still saw Pete Ryan's body in the back of his mind. He felt unaccountably excited and exhilarated. He helped himself to another whisky and sat back to wait for his turn at the shower.

*

Pigalle was jammed and garish. Light, noise, cognac, and men—citoyens and servicemen from all corners of the earth—and countless women of all ages, shapes, and sizes reverberated on Larson's and Ryan's senses in a cacophonous and merry orgy.

«Quelle vie, hein?» Garry laughed in way of a toast at their fourth or fifth cognac.

«You can say that again!—whatever it means,» Pete giggled. He was getting a huge boot out of his young pal. Larson was giddy-happy and all ears, listening like a rabid busybody whenever a French conversation got within earshot. He turned this way and that to watch and eavesdrop on the haggling going on between the garses and soldiers and sailors—and while he did so, Ryan stared at his face long and pensively. The officer's eyes softened, and a gentle, sensual warmth flooded his chest. He made up his mind that Garry Larson was indeed a very handsome and inordinately nice human. «Why don't you go show that dumb sailor how it's done, Garry?»

«Oh sure, I know all about it!» Larson chuckled. «You want to know the truth, I'm eavesdropping because I want some free lessons, myself! I told you I'm an E.T.O. virgin, Pete.»

«That fact gripe you at all?»

Garry realized that he was being asked a serious question; he straightened in his chair and bent his head toward Ryan. «Once in a while, I guess. It isn't so bad when I don't think about home—but hell, when don't I? Sometimes it gets so bad that I suppose like you, I even get a little jealous of those 'pigs' we roasted over the coals this afternoon. But that's a crock, Pete! I know I don't want that. I couldn't!

«But you know, the sex part isn't so almighty important, anyway. Don't get me wrong, Pete—I'm very far from frigid, I do assure!—but what I miss more than anything else is just having somebody to be close to and talk to. You know what I mean?»

«Sure I do. But don't you have any pals in the outfit?»

«Nope. No real ones, anyway. Sure, I suppose I get along fine with a number of the guys, but I'm not close to any of them,» Garry answered. «It isn't friendship.»

«I know exactly what you mean, Garry,» Ryan said. «It so happens that I'm in the same kind of a hole with that non-compus brass I have to work and live with. I'd even risk a bet that you're better off than I am!» Pete settled deeper into his chair and thrust his legs straight out until they tangled with Larson's. «Sorry. Say, who's this guy Steve you mentioned every so often in your letters? Near as I recall, I don't remember your ever writing to the bloke. All you ever write to is broads!» the lieutenant laughed. Neither man had moved; Ryan's legs were still on Garry's lightly.

Larson threw a sarcastic grin. «Wow, but you do concentrate on my letters like a hawk, don't you? Steve is a good friend of mine—as a matter of fact, he used to be closer to me than anyone else, probably. But he got married a year back.»

«And now you aren't friends any more?»

«Oh sure, I suppose we are. But it looks as if I'm going to have to sweat out Steve's honeymoon along with the duration.» Garry didn't sound bitter—but it was obvious that he cared. «He's a great guy. I'll be hearing from him when he needs me again, I'm sure.»

Pete tipped more cognac. «Meantime, I propose a toast to friendship, Garry—yours and mine!» he smiled with his face wide-open.

«I'll second that!» Garry smiled, brimming with sincerity and affection. «To friendship—and to all ninety-day-wonders by the name of Pete Ryan!»

«You feeling your drinks, Garry?»

«I'll say!»

The lieutenant drained his glass and stood up. «Come on, soldier—let's go get something to eat.»

During the meal, Ryan plied Garry with *café espresso* by the pint. Then they went back to their hotel.

«Still feeling those drinks?»

«Only way out around the edges, Pete,» Larson giggled cozily. «With your permission, I'd like to bring that glow closer to home.» And he reached for the bottle.

«Permission denied! Let's wait a while, Garry. What say?»

«Whatever you say, Pete.»

«You go shower first,» Ryan said. «I'm going to have a cigarette. O.k.?» He didn't watch Garry as the latter undressed. But when the soldier had closed the door behind himself, Ryan poured himself a stiff snorter.

«It's all yours,» Garry grinned on his return.

«What is?» Pete leered impishly.

«The shower! What you think I meant?»

Ryan merely laughed. Without stripping first, he slung his pyjamas over a shoulder and left the room. Larson undraped his towel and foraged in his dufflebag for a fresh pair of shorts. He was looking at a Parisian rotogravure when the lieutenant returned, very proper in his sleepsuit.

«Smoke, Garry?» Garry ditched the magazine and took the cigarette. Pete squatted on the end of the bed, close to the soldier's chair. «So tell me, Handsome, spot anything in our travels that took your fancy any?»

«How you mean, Pete?»

«Girls, you dope!» Ryan leered. «I'm talking about sex! Sure, I'm not forgetting about that moral code of ours, Garry—but what the hell, we're in Paris, and it's a damned tall switch from back in the outfit and it occurs to me that maybe you'd rather be doing more interesting things than parking it here with me.»

«Like what?» Garry said impishly.

«Like getting laid, for example!»

«Uh-uh. Not a chance, Pete.»

«How come? Aren't you horny?»

«Could be,» Larson grinned. «You?»

«Fair to middling, I guess: just about enough to turn me inside-out!» Ryan boomed through a comical grin.

Garry thought that was a riot. «So all right, I confess: I'm horny, too. Tell you what, Pierre, let's you and me shag it back to Pig Alley and take another look around. I'll pimp for you. I don't want any myself, but I'll watch you for kicks. What say?»

«You're a real pal, Garry—cross my heart. But to hell with Pigalle!» Ryan's grin was a yard wide, but suddenly it went a jot wobbly. «I just got out of the shower and I'm not about to get it all dirty again out on the bee, the bou, the boulevard or anyplace else! Matter of fact, I was thinking what's the matter with right here and now?»

«Come again?» Garry sputtered.

«You'll do fine, Garry. You're ever so much more exciting than anything I saw up the Alley. Know that?»

Larson cackled up a storm. «You want to know something, I think you're a real, live doll, too, Pete. So what do we do and with what and to whom?»

«I'm not entirely sure about that either, but I've got a hunch it might be fun finding out!» The lieutenant was still laughing, but his eyes were on Garry's downy, surprisingly muscular thighs.

«Cut it out!» Larson chortled. «I told you I'm horny, didn't I? If you don't watch out, I might just call your bluff!»

Ryan looked straight into Garry's rollicking grin. «I'm serious, Garry.»

«What?»

«I'm not clowning, Garry. I mean it.»

For long seconds the two men's breathing was the only sound in the room; the silence roared in Garry's ears. Finally the lieutenant raised a hand and laid it tenderly behind the soldier's neck. Garry didn't budge. The hand was wonderfully friendly; its touch was caressing, soothing and terribly exciting at the same time. Steve's hands had used to feel like that.

Larson suddenly jumped up. «Come off it, Lieutenant!» he spat. «What the hell you take me for, anyway? Just because I read 'great books' and I'm not a 'monosyllabic crud', don't go making up your mind that I'm a queer!»

Pete Ryan tried to smile, but he didn't make it; his voice was shaky, but urgent. «I'm not calling any names, Garry. I don't think you're a queer. Besides, since I'm the one making with the propositions, if anybody's a queer, then it must be me. I happen to be very fond of you, Garry. You've got lots of common sense and an awful lot of heart, and we seem to have a great deal in common. I told you I needed a friend—and you said you did, too.»

Garry gulped air and cut loose: «So what if I did, damn it? Is that any call for you to get any ideas that I'm secretly pining for a buddy to shack up with? You're out of your mind, Lieutenant! Thanks a million—but no, thanks!»

Pete's heart was scraping bottom, but he kept on talking. «Listen to me, Garry. I swear I didn't think any of those things about you. I always liked you, Garry, right from the very beginning. I like everything about

you—and most of the things I do like are much more important than the fact that I happen to think you're a very handsome boy. Oh don't get me wrong, that last item helps plenty, too—I was really shook-up when I saw you naked in the river the other day.

«I suppose that does make me a queer, doesn't it? But you want to know something, I don't give a happy damn whether I am or not—or whether or not you are. Do we have to know, for God's sake? I'm desperate, Garry; that's the one thing I know for sure. I picked you to chauffeur me to Paris because I thought you were a helluva nice, real hep Joe—and because I also happened to enjoy looking at you for some reason. But it wasn't till we swapped philosophies on life and love this afternoon that it occurred to me that maybe you were in the same boat as I am—and that you might give me what I need. I need friendship and I need sex and what I need worse than anything else is some tenderness in my life!

«Garry, you said you liked me. Did you mean it?»

Ryan's face was very close to Garry's now. The lieutenant's eyes were gentle and a little pleading and nakedly affectionate. Unaccountably, Larson's anger vanished, and a deep, somehow marvelous sadness took its place. In the back of his mind and his soul flashed the image of Steve. In that instant Garry saw the truth: with his heart wide-open he realized how sorely he had been banking on his friend; his hearty and happy acceptance of Steve's marriage had been pretense—even to himself; Garry's love and need for Steve had never ceased to be the most beautiful thing of all his existence. And now Pete Ryan was offering him the total love that Steve had been unable to give him.

«I meant it.»

Ryan relaxed visibly, his face happy and boyish behind its deep blush. «I'm not taking advantage of you, Garry. I sobered you up on purpose after that Pigalle toot and didn't let you have another drink here because I wanted to 'seduce' you sober. I didn't want this to be dirty. I don't want subterfuges and recriminations.»

Garry said nothing, but his look as he met the lieutenant's eyes head-on was gentle. Pete Ryan stood up and took Garry into his arms tenderly and a little tentatively. «You ready for that drink now?»

«I think I'm going to need it, Pete.»

It was fun—a wonderful adventure of soul and body—finding out what to do and with what and to whom. Several hours later Pete chuckled into the ear beside him on the pillow.

«What's so funny?» Garry smiled as he got up on an elbow to look his pal full in the face.

«I was thinking what a very ideal solution this really is, me boy,» Ryan laughed lightly. «My wife's going to ask me about me and other women, sure as shootin'. And I'm going to swear to her that I didn't touch another female with a ten-foot pole—and blimey, it'll be the truth!»

«Real sharp, aren't you?» Larson giggled. «But suppose she asks you whether you ever slipped it to any lonely PFC's?»

«She won't. She thinks I'm all man.»

«That a fact? Well, you tell her I said that yo' sho' am!» said Garry with graphic gestures.

«Care to put that in writing? You never know when I might need references!» Ryan laughed as he hugged Garry with all his might.

Still later, they finally got out of bed to wash up. Then they had a last cigarette and a drink before bedding down for sleep.

«Think we'll ever meet again, Pete? I mean later—after the war?»

«Probably not, Garry. But one never knows, does one?»

«Just a stop-gap affair, eh?» Larson grinned.

«So what if it is? Aren't most wartime affairs stop-gaps?» Ryan answered. «But ours isn't 'just' stop-gap, Garry. Real stop-gap flings are thruppence a dozen even before you start haggling—if that's what you want. But this isn't a fling for me, Garry, I want this to go on between us for the duration—or for as long as we manage to stay alive in this lousy war. Things might be different if I weren't married; who knows?—but the fact is I am married and I love my wife like blazes. But Garry, even if we never see each other again after the war's over, I know that you and I will carry a piece of each other in ourselves all our lives.»

«That sounds nice, Pete. Thanks.»

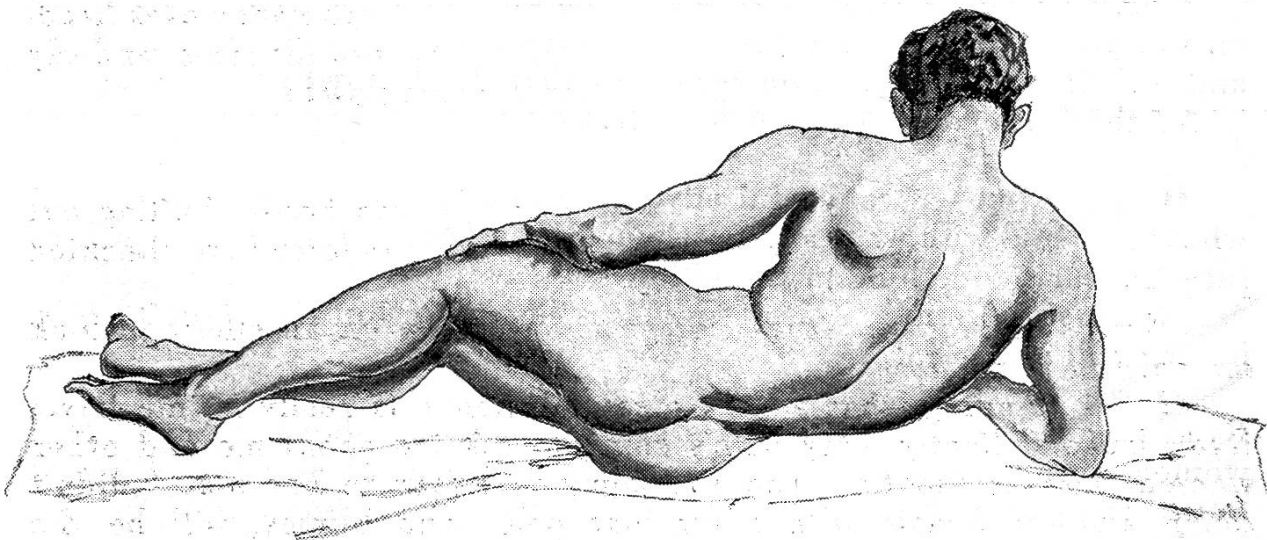
«And the same to you—twice!»

A last kiss as they lay side-by-side in bed, and then Garry fell asleep immediately. The lieutenant stared at the head bedded in his right arm and smiled with all his heart. «Private Larson!» he hissed.

«Here, sir!»

«Like I said, I love my wife—but oh you kid!» Pete laughed.

«I love you, too,» Garry Larson murmured.



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