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AND FOUR TO GO

by JIM RAMP

When Rod Bronson was a kid he used to chant:

One for the money
Two for the show,
Three to make ready
And four to go!

At twenty-one he came out of a small farming community in the middle west to join the Navy. The draft board had deferred him due to the fact he was his mother's sole support and engaged in an essential industry—farming. Not that he cared for farming, which he did very well, but because it was the only way he knew to earn a living. Therefore, he was not resentful when his father left the farm to his mother, and he was relieved when she married a neighboring farmer who was able to farm both her land and his own.

Rod was inducted and sent to boot camp July 1945, getting his first shore leave the Saturday after the Japanese surrender. Being shy he had no close friends and took no part in sex sessions so common among virgins and the uninitiate. He was naive, even gullible, the butt of practical jokes and endless kidding. He wanted to be a hail fellow, one of the crowd, as that seemed to be the best way to escape attention as an individual. Being a virgin he was innocent as a virgin is supposed to be but seldom is, husky and wholesome as buckwheat cakes with sorghum molasses. The sailor uniform seemingly designed to show forth a man's most manly attributes showed forth Rod as being very manly indeed, much to the envy of his shipmates. The supposition that those physically endowed are necessarily cocksmen of great repute is one of the deepest American convictions, and Rod was hoorahed into spinning yarns about his prowess with a host of mythical corn fed beauties.

He had no particular yen to go to downtown Chicago on his first shore leave, but his reputation was such that he dared not refuse a chance to visit a cat house. It was early evening and he was not due back in barracks before eight Monday morning. He wandered around the Loop, had dinner in a cafeteria, got caught up in a roistering group of shipmates and went along for a few beers. In a bar the question of broads followed as the night the day. It seemed that most of the sailors had lost their first pay in a crap game the night before. Not Rod. He didn't gamble, but he had decided to leave most of his money in his foot locker.

ONE FOR THE MONEY

One of the men started to organize a roller party and Rod was asked to join it as he was a natural attention getter. He had liked roller skating as a kid, so he agreed to go along. To his surprise they went to another bar where there were a lot of men in civvies dancing with each other and acting girlish. The sailors stood at the bar and the organizer said: «Listen, fellas! Let one of these jerks buy you a drink and take you home or to a hotel. Then roll him!»

«Roll him?» asked Rod innocently.

«Sure! Don't let him do nothing. Take his money, his watch and ring if he has one. If he says no, punch him. Then you'll have money for a hook shop.»

Rod was dazed, then scared. He hadn't bargained for anything like this, but he knew he must play the sophisticate and go along or be called a sissy or worse.

His companions dispersed along the bar to allow room for intended victims. To his consternation Rod was the first one to be propositioned. A middle aged man, neatly groomed, smelling strongly of cologne (Rod thought it was perfume) slid on a stool beside him.

«Buy you a drink?» he smiled.

«A beer, thanks,» Rod mumbled. He glanced at the man. Ordinary looking guy, didn't seem to be wearing a watch or ring. Rod gulped his beer nervously and the man said: «My name is Ben. Like to come home with me?»

Rod nodded, slid from his stool and followed Ben out of the bar. They walked silently for a couple of blocks and Ben stopped in front of a small hotel. «This do?»

Rod shook his head. «No, Ben. I'm supposed to go in, roll you and leave. I can't do it.»

«But you'll come with me?»

«No. This is all new to me, but I do not want to go with you. Thanks anyway.» He offered his hand, turned and walked to the bus station. He was asleep when the others returned to the barracks.

In the morning, in the showers, dressing, some of the sailors bragged of their pick-ups and in some cases assault of their victims. When questioned Rod was non-committal. No, he didn't have any trouble. The guy didn't have much money. No watch or ring. What cat house had he visited?

He didn't remember. Some soldiers took him. He left early since he didn't have enough money to stay all night.

TWO FOR THE SHOW

Committed to the lie he could not avoid going along on the next roller party, since it would be another week till pay day. The organizer said they should not play the same bar twice and led the group to a new one. Rod was picked up by a guy about his own age, wearing an open sports shirt, tight jeans snugged by a broad leather belt and cowboy boots with fancy stitching. He asked Rod to buy him a drink and then motioned toward the street.

Outside the guy said: «Just so there won't be any misunderstanding, my price is twenty dollars.»

Rod laughed. «Pardon me, I didn't know you were a prostitute.»

«I'm not!» snarled the hustler. «I'm not a goddamned queer. It's just the way I make my livin' so I can buy a woman.»

«Well, we're two of a kind. I expected you to pay me so I could buy a broad.»

«No dice.

«No offense, good night,» said Rod.

Next day in camp Rod reported that the hustler didn't have a dime so he clouted him.

THREE TO MAKE READY

Rod was discovering a new world of sexual mores—one he had never known existed. He decided to strike out on his own when the third shore leave rolled around. He scouted several bars, avoiding older men and hustlers. He was courteous, and amused by some of the gambits. «Got a match?» «What's the time?» «It's dead in here—let's go to Harrys.» «Let's get some air.» «What are you drinking?» «When are you due back to base?» «Want to go to a party?» «I've got an apartment. Want to play?» ect., etc. His third suitor was a quiet, shy boy, a bit long haired and romantic eyed. He clung like a leech until Rod became embarrassed by the whispers and snickers around him. He walked out, followed by his swain.

«Look!» breathed the boy, «I am ready for love, but it must be mutual!»

«I'm sorry,» said Rod gently, «but I am not yet ready for love, not even on a one way street. Please don't be hurt. I tried to avoid telling you, and I hope you find what you are seeking.»

Rod spent most of the evening prowling, not without curiosity—in fact with growing interest. He saw a few heart-clankers but did not know how to win their attention. On his way back to Base he tried to analyze his feelings. The desire for a warm, honest relationship was increasing and he knew he would not find it in a prostitute, male or female, nor, he finally had to admit, in any girl or woman. He chuckled as he remembered the romantic boy who had said earlier in the evening: «I am ready for love, but it must be mutual!» Brother, me too!

He was not given to self analysis, nor had he any convictions about sexual behavior. His only contact with religion was at the school house where itinerant gospel howlers came to garner rural pennies and preach Hell Fire to bored farm folk who regarded revival meetings as social events. Rod believed, vaguely, that he had a soul, but there was much more concrete evidence of an urge. Consequently he had no inhibitions, only vast ignorance and a thirst for carnal knowledge.

AND FOUR TO GO

The fourth shore leave, forty eight hours, came shortly after the eagle screamed, and Rod was loaded for conquest. He did not leave the base until late afternoon. After dinner he went to a movie and sat far back in the balcony, thrilled by hard riding cavalry and whooping Indians. He was only vaguely aware when another sailor dropped into the seat next to him, since he was riding in the vanguard of the thin blue line, leaning over his horse's withers, reins in one hand, whirling his saber with the other. As he leaned into the battle he spread his legs and pressed a knee against the other sailor's thigh. He was unconscious of the contact until a hand gripped his thigh and he fell off his horse into the balcony seat, where he froze, glancing furtively at the hand, then the face of the awakener.

He saw a dark, pleasant face, square jawed, cleft chinned, a head of short black curls. The boy seemed absorbed in the picture, unaware of his gripping hand.

Rod didn't know what to do. The warm pressure was exciting and his breath became short. He placed a hand over the hand on his thigh, intending to remove it. Instantly the hand turned and gripped his own. It was a strong, electric

grip, whitout squeezing or release. He sat, heart pounding, blood hot from the contact. He dared not move to ease a swelling desire, but carefully covered it with his hat. A quick glance revealed the sailor doing likewise. He never knew afterward who won the battle—the Cavalry or the Indians. He could still read, however, and when *The End* flashed on the screen, it meant lights and propriety. The boy also rose and preceded him down carpeted steps, around a turn, down balcony stairs. In the light of the lobby the sailor waited, his white smile a little unsure. «I'm Bob Palermo.» He offered his hand.

«I'm Rod Bronson.» The hand felt even better and he released it reluctantly, still clutching his hat at half mast. «Let's have a beer.»

They fell into step and on the darker street dared to put on their hats. In a bar booth they ordered beer, nursed it and looked at each other in smiling silence.

Rod finally said: «I'm a Kansas farmer boy.»

«I'm a Chicago baseball bum,» Bob stated. «Glad to know you.» They clasped hands on the table top. «Ah Hell, let's get outa here!» he muttered.

Hats at half mast they left the bar.

«Home with me?» suggested Bob.

«Lead the way. You got forty-eight?»

«Yeah—if I don't explode.» Bob whistled a taxi and they slid in, sitting in corners to avoid disastrous contact.

As Bob unlocked the door of a pleasant house he said: «Mother and Dad are in Milwaukee. Sister had twins. You hungry?»

«Not for food.»

«Likewise. Come along.» He took Rod's hand, led him up dark stairs and into a bedroom where night and love claimed them.

In the late lazy morning Bob scrubbed Rod's chest with a bristled cheek. «I've got a confession.» «Yeah, I know,» chuckled Rod, kissing his ear. «First time for me too!»

«May it never be the last for us!»

«Amen!»

Something for the Connoisseur

The Gay Cook Book by Chef Lou Rand Hogan, just published for \$ 5.95 by Sherbourne Press, Los Angeles is definitely a «must» for anyone who cares besides love for the (equal?) delights of cooking. Just buy it and try it out—you'll have no end of fun with this book.

R.F.