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## The Salute

by Richard Lewis

Life, in Stephen's experience, had a kind of velvet lustre. He looked at himself from one perspective and all he saw was weirdness. Move his head a little bit though, and everything looked reasonably normal.

Whether he was weird or not, the situation he found himself in definitely was. Running away to the circus couldn't have been any more alien. It was as if he'd stepped onto some grand stage where the world watched his every move; dressed up in all manner of costume, playing the part of the jolly or not so jolly sailor. There was little in the way of a script though. He just had to follow orders and dance to Jackson's rude, discordant tune.

Then as light reflected on the fabric of day and inner patterns shifted, Stephen took comfort in acting a part. Being mere rank and number, he could live a secret life hidden behind the mask.

Having grasped the knack of placing one foot in front of the other, their shiny boots crunching over the flat, unyielding surface of the parade ground, it was time for the performing seals to learn a new trick.

Jackson entered the mess one morning, chest puffed up like a winter robin. The gold buttons of his tunic straining to break free from their buttonholes.

"Today you will learn the important art of saluting." He shouted.

The origin of saluting has been widely debated. It would seem to date back to Roman times, though may also originate in France when knights greeted each other by raising their visors to reveal their faces. Raising the visor was a way of saying, 'this is who I am, I am not afraid.'

Stephen resented having to signal his inferiority to someone he didn't know or respect, just because they displayed a gold band or two on their sleeve. But there he was standing to attention as Jackson instructed the class on the intricacies of saluting.

"Hands down, bring the tips of your fingers of your right hand smartly to a point above your right eyebrow, whilst keeping your upper arm parallel to the deck and in line with your body. Longest way up...one, two three... shortest way down."

"Class...to the front...Saaalute!"

Jackson marched up and down making adjustments to hands and arms as Stephen wondered, 'for God's sake, how hard could it be.' Only to see Jackson glaring at him, annoyance written across his weathered face. He marched over to Stephen, towering over his prey and made a little jump, adding to the intimidation. Jackson enquired in his usual raucous tone.

"Why is your head bent sideways lad? Head straight and to the front...to the front lad!"

Having satisfied himself that they were now possessed with the special ability of how to salute, Jackson informed them that they were going to get paid. 'Fancy that,' Stephen thought, 'getting paid to be verbally abused, mentally tortured and for giving up his beloved drainpipes and winkle pickers for unfashionable, baggy articles of kit.'

Jackson told them they'd be paid in ship's book number order.

"When your name is called you will march smartly up to the pay officer, come to attention, state your name and number, salute and hold out your left hand, palm uppermost."

He stopped in front of Ackers who must have been losing the will.

"Am I boring you Junior Seaman Ackland?"

"No," said Ackers.

"No what," barked Jackson.

"No sir," Ackers mumbled.

"Speak up Junior Seaman Ackland, I can't hear you."

"No sir," came the reluctant, yet loud enough reply.

"Her Majesty will present you with a small buff envelope which the paymaster will place in your left hand. You will then drop your salute, turn smartly to your right and march back to your bedspace.

Jackson planted himself alongside the pay officer, looking pleased with himself.

"In your envelope you will find the princely sum of one pound and five shillings. That is your pocket money for two weeks."

For some reason Jackson smacked his thigh with his stick, as if to emphasise the significance of the occasion; but he'd under estimated his strength. Several of the class noticed him wince and take a sharp intake of breath.

Ackers, now fully awake, couldn't control himself and burst out laughing, then quickly tried to suppress it. It was something he'd regret.

"What do you think you're laughing about? Junior Seaman Ackland?"

"Nothing sir."

"Nothing sir," Jackson mimicked.

"Well perhaps you'll find it funny missing out on pay and having to stand in the middle of the parade ground in the cold and wet for the next half an hour, wearing nothing but your pyjamas."

'Poor Ackers,' Stephen reflected, 'how a soft velvety moment can soothe your soul and hold you in its gentle embrace; yet in the blink of an eye, its lustre could so quickly vanish, setting the mind to thinking one's life was hardly worth living.'