

# The agnostic

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## THE AGNOSTIC

Jim, a young seaman in the navy, stayed in New York on Christmas leave because there was not time enough to go home to California. And he stayed alone, not because he had no friends in the area, but because he wanted it that way.

Aboard his ship, undergoing repairs in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, the Navy's biggest single collection of ladykillers was concentrated. There was but one thing on their minds: women. You could start a conversation on any subject, and within two minutes it would contain some reference to women, and within five minutes it would be about women. Every shore leave was given to chasing women, catching, loving and leaving them, and Jim's shipmates would drag themselves back, worn out and penniless. And happy. And full of stories redolent of feminine pulchritude and male prowess. And their extravagance would grow in the retelling until the next shoreleave.

Jim's mates never wanted to do anything Jim liked, such as attending the concerts, or sitting all evening in an obscure bar and talking, or taking the trouble to go out of the city just to walk in the woods or fields. Whenever Jim proposed doing any of these his mates would say, «Knock that stuff off, Jimmy, you're a man now. Get you a woman to go hiking with, and take all night at it. You need it, boy!» Jim could not understand how so many men, just because they wore the sailor's uniform, could take complete leave of their judgment and raise the concept of Woman to a cult, and forsake all else. And what Jim could not understand, he could not appreciate. There was nothing wrong with women; in fact some of his best friends were women; but there were other things in the world. He did not want to waste this holiday in arguing, being overridden and bidden to follow his mates 'to learn how it's done.' He was tired of lessons in manhood. He wanted nothing more than to forget the ship and all it stood for. This meant avoiding his shipmates and forsaking his lessons.

So he mingled agreeably with the crowds of shoppers and merry-makers, experiencing the grey days, the thickly falling snow, the cold, luminous nights and the piercing wind, and the compensation of these in the lively, bright, joyous Christmas atmosphere of shops, windows, parks and buildings. In Rockefeller Plaza he saw wire angels poised in elegant stances of sounding Noel on long trumpets, watched skaters below gilded Prometheus, now surrounded by fir trees and colored lights; marvelled as a little girl executed surprisingly intricate figures on the ice with casualness impertinent in one so young. He walked in the silent, white park and viewed the towers rising above the black trees, remote and tenuous; and passed the monumental statues facing Columbus Circle and thought how the sculptured boy in the foreground, preoccupied with being symbolic, seemed oblivious of the snow lying on his boyish head and shoulders and on the extraneous drape that was all there was to cover his nakedness. In Times Square he passed a beggar crouching in a doorway. He gave him some coins. Passing on, he thought how the snow, so white and delicately fallen like a benediction, was probably not so beautiful to one who must sleep in it in a doorway and who would not greet it in the morning through a warm, cheerful restaurant's window while waiting for coffee and breakfast. This same snow which for Jim enchanted the city, also hampered commerce on the highway, closed rural and mountain roads, damaged electrical and communication lines. To the weather bureau it was a statistic; to the homeless beggar merely another discomfort, another manifestation of the harshness of existence. Snow and women, Jim said; it seems to

depend on how you look at them. Anything could mean anything, then, depending on how one looked at it, depending on what attitude he took toward it.

But what attitude was one to take toward the juxtaposition of beggars and merrymakers in Times Square? There was the beggar stoically accepting coins, and there the merrymakers passing by in hundreds every minute, hurrying to spend large sums seeking entertainment, scarcely pausing in their jollity to drop those few coins. It was rather like feeding the pigeons in Bryant Park. In the two actions was the same denial of any parallel between the existence of giver and of recipient. But as things were, perhaps recognition of a parallel would bring on too far-reaching repercussions, would be too inconvenient. And how *were* things? At this moment, Jim's shipmates were undoubtedly trying to make out with some skirt; the weather bureau was accurately measuring the snowfall; the beggar was shivering in his doorway, blatantly contrasting with the fantastic expense of any one of those colossally agitated displays in the square; the multitude was hurrying on its way talking, laughing and carrying bundles and leading dogs on leashes; and Jim, who saw but did not comprehend, was saying, «Vanity of vanities, all is vanity and vexation of spirit. It is a sore travail which God hath given the sons of men to be exercised therewith,» and thinking about it, without, however, reaching any conclusion.

He examined the idea he was a part of all this Christmas scene, one item in this vast collection of things making the city at midtown at this hour, from the snowflakes thickly falling to the massive solidity of buildings, like the pigeons in Bryant Park, the lacybranched trees whose glistening coats made little crackling sounds in the wind, like the colored lights, fluorescent tubes seen through windows high above the street, trashcans, bus stop arrows, gratings and grilles from which came the sound of subway trains, and the people, who did not stare at him as at a being from Mars, but passed him by as one of their own, unaware of his special, unique conception of interrelationships, unconscious of their own part in it.

He windowshopped at Stein's and at Hearn's, at Abercrombie and Fitch and at Bloomingdale's; in Macy's he smelt perfumes and discussed them animatedly with the pretty salesgirl, then bought some of his mother's favorite scent; in Gimbel's he bought some subtly exotic pipe tobacco for his father. Returning to his hotel room, he wrapped the gifts in rich papers and again in protective brown, then carried them to the post office to dispatch them.

Strolling in Fortyninth Street on Christmas Eve he passed St. Mary The Virgin's and saw people entering. He smelt the heavy odor of incense and wondered what was the inside appearance of a church which used incense in its ritual. It must be rather oriental. Impulsively he turned aside and went in to see.

The auditorium was almost filled, and ushers in business suits went back and forth along the aisles, seating the congregation before the mass began. Far ahead rose the intricately carved reredos and the altar, brilliantly lighted by many candles and surrounded by pine and spruce and christmas flowers. Behind were candystriped pillars; in the gloomy height of the ceiling small spotlights warmly lighted the congregation, and a cloud of incense smoke drifted between.

Jim had scarcely gained a general impression when an usher motioned imperiously to him. Startled from his sightseeing, he turned to leave. But retreat was cut off: the entrance was crowded with people, and more were coming in. Those immediately behind Jim looked at him curiously. Blushing, he turned

and followed the usher, who was urging a dozen seated persons closer together to make room. Jim sat hesitantly, and glanced apprehensively around to see what reaction his arrival had occasioned. They were apparently oblivious, or passively resigned to the intrusion.

Now the choir filed into their places in the loft behind the congregation, and the organ joined them as they began the christmas music. The ushers hurried on their errands, and the remaining spaces quickly filled. The general murmur died into an expectant hush. Now the Processional moved up the center aisle, and the Mass began.

Jim felt as if he had sneaked in to see the show. All about him the devout and sincere sat and stood in silent opprobrium. Some of them had planned for weeks or months to come tonight, whereas he had dropped in (and got a seat); those from the suburbs had struggled through that inclement weather to be there, whereas he had turned aside from an evening walk. Full of contrition, he glanced apologetically at the faces around him, as if asking their forgiveness.

He became uneasy. Some of those faces indicated that their owners were not conscious of the season. GLORIA IN EXCELSIS DEO, sang the choir. Tonight was the anniversary of the Savior's birth, occasion for the greatest joy and celebration, when men and angels joined their voices in paeans of gladness and praise; yet some of these faces wore dark, foreboding expressions. Others had dull, empty looks, devoid of all animation, while others were abstracted, as if pondering some business matter. AGNUS DEI QUI TOLLIS PECCATA MUNDI, MISERERE NOBIS, implored the choir. Vanity of vanities, thought Jim, beginning to feel depressed. It could not be that he alone saw the meaning of the celebration and felt that which the choir and organ communicated as they filled the vast space with the response. How could these people sit there so stupidly inert? Suddenly he recalled that, although he felt it very strongly, the throng outside had not noticed his uncommon attitude toward them. If his feelings did not show in his features, then the same might be true also for these others. Maybe they were as aware, as impressed and as appreciative as he; maybe even more so. Like a bunch of poker players, he thought. Eagerly he grasped this exonerating speculation and forgot the intrusion, forgot facial expressions, forgot snowflakes and beggars, and spellbound by the magnificent spectacle, finally knew that whatever his original intentions and whatever this celebration was to the others, his response was not foreign to its essential nature.

Afterward he went out into the biting crispness of early morning. But he did not return straightway to his hotel. Instead, he walked to Times Square, found a bright, warm cafeteria and had french toast and coffee, then walked about, relishing his mood.

He was mildly curious whether Christmas Spirit was possible for one who was not a confessed Christian, for while he felt a peacefulness that altered the ordinary appearance of things, his religious consciousness was in fact not aligned with any established sectarian view. Moreover, this serenity had in effect been deliberately fostered by what amounted to conscious selection of attitude. That is, he might have had a date with some girl tonight, or might not have entered the church at all (or at least not remained), or he might have fallen asleep during the Mass. In view of the multitude and apparent chaos of phenomena that make the world, it might be that the question of Spirit was nothing more than a question of consciously or unconsciously choosing the right attitude. He

passed the Library, where the sculptured lions, sitting in benign and formal dignity wore wreaths informally about their necks. He saluted them, each in turn.

After Christmas the days passed agreeably and uneventfully. Hat in hand, Jim wandered through the galleries of the Metropolitan Museum, completely absorbed until a sensation in his sacroiliac reminded him that he had been standing for several hours. He browsed in the Library, visited other museums and galleries, and again watched the skaters in Rockefeller Plaza. On Sunday morning, upon the recommendation of a friendly bellboy, he went to a place in Chinatown for breakfast. Instead of bringing a menu, the chinese woman brought him a large pot of tea and a small cup with no handle, and smiling, went away. In a little while she returned carrying many covered dishes and plates, and much to Jim's surprise, put them all on his table. In them were chinese pastries, a delightful and almost endless assortment of little steamed breads, each with delicate, savory seafood or pungent meat in the center. The woman gave Jim a pair of chopsticks and showed him how to use them by deftly cutting one of the pastries in half and raising it effortlessly from the plate. Then Jim tried, and almost pushed dish and all onto the floor. They both laughed, the woman showed him again und then left him to eat.

He walked in Battery Park, where there were very few people leaning on the gale and watching the wintry harbor. Offshore in the grey expanse of water the Statue of Liberty bravely stood among the harbor craft and the ships. Jim rode the ferry to Staten Island, and then he returned.

He walked in Washington Square, and in Rienzi's he got a cup of venetian coffee and sat with tongue in cheek watching the villagers making Beat Generation appearances at the small tables, and politely said no when asked whether he had a light.

Then it was New Year's Eve.

Waking from a nap, Jim discovered a sea change in his mood. He had had a dream, but could not recall what it was about. Thoughtfully he rose, showered, shaved and put on a clean uniform. Then he went down to the dining room and took a small table by the wall. He ordered and ate thoughtfully, and when he was finished, had coffee.

He wondered what had happened. Everything was different. An attitude, obviously; but why should he suddenly change attitudes while asleep? He began to wonder what he would have planned to do with these days had he been the planning kind (which he was not). There was no question whether the time had been wellspent, or that it had passed agreeably, because it had; but tomorrow he would return to the ship, and he was not certain that at that time he would consider it a successful holiday. Something was missing. But what? He had sent his family their presents, he had contributed to the beggars, and had even attended church, after a fashion. It had not all been sensual enjoyment. Sensual enjoyment, he repeated; the sensual over against the spiritual aspect of Christmas. The holly and the ivy, he said, grinning. His shipmates would interpret it differently. Vanity of vanities, he added, and drank his coffee, signed the check and left.

Outside, he was relieved to find the city intact. The structural verticality remained, as did the human presence and the energy of motor vehicles. Jim thought that he would like to go again to the village und see these villagers. There was something about them.

Avoiding Times Square, he took the subway downtown. In the train he watched the conductor unofficially waiting to open the doors at the next sta-



tion, a drunkard sprawled senselessly on a seat among crumpled newspapers, an old couple facing forward, evidently intent upon maintaining dignity, a laborer in soiled denims, leaning against a window, reading the sports page, his lunchkit and coffee bottle beside him. What a way to celebrate New Year's, Jim thought. The old year was dying and the new being born. So what? In Times Square there was mass hysteria; here there was business as usual. Attitudes.

He got off at Washington Square station and came up into the triangle at Sixth Avenue and Eighth Street, and stopped to look around. The temperature was warming. People sloshed through the sodden snow as if trailing remnants of the festive Christmas air. Cars and taxis, trucks and buses sped by, showering the churning slush before them and sending the people leaping aside to avoid getting splashed. Jim glanced at his wristwatch. 21.30. On Sixth Avenue, beyond the newsstands, delicatessens and hot chestnut vendors a cinema marquee advertised *Beneath the Twelvemile Reef*. In Eighth Street, under the festooned lights, another offered the british film, *The Holly and the Ivy*. At the end of Greenwich Street Jim saw another marquee, but could not read what it said. Two women stopped and peered at him.

«Honey, you look real lonesome,» said one, laying a large arm on his shoulder and breathing liquor into his face. Jim appraised both women, then replied, «My dear lady, you can't always tell by look.» She pursed her lips, glanced at her companion, then back to Jim.

«You mean you *ain't lonesome?*»

«That's what I mean.»

The other woman laughed. «Oh, he *is* lonesome, too. He's just being brave!»

Jim extracted his shoulder and backed away. «I am not lonesome,» he said decisively. The women stared at him. He added, «But I appreciate your concern.» They brightened like two lights switched on.

«You're waiting for your girl, ain't you?»

«No.»

«Have you got a girl?»

Her companion caught her sleeve.» Don't be so inquisitive.»

«I ain't being in-qui-sitive, I just want to know has he got a girl. He looks like he ain't got any.»

«Of course he has a girl. Every sailor has a girl. Come on and leave him alone, he's waiting for her now.»

«I haven't any girl,» Jim said, «and I'm not waiting for anybody. I'm just standing here.»

«Well chacun a son gout, then!» declared the woman, slapping her thigh. The women laughed uproariously and went off leaning on each other and waving and calling back, «if you ever get lonesome, honey, look us up!»

Jim went to see the British film.

It was raining when he came out. Feeling somewhat stuffy from the crowded theater, he decided to go for a walk and clear his head. Hitching up his collar he set off, breathing deeply and recalling his senses away from England back to the United States and the imminent new year.

He was in West Fourth Street when midnight struck. He stopped by a lighted shopwindow and looked at his watch as its second hand summarily swept away the last fifteen seconds of the old year and then without ceremony or hesitation swept away the first fifteen of the new. He continued walking. He wanted to make some gesture to mark the new year's arrival; a sort of ritual observance. He

decided to find a bar and drink a toast. «To the New Year, to new hope, and new understanding.» There were so many things that he did not understand.

A small sign hung above a doorway with steps leading down. Probably a quiet place. Jim descended and opened the door. A big cloud of cigarette smoke burst out and rose up the stairway, propelled by the deafening sound of many voices shouting. Before Jim could recover, voices rose closeby above the bedlam: «*Happy New Year!*» Hands reached out of the gloom and pulled him inside as the door swung shut, and he was engulfed in arms and hands and bodies and noise and darkness.

Someone kissed him. Someone's arms were about his chest, and hands were on his back. He struggled. This bore some resemblance to the subway at rush hour. Jim wondered whether it did not exceed the allowable limit on occupancy. He found himself laughing madly, trying to fend off the overt greetings and reach the bar. They certainly are spontaneous in here, he observed. There was a light behind the bar and one in the jukebox; a feeble blue bulb glowed through the pall of smoke at the ceiling.

At about the same time Jim's eyes became accustomed to the dark and he was able to see the room it came to him that there were no women visible. Maybe they were sitting. No; the idea was preposterous here. Then it dawned on him: one of *those places!* Simultaneously he realised that the power of the sound and pressure of so many people in the small room was battering his senses. Mass hysteria. He knew that this happened in Times Square, and had avoided that area for this very reason. He decided that he had better leave without toasting the new year, and began the arduous journey back to the exit, harried by affectionate demonstrations on the way.

«Don't go away, honey, the party's just beginning!»

«Sorry, I have to go,» he said to nobody. He concentrated forcibly on shutting out the sensations that were crowding in upon him. «Not one of these!» he repeated it, over and over; «Not one of these! I'm different, but not like this!» He raged against his lack of selfcontrol. If he could get out of here, everything would be all right again.

At last, near desperation, he gained the door and was reaching for it when it opened. A young navy seaman stood outside. The surprising noise made him for an instant into the appearance which Jim had felt when he stood there. It was evident that this boy, like Jim, had come to the wrong place. Overjoyed to find an ally in a time of such need, Jim's sympathy went out to the sailor, and his badly-worsted courage revived to fight the frightening forces which threatened to overwhelm him. In the next instant, however, the boy shouted a greeting to the men around the door and flung himself into their midst with complete and joyful abandon. Jim, amazed by this display of levity (he had never seen a sailor carry on like this), essayed to slip past through the open doorway. «Vanity of vanities!» he cried, «all is va-» He did not make it. The sailor clamped strong arms about him and smiling broadly, asked, «Where are you going, Mac? You're not leaving like this, are you?» Jim saw the fine, smooth curve of the boy's lips and strong, even rows of teeth. «Yes, I've got to go!» he answered, renewing his struggle. The sailor said, «All right, but come back when you got rid of her,» and kissed him. The crowd cheered.

Jim wrenched himself free, and in doing so sent the door slamming against the outside wall. The crowd shrank from him, the sailor stepped back a little, watching him closely, his smile gone and awareness of crisis smeared across

his boyish face. He thinks I'm going to hit him! Jim was stricken by the thought as the door swung shut on the sailor. Quickly he opened it again and held it with his foot. He soberly and carefully saluted the sailor. Then he released the door, turned and leapt up the steps under the billowing smoke.

In the street passersby might have taken him to be drunk. His behavior veered sharply from manly attempts at sober dignity to light and boyish mobility. He laughed, frowned, shrugged, grimaced, struck his head with the palm of his hand and muttered, «How about that!» and «Wow!» His heart pounded; complex rhythms beat in his ears; he found that he was oblivious of time and place and direction, and that moreover, he did not care. «How about that!» he cried, laughing. He had saluted that sailor. He shook his hand as if to dislodge the recollection. But it stayed. He had exhibited violence when violence pointed unerringly to strong feeling and where strong feeling was significant. And he had sought to undo this revealing display only to reveal still more: he had saluted that sailor. «I must be out of my mind!» he gasped. But perhaps he was making too much of it; maybe the gesture had little or no meaning to the others. Yes, it was doubtful that anyone but he would attach any meaning to it. He frowned, not reassured. Why had he done that instead of breaking his jaw as everyone had expected? — And that hammy exit! If *that* didn't bring the little queer running after him, nothing could! Jim glanced behind him apprehensively. The street was empty. He laughed, to think of being pursued by one who a moment before had braced against the inevitable blow. Jim, the crowd, the sailor — everybody knew that this was what happened when that sort of thing was tried with the wrong man. — But *this*: here was a young, handsome, lively, healthy, well-built boy whose conduct was not exactly what one would call manly, but — Jim was dismayed to find that he liked that boy. Then the whirlwind of his thoughts stormed on. He tried to calm himself and regain his objectivity and detachment. Instead, sensations swept headlong through his brain, and the sailor's image leapt exuberantly in and out among them like dolphins on a sunlit summer sea. Drunkenly on his way he went, struggling with his visions.

Running footsteps sounded behind him.

«Hey! Wait a minute!» The voice stopped him. Wheeling about as the sailor caught up, Jim started, and stared as if at a specter. Between gasps for breath the sailor blurted out, «May I talk to you for a minute?»

«Sure,» Jim answered, guardedly. Silently he waited for the boy to regain his breath, and watched his chest rising and falling.

«I wondered why you left in such a hurry.»

«Like I said, I had to,» Jim replied.

«You have to catch a plane or something back to your base?»

«No, my ship is in the Yard over in Brooklyn. I just had to leave — that's all.»

«Too crowded and noisy in that bar?»

«Well, yes, I guess it was.» Jim smiled, again guardedly. The sailor smiled, too; the same broad smile which had ultimately brought forth that illconsidered salute.

«That's a wild place tonight,» the sailor said. To Jim it seemed that this was perhaps understating the facts. Too, it was a curious statement, coming from one who made so notable a contribution to that 'wildness'.



While they stood in the rain Jim noticed that the sailor was breathing slower now, but in consciously-measured cycles, as if anticipating something. *I know what he's thinking!*

«Would you like to go somewhere else?» the sailor asked, «somewhere that's not so crowded and noisy? I know a good place. It isn't far.»

«I guess not. I'm tired and sleepy.»

«*Tired and sleepy!* On New Year's Eve? You *can't* be! — Do you mean that you leaped up the steps like that and got all the way down here before I could catch up with you, and you're *tired and sleepy?*»

Jim saw that it was a feeble excuse, and evidently a transparent one. It was not even true. He was *anything* but tired and sleepy. while trying to present an outward appearance of calm, he raged against this erratic conduct. Here was a phenomenon that he could not dismiss with his favorite phrase, upon which in fact, his favorite phrase had crashed and burned. But what was most alarming was that he did not care; he was not really trying to think clearly. It was too evident that this other sailor was the cause. Jim's struggle was not to discover why, but to evade the issue entirely and return to the safety of his old ways. But as his resources played out and the sailor (whose intentions he apprehended) gained the advantage, Jim fell into the desperation of the lost.

«Are you saying that I'm not telling the truth?» The ignoble sound leapt into the air. Jim could not believe he had uttered it. But the sailor, showing similar disbelief, was answering, «No; no! — I thought that the way you shoved off after you saluted me meant that you only wanted to get away from the others. And the way you smiled. —»

«I *smiled* at you?»

«I *thought* you did.»

«Maybe I did,» Jim said, weakly. This was too much. He had better go. Turning away, he said over his shoulder, «Well, goodnight.»

«*Wait!*» The sailor was before him in one leap. «Listen,» he said, earnestly, «I don't want to beg you, because that's not the way it should be. I like you, Mac, and I think you like me, or you wouldn't have done what you did. —» He searched Jim's face for a sign of understanding. Jim watched him, not breathing. The boy made a gesture with his hands, hesitated a moment, then dropped them, hopelessly.

Jim was shaken. «Look, I know what you're asking! I may as well admit it. And I may as well admit that I do like you; but — I'm not — I'm not —»

«Homosexual?»

«Yes, yes, that's what I mean!»

«Is *that* all that's bothering you?» the boy said. «I didn't much think you were. Until you saluted me. — but let's change the subject. We still like each other, and I know how to behave myself. You needn't be afraid; I won't try anything. Come on, let's go.»

«I can't, I'm all shook up.»

The boy was genuinely concerned. Laying his hand gently on Jim's shoulder he said. «You'll feel better with a shot of brandy. It's a hell of a night to be out in without any; and you need it. — Come on.»

Jim looked at the pavement. «I guess I just don't want to,» he replied, hating the conviction he was putting into the lie. But it was necessary: that

hand lying on his shoulder told him that it was not the boy, but himself, who must be guarded against.

«Are you sure?»

Jim nodded without looking up.

«I guess I can't get around that,» the sailor said. «Thanks anyway, for being decent about it.» He held out his hand and Jim clasped it strongly. He added, «Sometimes it's hard to tell which way a guy is. I guess you know that it can end pretty nastily when there's a mistake like this.» Withdrawing his hand, he said, «I'll get back to the party now. Goodnight and good luck.» He walked away, and Jim's gaze dumbly followed until he disappeared around the corner.

The battle was over, and the field was Jim's. He was safe. Rooted to the spot, he surveyed the scene. In the rain, dismal, forlorn, blackwindowed façades lined the empty street. Lonely, dripping lamp posts sent wan light through the ocean of silence. Was this the victory over a frightful adversary? Was this the New Year, so full of hope and promise, so long awaited? He looked up and down the street. He was miserable.

There was nothing to do but return to the hotel. He would go to bed and sleep a long time, then wake up and see what tomorrow would bring.

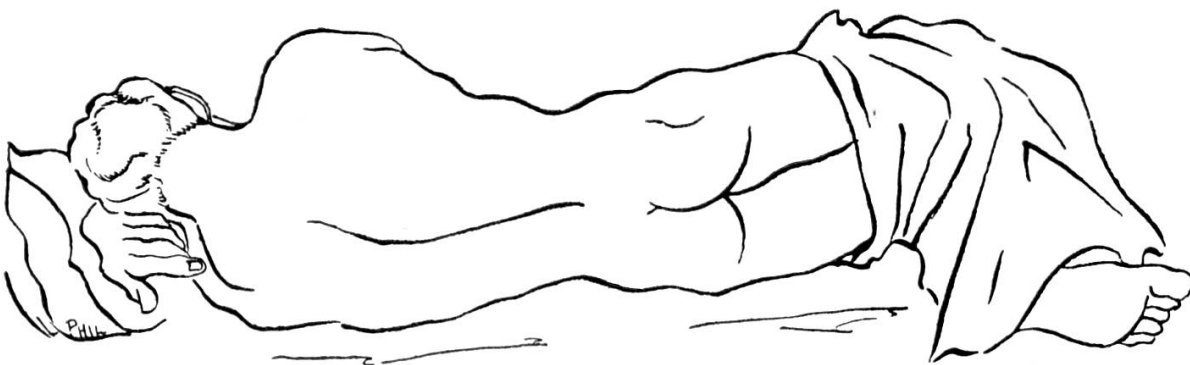
Tentatively he took a few steps in that direction. Halted. A grimace passed over his features. Wearily he passed his hand over his face, drew in a painful sigh and slowly let it out again. That, then, was settled. He would not go back to the hotel.

A moment later he turned about and began walking. Then he quickened his pace. Then he bolted and ran. Rounding the corner at full speed he saw the sailor two blocks away.

«*Hey! Wait a minute!*» Jim saw the sailor stop. His feet flew over the pavement, the wind sang in his ears as he leapt across pools of water and over curbs and snowdrifts. Then he was beside him, and the sailor was looking at him curiously while he stood there gasping for breath and struggling to think how to say what he had to. Finally he blurted out, «I guess I'm not so sure after all.» The sailor did not understand. Jim tried again: «Where is that place you were telling me about?»

«It's not far,» the sailor answered, smiling.

by h.r.



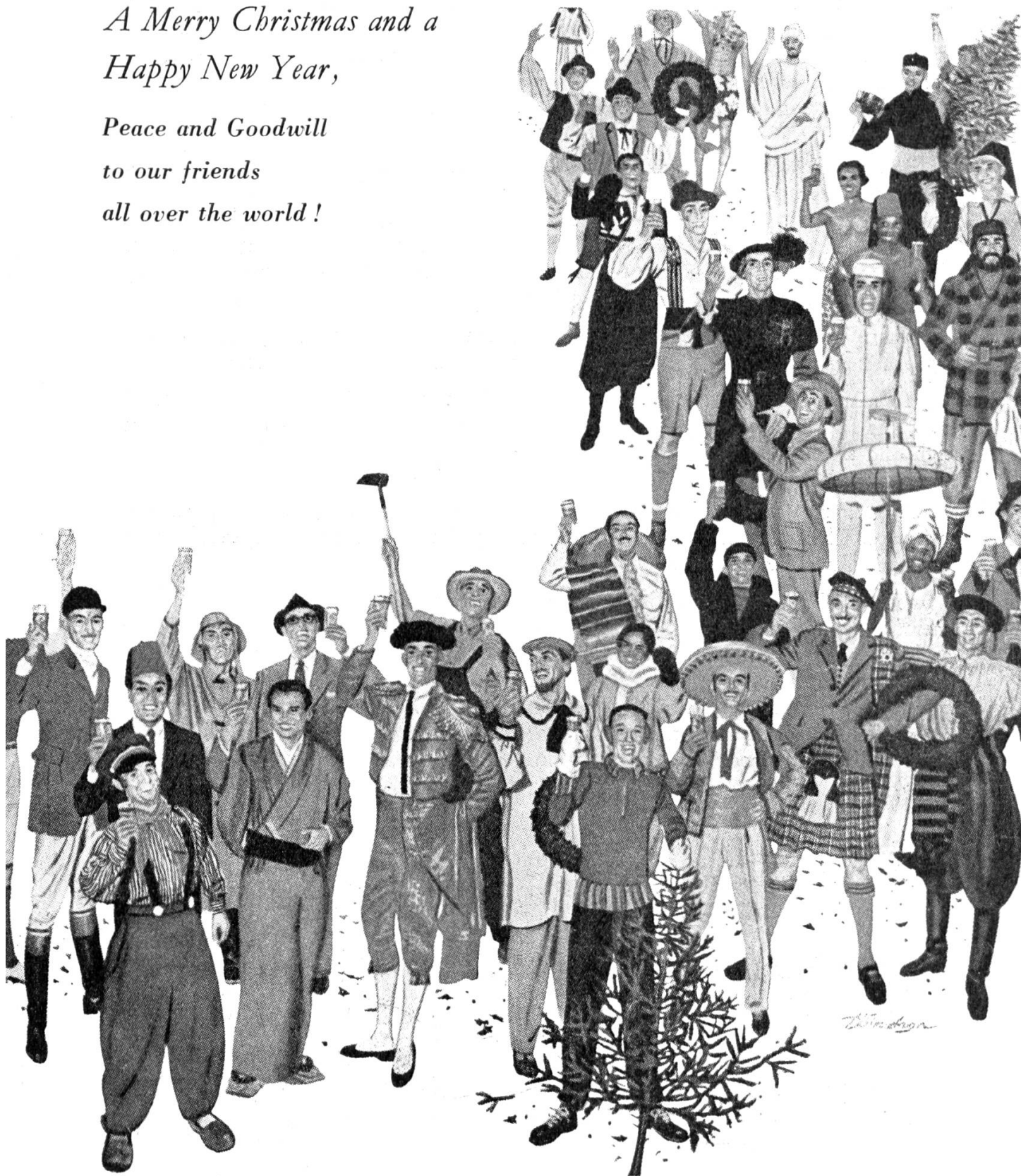
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