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# Colman's Mustard

## SHORT STORY

# "I'M AN ARMENIAN"

THERE'S a dozen ways I could wrap up this story, but the only way to write it is the way it happened.

"Dance?" he said. "They call me Sam."

There was a rule at the Club that when asked one couldn't refuse, so there was no help for it.

Now, I have danced with many of those boys, lads from Wisconsin, and Florida and Dakota, long rangy Texans and Polaks from Minnesota and Jew boys from Brooklyn and the Bronx, but there was never one to equal Sam.

Cacophony from the company band, squeaking of the sax and hideous squall of the trumpets, the little corporal with the dazed look in his eyes, on the drums there in the corner, beating them up in a frenzy, louder, harder—crash, boom-boom, crash, boom-boom, boom-rah-rah.

And Sam? In the midst of all this chaos Sam was a thing inspired, a beast uncaged, a jungle animal. Hunch of his shoulders and set of his jaw, feet going God knows where, rush, whirl, pounce, mad leap. Ah, there's a wee clear space in the middle of the floor, a tigerish spring and Sam will have you there. Close your eyes, don't look, it's coming, it's coming, it's come! The top sergeant who looks like Johnny Weismuller, and the red-headed sailor have also seen the space. They also spring. It doesn't matter of course that Sam lands against the top sergeant and bounces off so that both heels sink into your instep. It doesn't hurt half as much as you thought it would; you're only glad it wasn't the sergeant that hit you. And you can still move, after all. Steady, now, steady, that's better, you haven't cannoned into anyone for at least a minute. Ah, nicely done, Sam, and it was only the top sergeant after all, as he hurled his woman away from him and charged back into a clinch. His elbow smashes you in the back as he flings her off again, but it's all in fun and you don't mind a bit.

\* \* \*

THE music is wearing out now. A final screaming crescendo and it subsides. The band collapse and mop their faces. They need to. Sam and I sort ourselves out and sit down. It is good to sit down. To have a chair beneath one and a table to prop one's elbows on. When the music stopped the lion rampant that was Sam ramped no more. He was passive now beyond the point of stolidity.

Cigarette? said Sam.

Thanks, I said.

So you're Sam, I said, surreptitiously feeling my instep under the table. I could feel the blood all right, but my stocking, thank heaven, was intact. And where do you come from, Sam?

California, he said. I'm an Armenian.

So you're an Armenian, I said.

Sure, he said. Sure I'm an Armenian.

And you come from California? Lived there long? Born there maybe?

Written for "The Listener"

by R. M. WHEELER

Sure, he said, that's right. I was born there. In California.

Nice place? I said.

Sure, he said.

And what did you do in California, Sam?

Do, he said, in California?

Yes, I said, in California.

Oh, he said, this and that.

Which and what? I said.

Oh, he said, most everything I guess. Message boy, tool maker, fruit picker, farm hand. I've been around. I'm an Armenian, he said.

Yes, I said, I know. You're proud of it, aren't you, Sam?

Sure, he said.

Tell me, I said, about your jobs; which did you like best, what do you want to do?

He smiled, Sam, the Armenian, with his curly black hair and curious blank eyes in his wide face, dropped his head and smiled.

You'd think me crazy if I told you, he said. You'd laugh at me.

No, I wouldn't, I said. I promise, Sam. Tell me.

I want to write, he said. He lifted his chin and smacked his hand on the table. Yes, sir. That's what I want more than anything, I guess. I want to be a writer.

He was an Armenian. He was born in California and he wanted to be a writer. I held my breath as I asked the next question. Carelessly, though, I asked it. So he shouldn't know how important it was.

Do you like Saroyan?

Saroyan, he said, what's that?

William Saroyan, I said. He writes. He's an Armenian, and he was born in California and he is a writer. Haven't you heard of him? I was pleading with him almost, but he wasn't to know.

No, he said, no I never heard of him.

He wanted to be a writer, he was an Armenian born in California, yet he had never heard of Saroyan.

But you must have, I said desperately. Next to you, he's probably the greatest writer in America. The way he says things they are real and full of meaning and as you have always known them, and he wraps them up in words to make you laugh or weep, but to make you know. He—But I stopped. It wasn't any use.

No kiddin', said Sam, politely, I never heard of him. He must be some guy.

Yes, I said. But tell me, Sam, what made you want to be a writer?

I don't know, he said, I guess I've always wanted to be one. I guess it's reading made me want to be a writer.

Yes, I said, eagerly, that must be it. What do you like to read, Sam?

(continued on next page)