

COMMISSION OF INQUIRY



By Recorder H. R. CROSS, R.N.Z.N.

This story was awarded first prize in its section in the recent Services' literary competitions.

"CAN YOU SWEAR?" So nervous was I, eager, shaking for his approval that would sign me on to his ship, to work at I didn't care what, for what pay I wasn't bothering, that it wasn't for months that I smiled—a mocking smile, I suppose—at my ingenuousness: "Too damn right," I said. If I answered stronger than "damn," it flashed through my mind at the moment of the question, he might think I was not the right type; that I was not disciplined; that my parents had been slack in my upbringing. That is what I thought. I was not experienced in much besides saying "Sir" to schoolmasters—not at that time—and, anyway, I was nervous. Because I wanted his approval, I wanted to work on that ship. There was a war, I was young and wanted to do something.

I wanted his approval, and I got it: to work on that ship, to live (and nearly to die, want to die at times) through the life that followed; his approval for the months ahead—months of hard, sweating tropics, work that was dirty to my hands and dirty inside me, short hours in ports, men—I thought they weren't at first, I wasn't used to their ideas. I found they were, and human.

His approval for the monotony of days that meant nothing; days of separate minutes, each like the ceaseless drips, and as slow, of water from the roof of a cave I knew, and still remember, as a boy. One followed by another, and there was no end. No hurry, no breathing there. Those days meant nothing, I said; they didn't; and if I had let them I couldn't have stood it. So he gave me his approval; and it went also for all that was the life on that ship: even for the awkward and ever-continuing, unremitting motion, always the same. That ship never gave a false step. I said once in a letter home that we rolled so much and for so long that the cow we kept on board finished by giving churned butter instead of milk. Had there been a cow it might have been true. I wasn't unhappy; I didn't feel anything much after a while. There seemed no use.

He asked whether I could swear. He looked, this captain, as though he had been with the ship as long as the cockroaches I was afterwards to curse—I cursed the captain and the cockroaches. Christian Clemensen, his name; and, like the ship, he was Norwegian in nothing but name. M. V. "Skaanen"—London businessmen were the owners; port of registry, San Pedro; built on