

from ATLANTIC ORDEAL

In 1940 Mary Cornish, an escort travelling with English children, found herself in a lifeboat with six boys and forty men after their ship was torpedoed.

After nightfall another of the boys became delirious. His feet were so painful that he could not bear to have them touched. As the night wore on he became obsessed with the fear of going mad. Sometimes he screamed horribly and shouted: "I'm mad, I'm going mad, I *know* I'm going mad."

5 Mary Cornish tried to calm him, but if anyone touched him, he shouted all the more. Father Sullivan said in French:

"This boy is dying of thirst."

"The others aren't. He must hang on somehow."

10 There was one service that the priest alone could perform. He knelt beside the boy and offered prayers for his soul. The others could not understand the rapid Latin phrases, but the low-voiced words had a soothing effect.

There was a disturbance . . . and then the gunner appeared. He took in the situation at a glance: the boy's exposed legs and feet — he had kicked off the blanket — the kneeling priest, and the solemn atmosphere.

15 "What's going on here *now*?" he demanded. "What's wrong with the poor little blighter?"

The boy, croaking like a frog, cried out for water.

"Water?" the gunner said. "Is *that* all? Of course you want water; we all do. You'll get some in the morning."

20 The boy only cried out again for water.

"Now you forget about it," the gunner commanded. "You'll have plenty of water when we're picked up, and that won't be long now. Is *that* all that's wrong with you?"

"My feet are cold," the boy answered weakly.

25 The gunner snorted triumphantly and glared at the escorts. "Huh! So your feet are cold. That's a nice way to look after a kid. . . ."

The cadet took his coat off to give to the boy, and the gunner wrapped it round the sick boy's feet and tucked it in.

"There. Any better?" he demanded.

30 "My feet are still cold."

"No, they're not," the gunner said firmly. "They're wrapped up properly now and they'll be warm as toast in half a jiffy. Now, are your feet warm?"

"My feet —" the boy began.

35 "Don't let me hear another sound out of you till morning," the gunner said fiercely. "No more of this yelling out. Now -- *are your feet warm?*"

"Yes," the boy whispered feebly.

"Then you'll be all right till the morning."

40 He went off, muttering under his breath about boys with cold feet, women who didn't know how to look after kids, and the respective merits of saying prayers and keeping children warm. His methods were effective; the boy did not scream anymore and he gradually quieted down.

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