

DANCING ON AIR

by Jim Ruland

Not by choice. You swung the axe but it was not your choice. You have never looked at wood so closely. The carefully hewn boards fitted together so carefully. A man with responsibilities. Mouths to feed. You were at a saloon on Water Street. Witnesses say. You were taken out of the place and put on a sloop against your will.

Witnesses don't say. Let the record show that you are in possession of a bump on the back of your noggin.

The night did be dark in your favor. From the bridge you quickly did creep. Swung the axe at the forward lookout. Swung the axe at the boy coming up from below. Chopped away at the captain and when the devil wouldn't let go of the taffrail you chopped off the devil's hands.

Not by choice.

Let the record show you have a brick in your head. Let the record show your lovely penmanship. The scene of horror described by Captain Weed of the Second Police Precinct. The character of the captain described by one who knew him well. Proceeds to benefit.

The sloop listing in the distance. The cutwater crushed, the bowsprit sundered, decks awash with blood. The trails the bodies left as you dragged them across the deck your grim signature. The stove turned over, bleeding ash while the oysters rotted in the hold.

You never denied the deed, ladies and gentlemen. The gibbet is strong, the shackles secure. All that wood in scientific harmony. As wonderful a gallows joining as you ever did see. Troops from Governor's Island, troops from Fort Hamilton. The Lord's name in the murderer's mouth. Let the record show the accused sold a plaster cast to a curio collector for \$25 and a box of cigars. Let the record show you take your coffee with a dash of cinnamon. A full confession. The devil, the devil. The drink and the devil. And what kind of choice is that?

Shanghaied. A beautiful word for an ugly thing. Knocked their brains out of their skulls on the low seas, ladies and gentlemen! The

murderer's wife, the murderer's children. Lord have mercy on their souls. The sharpness of the saw that sawed the planks something you would like to but never will see. You place your feet inside a square that isn't there and wait for the dance to begin.

