

THE PREVIOUS ADVENTURES OF POPEYE THE SAILOR

by Jim Ruland

There he sat with his hands reposing on his knees, bald, squat, grey, bristly, recalling a wild boar somehow; and by his side towered an awful, mature, white female.

--Joseph Conrad

He goes by many names. In the Mediterranean he is Iron Arm. In Sweden he is known as Karl Alfred. In Denmark he goes by Skipper Skraek. Here in the Western Pacific he is best known as Father of One Hundred Bastards.

As a young man, Popeye did not display an aptitude for deck seamanship. He did, however, possess an unbridled capacity for violence, and it was violence that sent him to sea when a judge gave him a choice between a berth on a ship or a bunk in a cell. He chose the former. Thus began an auspicious naval career.

Popeye was serving as a boatswain's mate on a steamer when the ship developed engine trouble and limped into Haiphong for repairs. Popeye went ashore with his mates, drinking as sailors do. Staggering bandy-legged down the boulevard he noticed a beautiful courtesan smoking on the balcony of a sumptuous pleasure house. She caught his eye, or perhaps he caught hers. It's the oldest story there is. He tried to come up, but an over-muscled goon barred him from entering. Although Popeye's temper was famous from Siam to Palawan, he left without a fight.

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In addition to the pair of stock anchors that adorn his massive forearms, Popeye has a portrait of a woman on his upper arm, under which the name "Doan Vien" is inscribed on a stylized banner, fluttering in a wind that never was. On his left shin can be found a dead red rooster, dangling from a noose. Popeye never tires of telling young ladies "I've got a cock that hangs below me knee." Then, that ridiculous laughter.

Popeye was short and scrappy. He weighed just one hundred sixty pounds. He distinguished himself by clotheslining the brawniest squab on the steamer as the fellow stepped over his sea bag. I can imagine Popeye standing over the man, flushed with rage, sputtering nonsense. The bells are ringing, but there's no one in the engine room. He had all his hair then. And both eyes.

Who was Doan Vien? She was my mother. Presume what you like. As for Olive Oyl, I do not have the words to describe how much I loathe that awful woman.

Popeye returned to the pleasure house at midnight, shimmied up a drainpipe, and vaulted onto the balcony. He parted the billowing curtains and let himself into the courtesan's bedchamber. She invited him in with a smile. My father interpreted the gesture as foreplay, the prelude to a ravishing she did not resist.

The purpose of an anchor, as any old salt can tell you, is to bring a ship to a stop and keep it there.

Popeye and Doan Vien were seen everywhere together. Hotels and restaurants. Theaters and teahouses. They made an odd couple. He was ill tempered and rough. She possessed the grace of a swan. Whenever Popeye had to go back to the ship, Doan Vien returned to the pleasure house. This he could not abide. My father is an insecure

man. He is tormented by doubts, riddled with apprehension. See how disgracefully he clings to Olive Oyl?

Popeye's past is forever creeping up on him. When he mutters his half-mad asides, is he speaking to those who would bring him down, or is he speaking to me?

To control Doan Vien, he introduced her to opium and made sure she had enough to smoke when he left her bedchamber each morning. Soon the pipe became more than an accoutrement for managing the quiet time between clients. Within a matter of weeks, it had become her master.

It is an easy thing to take out an eye.

In the lexicon of tattooing, an anchor symbolizes a search for a home. This is ironic because a home is the opposite of what Popeye was searching for.

One bright, fine morning that bore a cool breeze from the north, the first suggestion that autumn was coming, Popeye's steamer quit Haiphong for Hong Kong. My father was on board. He'd left without bidding Doan Vien farewell. You can imagine what became of her.

What did he see in my mother? A port for his dinghy? A slip for his seed? A vessel that could bear the strain of his ferocious ardor?

On those rare occasions when Popeye finds himself between ships, he, contrary to popular opinion, does not live in a garbage can. Usually, he finds work as a dogcatcher in San Diego.

Eighteen years later, Popeye returned to Haiphong. Cavorting in a class of brothel the likes of which you have never seen, Popeye encountered my mother once more. Her beauty had dissipated. Her courtly mien had been wasted by the strain of her relentless need.

She was utterly transformed. He failed to recognize her, but she knew him in an instant. The lopsided smile. The piss-reek of boiled spinach. That infuriatingly mindless laughter. She came home and told me where he could be found. It was not a happy homecoming.

I have inherited my father's anger, that much is true. But he left me no choice. We are what we are. Even he will tell you that.

(end)

