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The Night without remorse

Captain Kent experiences with his orderly Anson the cruel war against the Japs in the Burma jungle. We reprint this chapter from the third part of the latest bestseller: «Look down in mercy» which had an unusual succes in England as well as in the States.

A few days later he was sitting in the garden when the sirens started in the town. There had already been several false alarms, and he took no notice until he heard the first faint sounds of planes. He was not afraid, the bungalow was on the outskirts of the town, and there were only a few scattered houses near him, half-hidden by trees. He judged that the planes were flying very high and were unusually numerous. He lay on the grass when he heard the bombs whistling down and exploding in the town, and then the planes passed over him in the direction of Mandalay.

He went to the club earlier than usual that morning and found the bar already crowded with people talking excitedly about the bombing. By one o'clock there was a rumour that Mandalay had been bombed, and that the city was on fire, but nobody was very interested. By the time Kent went home for his afternoon sleep he was more drunk than usual and slept later. He went back to the club again but he felt too ill to do more than eat a little chicken and drink two glasses of wine. He sat at the bar afterwards and tried to drink some brandy, but every time he took a sip it seared his stomach and without saying good-night he left the club.

Outside the air smelt faintly of carnations and a young moon was setting. After the club it seemed so fresh and peaceful that he decided to go a long way round and then cut back through the town toward home. As they drove slowly up the main street he looked for signs of damage but there was very little to see; only fragmentation bombs had been dropped, and apart from one or two smouldering ruins there was nothing. When they reached the end of the line of shops he saw Anson standing by himself outside a small restaurant; without thinking he called to him and told the driver to stop, and Anson came quickly towards the gharry.

«Have you had food here or at the bungalow, or what are you doing?» Kent asked. He suddenly felt much better and wide awake.

«I had food at the bungalow, I was just going back to barracks. You're going home early to-night, aren't you, sir?» His voice was frankly curious.

«I got bored and thought I'd have an early night for a change, and now I'm sorry. Why don't you come back and have a drink with me, it's only ten o'clock, you needn't be back until twelve.» There was a moment's silence and then Anson got into the gharry and the driver flicked his whip along the horse's emaciated flank. Kent made some remark about the bombing but Anson did not reply, and they drove in silence along the dark roads, with the stars moving slowly through the trees above them.

All the way back to the bungalow Kent wondered what to do when they arrived, whether to keep the gharry and send Anson back to

barracks in an hour's time or whether to pay the man off and let him go. He now knew quite clearly what he wanted to do but he was still struggling against himself, bitterly resenting the truth and terrified of the consequences, all his upbringing and fundamental ignorance shouting at him that what he was considering was unthinkable, beyond words dreadful. As they turned into the drive the thought came to him that some of his friends at the club might miss him and decide to look for him at the bungalow; the mere idea of being found treating a private soldier as an equal, sitting in the lounge drinking together, was enough to panic him, and he decided to tell the driver to wait.

They drew up at the veranda steps and Kent turned to Anson. He could see his face in the starlight. «I think we had better keep the gharry, don't you?» He whispered as though someone might be eavesdropping. «I don't want to make you late getting back to the barracks and catching seven days' C. B.» He tried to smile but his face was stiff. Anson answered in the same low tone of voice.

»Don't worry about that, sir, it's dead easy getting into barracks without being seen, and the bloke in charge of my room won't say anything.» Kent didn't reply for a moment, and then he nodded his head and got out. He was telling himself that he had done nothing wrong so far, and that drinking to a time-table spoilt an evening. He gave the driver the full amount he was asked, suddenly anxious for him to go.

They walked quietly into the lounge and Kent felt for the light switch. Before he turned it on he whispered in the dark toward Anson.

«I left the club this evening without saying good-night to the officers I was with. If we hear anyone coming up the drive slip out through the french windows and go back to barracks. Whatever you do, don't be seen.»

«Right, sir.» He turned on the ceiling light and they stood with their eyes narrowed, smiling at each other, then Kent pulled the cheap curtains and opened the doors into the garden. There was a tray of drinks by the sofa and as they sat down Kent asked him what he would like.

«Beer if there's any handy, sir, I'm not very used to spirits.» He smiled almost apologetically at Kent, who passed him a bottle of beer and a glass, helping himself to brandy. His feeling of illness and repulsion at the thought of alcohol had completely gone, he was happy and excited as though about to start a long planned journey.

As he drank and talked at random he was aware of a mounting physical sensation that was not unpleasant but made him feel that he had no control over his stomach and at any minute might be sick, not with a sweaty nausea, but as though one had drunk champagne too quickly and threw it up easily before the wine was corrupted by the stomach. As they talked they looked each other straight in the face; it became difficult to disengage their eyes even when a silence fell, and the silences began to fall more frequently and last longer.

Kent looked at his watch and saw to his amazement that it was nearly one o'clock. Then he felt relief, no one would come to the bungalow now.

«Good God above! It's nearly one o'clock,» he said, at the same time

reaching for the bottle. He poured himself out a drink and looked at Anson over the rim of the glass.

«Do you want me to go, sir?» Anson spoke quietly, sitting back against the cushions in the corner of the sofa.

«Do you want to go?» Kent swallowed some neat brandy. He was afraid he would be sick where he sat, his eyes felt enormous, immovable, the words were said almost, it seemed, without any volition on his part, and the word «want» balanced all the other words. Far away they could hear a dog barking and the curtains across the garden doors stirred.

«No, sir.» He shook his head slightly without moving his eyes. Kent drained his glass and got up, knocking the low table with his leg. A long-stemmed glass fell over and splintered, but he did not notice, he was suffocating, the palms of his hands slippery and cold with sweat; without thinking he wiped them on his trousers and held out his hand to Anson.

They crossed the room like dreamers, the blood in Kent's ears pounded and the shadowed doorway swayed. «Oh, God, I'm drunk,» he thought, «I must send him home. Oh, God, I'm drunk!» They reached the doorway and he saw the light switch, and then the room was in darkness and they moved together.

In the darkness of the bedroom they stripped off their clothes swiftly, laying them on the floor at their feet, noiselessly taking off their boots as though the faintly showing mosquito net held a sleeper who must not awake. Lying down side by side on the bed they encircled each other with their arms, until Kent was aware that he was cold and pulled up a sheet and one thin blanket. In the darkness Anson turned to Kent.

«Do you think I ought to go now?» He still spoke as though there was someone asleep in the room and Kent was pleased, although he could not have told why. He peered at his watch and for the second time could hardly believe the swiftness with which time had passed.

«What's the latest you can be back with safety?»

«Six-thirty would be all right.»

«Why don't you stay here until six then, there's no point in going back now, unless you want to. Let's have a cigarette and then sleep for a while, as long as we don't oversleep.» He fumbled for the cigarettes and matches on the table by the side of the bed and lit two together. He knew that the end of the one he handed Anson was wet but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered now, he thought, as he lay back and slid his arm between the pillow and Anson's shoulders, watching the inside of the net glow faintly as he drew deeply on his cigarette, nothing at all. He had committed the unforgivable sin and now there was nothing to be done except not to be found out.

They lay in the dark security of the net, and Kent felt sadness stealing over him, a sadness of regret and emptiness. He wanted Anson to leave and yet he wanted him to stay, his mere presence was a comfort, a shield against the darkness of the night and the remorse that would come with the day. He finished his cigarette and reaching down the side of the bed crushed it out on the bare floor. Silently Anson handed him his own cigarette and as Kent stubbed it out he noticed that it was

only half smoked. As though they were going to sleep Anson put his head on Kent's shoulder and they closed their eyes, listening to each other's soft breathing, wide awake in the darkness. And now Anson's closeness gave Kent a feeling of great tenderness for him and he fought against sleep, trying to prolong the few hours before he must leave. But at last it overcame him and when he awoke the open windows were grey.

He looked at his watch and saw that it was five-thirty. Anson's head was still on his shoulder and he was asleep; Kent rubbed his eyes and wished that he could reach the glass of water on the table without disturbing him. He lay quietly for a few minutes until he was wide awake and then noticed that the arm Anson was lying on was completely numbed. As he tried to move it away Anson stirred and lifted his head quickly.

«Sorry,» Kent whispered, «I must move my arm.» Anson smiled at him sleepily and half sat up in bed.

«Is it time to go yet?» he asked, yawning.

«Not for half an hour.» It would be quite light by then but he still wanted to postpone the moment when he would hear Anson tiptoe across the veranda and he would be alone. «Are you quite sure you can get back without being caught?»

«Yes, I'm sure. But even if I was I'd simply say that I had spent the night with some bibby.»

«Yes, of course,» Kent answered quickly, «I wasn't thinking of that, but if you were caught they might send you straight back to the battalions.»

«No, you needn't worry, I promise you.»

Kent drank a glass of water and without bothering to put on any clothes walked to the bathroom. When he came back Anson did the same. While he waited Kent propped the crumpled pillows against the wooden head of the bed and lit two cigarettes. The smoke made him dizzy and his body felt light from lack of sleep.

They sat up in bed leaning against each other and smoking, watching the light grow steadily outside and come seeping through the net. Now Kent could see the two untidy piles of uniform on the floor and even as he wondered why the sight of them filled him with nostalgia he realised that he had already made up his mind that this must never happen again. He lit another cigarette and turned to Anson.

«Are you sorry?» He spoke sadly, not looking at him.

«No of course not, I'm not sorry at all, why should I be? If I was going to be sorry I wouldn't have let it happen.» He was quite ready to discuss the matter but not from the point of view of regrets, and he did not want Kent to begin feeling remorse.

«I'll be back at nine but I won't wake you.»

«Yes, do that,» Kent answered listlessly.

«Good-bye,» Kent said, «be careful about getting back.»

«Good-bye, sir, I'll see you later on.» Kent watched him leave the room and the door closed carefully behind him. He knew it was despicable but he was glad that Anson had called him 'sir'.»

«Look down in mercy» by Walter Baxter. Edition William Heinemann Ltd. Melbourne / London / Toronto.) We refer to the critique on the German édition.