JACK HIGGINS

TOLL FOR THE BRAVE

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The dream always ended in exactly the same way – with me sitting bolt upright in bed, screaming like any child frightened in the dark, St Claire's laughter ringing in my ears which was the most disturbing thing of all.

And as always during the silence that followed, I waited with a kind of terrible anxiety for something to happen, something I dreaded above all things and yet could not put a name to.

But as usual, there was nothing. Only the rain brushing against the windows of the old house, driven by a wind that blew stiffly across the marshes from the North Sea. I listened, head turned, waiting for a sign that never came, shaking slightly and sweating rather a lot which was exactly how Sheila found me when she arrived a moment later.

She had been painting – still clutched a palette and three brushes in her left hand and the old terry towelling robe she habitually wore was streaked with paint. She put the palette and brushes down on a chair, came and sat on the edge of the bed, taking my hands in hers.

'What is it, love? The dream again?'

When I spoke my voice was hoarse and broken. 'Always the same – always. Accurate in every detail, exactly as it was until St Claire starts to laugh.'

I started to shake uncontrollably, teeth grinding together in intense stress. She had the robe off in a moment, was under the sheets, her arms pulling me into the warmth of that magnificent body.

And as always, she knew exactly what she was doing for fear turns upon itself endlessly like a mad dog unless the cycle can be broken. She kissed me repeatedly, hands gentle. For a little while, comfort, then by some mysterious alchemy, she was on her back, thighs spreading to receive me. An old story between us, but one which never palled and at such moments,

the finest therapy in the world – or so I told myself.

Englishmen who have served with the American forces in Vietnam aren't exactly thick on the ground, but there are more of us around than most people realise. Having said that, to disclose what I'd been doing for the past three years, in mixed company, was usually calculated to raise most eyebrows, and in some instances could be guaranteed to provoke open hostility.

The party where I had first met Sheila Ward was a case in point. It had turned out to be a stuffy, pseudo-intellectual affair. I was thoroughly bored and didn't seem to know a soul except my hostess. When she finally had time for me I had done what seemed the sensible thing and got good and drunk, something at which I was fairly expert in those days.

Unfortunately, she didn't seem to notice and insisted on introducing me to a sociologist from the London School of Economics who by some minor miracle known only to academics, had managed to obtain a doctorate for a thesis on

structural values in Revolutionary China without ever having actually visited the country.

The information that I had spent three of the best years of my young life serving with the American Airborne in Vietnam including a sizeable stretch in a North Vietnamese prison camp, had the same effect as if he had been hit by a rather heavy truck.

He told me that I was about as acceptable in his eyes as a lump of dung on his shoe which seemed to go down well with the group who'd been hanging on his every word, but didn't impress me one little bit.

I told him what he could do about it in pretty fluent Cantonese which – surprisingly in an expert on Chinese affairs – he didn't seem to understand.

But someone else did which was when I met Sheila Ward. Just about the most spectacular woman I'd ever seen in my life. Every man's fantasy dream. Soft black leather boots that reached to her thighs, a yard or two of orange wool posing as a dress, shoulder-length auburn hair framing a strong peasant face and a mouth which was at least half a mile wide. She could

have been ugly, but her mouth was her saving grace. With that mouth she was herself alone.

'You can't do that to him,' she said in fair Chinese. 'They'd give you at least five years.'

'Not bad,' I told her gravely, 'but your accent is terrible.'

'Yorkshire,' she said. 'Just a working class girl from Doncaster on the make. My husband was a lecturer at Hong Kong University for five years.'

The conversation was interrupted by my sociologist friend who tried to pull her out of the way and started again so I punched him none too gently under the breastbone, knuckles extended, and he went down with a shrill cry.

I don't really remember what happened after that except that Sheila led me out and no one tried to get in the way. I do know that it was raining hard, that I was leaning up against my car in the alley at the side of the house beneath a street lamp.

She buttoned me into my trenchcoat and said soberly, 'You were pretty nasty in there.'

'A bad habit of mine these days.'

'You get in fights often?'

'Now and then.' I struggled to light a cigarette. 'I irritate people or they annoy me.'

'And afterwards you feel better?' She shook her head 'There are other ways of relieving that kind of tension or didn't it ever occur to you?'

She had a bright red oilskin mac slung around her shoulders against the rain so I reached inside and cupped a beautifully firm breast.

She said calmly, 'See what I mean?'

I leaned back against the car, my face up to the rain. 'I can do several things quite well besides belt people. Latin declensions which comes of having gone to the right kind of school and I can find true north by pointing the hour hand of my watch at the sun or by shoving a stick into the ground. And I can cook. My monkey is delicious and tree rats are my speciality.'

'Exactly my type,' she said. 'I can see we're going to get along fine.'

'Just one snag,' I told her. 'Bed.'

She frowned. 'You didn't lose anything when you were out there did you?'

'Everything intact and in full working order, ma'am.' I saluted gravely. 'It's just that I've never been any good at it. A Chinese psychiatrist once told me it was because my grandfather found me in bed with the Finnish au pair when I was fourteen and beat all hell out of me with a blackthorne he prized rather highly. Carried it all the way through the desert campaign. He was a general, you see, so he naturally found it difficult to forgive me when it broke.'

'On you?' she said.

'Exactly, so I don't think you'd find me very satisfactory.'

'We'll have to see, won't we?' She was suddenly the lass from Doncaster again, the Yorkshire voice flat in the rain. 'What do you do with yourself – for a living, I mean?'

'Is that what you call it?' I shrugged. 'The last of the dinosaurs. Hunted to extinction. I enjoy what used to be known in society as private means – lots of them. In what little time I have to spare, I also try to write.'

She smiled at that, looking so astonishingly beautiful that things actually stopped moving

for a moment. 'You're just what I've been seeking for my old age.'

'You're marvellous,' I said. 'Also big, busty, sensuous . . .'

'Oh, definitely that,' she said. 'I never know when to stop. I'm also a lay-out artist in an advertising agency, divorced and thirty-seven years of age. You've only seen me in an artificial light, love.'

I started to slide down the side of the car and she got a shoulder under my arm and went through my clothes.

'You'll find the wallet in my left breast pocket,' I murmured.

She chuckled. 'You daft ha'p'orth. I'm looking for the car keys. Where do you live?'

'The Essex coast,' I told her. 'Foulness.'

'Good God,' she said. 'That must be all of fifty miles away.'

'Fifty-eight.'

She took me back to her flat in the King's Road, just for the night. I stayed a month, which was definitely all I could take of the hub of the universe, the bright lights, the crowds. I needed solitude again, the birds, the marshes,

my own little hole to rot in. So she left her job at the agency, moved down to Foulness and set up house with me.

Oscar Wilde once said that life is a bad quarter of an hour made up of exquisite moments. She certainly gave me plenty of those in the months that followed and that morning was no exception. I started off in my usual frenzy and within minutes she had gentled me into making slow, meaningful love and with considerably more expertise than when we had first met. She'd definitely taken care of that department.

Afterwards I felt fine, the fears of the hour before dawn a vague fantasy already forgotten. I kissed her softly under her rigid left nipple, tossed the sheets to one side and went into the bathroom.

A medical friend once assured me that the shock of an ice-cold shower was detrimental to the vascular system and liable to reduce life expectancy by a month. Admittedly he was in his cups at the time but I had always found it an excellent excuse for spending five minutes

each morning under a shower that was as hot as I could bear.

When I returned to the bedroom Sheila had gone, but I could smell coffee and realised that I was hungry. I dressed quickly and went into the sitting-room. There was a log fire burning on the stone hearth and she had her easel set up in front of it.

She was standing there now in her old terry towelling robe, the palette back in her left hand, dabbing vigorously at the canvas with a long brush.

'I'm having coffee,' she said without turning round. 'I've made tea for you. It's on the table.'

I poured myself a cup and went and stood behind her. It was good – damn good. A view from the house, the saltings splashed with sea-lavender, the peculiarly luminous light reflected by the slimy mud flats, blurring everything at the edges. Above all, the loneliness.

'It's good.'

'Not yet.' She worked away busily in one corner without turning her head. 'But it will be. What do you want for breakfast?'

'I wouldn't dream of disturbing the muse.' I

kissed her on the nape of the neck. 'I'll take Fritz for a walk.'

'All right, love.'

The brush was moving very quickly now, a frown of concentration on her face. I had ceased to exist so I got my hunting jacket from behind the door and left her to it.

I have been told that in some parts of America, Airedales are kept specifically to hunt bears and they are excellent swimmers, a useful skill in an area like Foulness. But not Fritz who was Sheila's one true love, a great, shaggy bundle in ginger and black, amiable to a degree in spite of a bark that could be heard half a mile away. He had ceased to frighten even the birds and was terrified of water, objecting to even the mildest wetting of his paws. He romped ahead of me along the rutted grassy track and I followed.

Foulness – Cape of Birds, the Saxons called it and they were here in plenty. I have always had a liking for solitude and no more than fifty-odd miles from London, I rotted gently and in the right place for it. Islands and mist and sea walls

to keep out the tide, built by the Dutch centuries ago. Creeks, long grass, stirring to change colour as if brushed by an invisible presence, the gurgle of water everywhere and the sea creeping in like a ghost in the night to take the unwary.

The Romans had known this place, Saxon outlaws hidden here from the Normans, and now Ellis Jackson pretended for the moment that this was all there was.

In the marshes autumn is the saltings purple and mauve with the sea-lavender, the damp smell of rotting vegetation. Birds calling constantly, lifting from beyond the sea wall uneasily, summer dead and winter yet to come. Gales blowing in off the North Sea, the wind moaning endlessly.

Was this all there was – truly? A bottle a day and Sheila Ward to warm the bed? What was I waiting for, here at the world's end?

Somewhere in the far distance I heard shooting. Heavy stuff from the sound of it. It stirred something deep inside, set the adrenalin surging only I didn't have an MI6 carbine to hang on to and this wasn't the Mekong Delta. This was a grazing marsh on the tip of Foulness in quiet Essex and the shooting came from the Ministry

of Defence Proof and Experimental Artillery ranges at Shoeburyness.

Fritz was somewhere up ahead exploring and out of sight. He suddenly appeared over a dyke about fifty yards ahead, plunged into a wide stretch of water and swam strongly to the other side, disappearing into the reeds.

A moment later, he started to bark frantically, a strange new sound for him that seemed to have fear in it. There was a single rifle shot and the barking ceased.

Birds lifted out of the marsh in great clouds. The beating of their wings filled the air and when they had passed, they left an uncanny stillness.

I ran into the mist calling his name. I found his body a minute later sprawled across the rutted track. From the look of things he had been shot through the head with a high velocity bullet for most of the skull had disintegrated. I couldn't really take it in because it didn't make any kind of sense. This wasn't a place where one found strangers. The Ministry were tough about that because of the experimental ranges. Even the locals had to produce a pass at certain

checkpoints when leaving or returning to the general area. I had one myself.

A small wind touched my cheek coldly, there was a splashing and as I turned something moved in the tall reeds to my right.

North Vietnamese regular troops wear khaki, but the Viet Cong have their own distinctive garb of conical straw hat and black pyjamas. Many of them still use the old Browning Automatic rifle or the MI carbine that got most American troops through the Second World War.

But not the one who stepped out of the reeds some ten or fifteen yards to my right. He held what looked like a brand new AK47 assault rifle across his chest, the best that China could provide. Very probably the finest assault rifle in the world.

He was as small as they usually were, a stocky little peasant out of some rice field or other. He was soaked to the knees, rain dripped from the brim of his straw hat, the black jacket was quilted against the cold.

I took a couple of cautious steps back. He said

nothing, made no move at all, just stood there, holding the AK at the high port. I half-turned and found his twin standing ten yards to my rear.

If this was madness, it had been a long time coming. I cracked completely, gave a cry of fear, jumped from the track into the reeds and plunged into the mist, knee-deep in water.

A wild swan lifted in alarm, great wings beating so close to me that I cried out again and got my arms to my face. But I kept on moving, coming up out of the reeds on the far side close to the old grass-covered dyke that kept the sea back in its own place.

I crouched against it, listening for the sounds of pursuit. Somewhere back there in the marsh there was a disturbance, birds rising in alarm. It was enough. I scrambled over the dyke, dropped to the beach below and ran for my life.

Sheila was still at the easel in front of the fire when I burst into the cottage. I made it to a wing-backed chair near the door and fell into it. She was on her knees beside me in an instant.

'Ellis? Ellis, what is it?'

I tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come and there was real fear in her eyes now. She hurried to the sideboard and returned with a glass of whisky.

I spilled more than I got down, my hand shaking as if I was in high fever. I had left the door open behind me and it swung to and fro in the wind. As she got up to close it, there was the patter of feet.

She said, 'There's a lovely old boy and mud up to the eyebrows.'

Fritz padded round to the front of the chair and shoved his nose at my hand.

There had always been a chance that this would happen ever since Tay Son. The psychiatrists had hinted as much, for the damage was too deep. I started to cry helplessly like a child as Fritz nuzzled my hand.

Sheila was very pale now. She pushed my hair back from my brow as if I were a small untidy boy and kissed me gently.

'It's going to be all right, Ellis. Just trust me.'

The telephone was in the kitchen. I sat there, clutching my empty whisky glass, staring into space, tears running down my face.

I heard her say, 'American Embassy? I'd like to speak to General St Claire, please. My name is Mrs Sheila Ward. There was a pause and then she said, 'Max, is that you?' and closed the door.

She came out in two or three minutes and knelt in front of me. 'Max is coming, Ellis. He's leaving at once. He'll be here in an hour and a half at the most.'

She left me then to go and get dressed and I hung on to that thought. That Max was coming. Black Max. Brigadier-General James Maxwell St Claire, Congressional Medal of Honour, D.S.C., Silver Star, Medaille Militaire, from Anzio to Vietnam, every boy's fantasy figure. Black Max was coming to save me as he had saved me, body and soul, once before in the place they called Tay Son.