

DOG OF SKY-ALLEY

A Story

by

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Dog o Sky - Alley

We started our huge project in a valley with golden leaves, called Sky-Alley because it was so wide, flat and open to the sky, with a black rock towering up at one end. Usually this rock was hidden by mist, but on clear days, when the trees on either side of the valley were utterly still and it was like one of those muffled summer days again, the rock's flat top was visible, with terraces in shining granite, and into this thing we would bore a hole eight metres tall, when the next spring came round.

Our valley had no curves. On either side there were straight long wooded hills where we had crawled during the summer for shelter against the heat. The leaves were all golden or yellow or russet now, thick to the very summits, inches deep, with a warm steam rising up. All day and all night Sky-Alley echoed with our work. The camp extended its whole length, about three kilometres. A pistol-shot went up and down across the valley in echoes five or six times, jumping from one side to the other, sharp now and then a moment later made clement by the cushioning leaves. The hooter, blowing short blasts, was answered further and further back, until it gave forth its own increasing harmony, like vast melancholy reeds being blown across the sky, one wood-note growing on another, emerging huskily from the woods.

The drills when they started were like a burst of machine-gun fire, and they filled the valley with a great roaring, a square block of sound, darkly metallic, deafening everybody. The hammers sounded out against the stones and the occasional white boulders, tractors grinded and heaved across the wired paths laid down on mud, and always, especially when a fearful hush fell on the valley for no reason at all, the bells of the field-telephones could be heard, like hidden birds mechanically cheeping, near the sodden pits and among the tents.

At night the great arc-lamps shone over us, some of them at regular intervals in the flat, behind the tents, some spaced out near the top of the hills on either side, shining diagonally into the girdered, pitted lawns, and others at the top of great pylons every half-kilometre. One never needed a light in one's tent, except to read or write letters. The tent-walls glowed white, and the echoes outside seemed to be longer and more luxuriant than by day, with bigger tremolos, the notes falling down to the most secret and quiet places at the very edge of the lighted arena where everything went woody and ~~in~~ dim.

I shared a tent with a young man called Johnson^K. The skin round his eyes was drawn tightly back, making them long and narrow, their gaze calculating. He was always neatly dressed, and it struck me again and again that he never made mistakes as the rest of us did, but always seemed ready for the chance visit of an inspector, ~~any~~ or for a sudden call by telephone to bring up more wire-netting for the tracks or an extra pump. The result of this was that he was liked by the overseers and given some of the most difficult jobs. He had a kind of clever energy: using

it suddenly and rarely, only where it would have the best effect. Other men would start in at one of the pits with the usual instruments the moment the order came down, but he would sit at the telephones, perhaps for an hour, and have the best drills sent up, calmly arranging things, in that crisp, jarring voice, so that the work would take half as long. All his work was tidy. The lights were always properly placed, there were never too many hands, water was always quickly pumped away, the drills thoroughly tested before they were used, the electrical batteries checked, the vehicles waiting one behind the other to carry off the soil, the canteen ready with coffee at precisely the times he had arranged, the tracks clean and dry, the pit-walls carefully propped.

The overseers never gave him a dead-line. They never interfered with his teams, of which he was always the unofficial leader, and they sent the inspectors down to him as little as possible. Men liked working with him because he never shouted at them, and because the work was always quicker if he supervised it. He was quite a cheerful man, withdrawn and quiet, never giving too much of himself or laughing too long, but affable, listening carefully to everything that was said. And he was fair. He never slipped extra work on to a man, as punishment or out of spite, though he had all the cunning necessary for doing that kind of thing. Nor did he take his problems to the overseers. If a man disagreed with him and wanted to go to work in a different way - which he had every right to do, since Johnson K. had no official position - he simply bided his time, became especially quiet, until at last the man made the mistake for which he had been waiting.

When something was beginning to annoy him his lips would purse together, and the only sign of his anger was the slight flush that rose from his neck to just below his cheeks. He never swore like the others. He would simply say, calling ~~over~~ to one of the Italians, "Come over here, Saladino", then he would raise one of his long fingers, staring at the place where the man had been at work, and point, - "Look at that."

Our names were always put together in the work-lists, since we lived in the same tent, and he often used me as a kind of assistant, running messages for him or arranging what routes were to be used by the vehicles, for the tracks were narrow and therefore one-way, involving a complicated traffic-system. My work was sometimes the best in the team, surprising him, and at other times it was so bad that the other nine men had to work hours longer to repair it. A blindness and stupidity took hold of me, though the previous day I might have been brisk and alert. After a time he was no longer annoyed when I did something wrong; he only sighed as if to tell the others, "Look, he ^s ~~has~~ had another relapse." He thought of me as a bit of a joke, trustworthy and not at all a fool, but rather pathetic, lost. He never laughed in an outright way, but sometimes he would stand and chuckle at me, his harrow eyes quite still, watching the ~~way~~ absent-minded way I did things and moved about.

But we got on well together, and lived rather separately from the others. Our tent was the only one in the compound where overseers sometimes came and discussed projects over a drink, sitting on the beds or the canvas

chairs. Johnson K. was too young to be an overseer, but it was easy to imagine him one, and already there was a separateness about him which even some of the overseers did not have.

There was so much work in the camp, and time was so short before the valley iced up, that we very rarely went into the city. Each man in the camp was allowed two trips a week, and usually he only took one of them. Every evening at the north end of the valley there was a convoy of ten or fifteen lorries with the words SKY-ALLEY PROJECT printed above the driver's cabin. Apart from a few of the workers who had bought old machines locally, only the overseers had cars. We thus spent most of our time in the camp, and during our free hours we usually went to one of the cafes which were in marquees placed at intervals the whole length of the valley. We were all getting a lot of money; the rates were very high and apart from this more than a quarter of our work was overtime at time and a third. We all had an itch to spend. There were no women in the camp, and we seldom went to the city-brothels more than once a week. But there were two bazaars in the valley, and there we could ^{find} a great variety of things ^{with which} to decorate our lives.

Fashions took hold of the camp, going swiftly from one end to the other. Hundreds upon hundreds of men began to wear coloured scarves, and then heavy silver or golden rings became the fashion, sometimes two of them on one hand, burning fabulously against the rough skin, and then light-grey whipcord trousers, and then rainproof jackets with linings of white fur and hoods which could be clipped round the head so

that the neck and ears were protected, Then men bought magnificent polished chess-sets in deal boxes inlaid with ivory, ^{carpets} Persian maroon and russet for the tents, eiderdowns of flashing pink silk, cork-screws designed as postern-keys or the tails of black cats, corks for sherry and port bottles worked up into grimacing hob-goblins and humped old men with tasselled hats, long red hoses and spectacles, - so many grotesque and shining things stood about the tents, surrounding each man with his legend.

But the possessions about which there was the most ceremony were the pets. In every compound there were Siamese cats, dogs of every breed, Angora rabbits, and tortoises. There was a medical post for these animals at one end of the camp where a veterinary surgeon was on duty all and every day. After the first signs of the pet-fashion a camp-order was issued that no man could have more than one pet, and that a pet-tax was to be instituted, the price differing according to the size and breed of the animal. Between the woods and the tents on either side of the valley, running the whole length, there were wire hutches and kennels. Perhaps the best pets were the Siamese cats, because they were intimate, of noble and fastidious temperament, and clean. Moreover, they could sleep in the tents, usually curled up at the foot of the bed. But one day I went up to the nearest hill-village, where there was now quite a trade in animals for the camp, and bought a pointer, - a stocky, soft-footed creature with drowsy eyes. When I took him up into my arms he showed no terror at leaving the rest of the litter, nor did he show any interest in me. I took him down to the valley, bought a large box at one of the bazaars, prepared soft food in bowls, put a collar round his neck and fixed the lead to the centre

pole of the tent so that he could go in and out but not wander off. It was always advisable to chain the animals for the first few days, until they knew their homes.

But this creature, thick-limbed and able to spring like a tiger, never seemed to recognise me, even after a month. He had always the same rather blind gaze, uninvolved. After a time I let him off the lead, and though he always returned to my tent, he never answered the name I found for him, or came near me of his own accord, or looked up into my face. It was of course stupid to feel such a thing, but I think I was hurt by this indifference. Lacking love, apart from the token love in the brothels, we were disturbed even by the indifference of our animals. Men would tell each other about their pets every day, proudly, about how they licked their hands, how they begged for food, how they slept at the foot of the bed and woke them by touching their cheeks in the morning. But my pointer was sad, and I could not console him. I seemed quite absent to him.

The quarrel between Johnson K. and myself was caused by the new overseer of our compound, Richter. He was a short, rather pale man in his forties, and his small eyes had a silver gaze, behind spectacles. He dressed in a very ordinary way and never sported the extravagant fur-lined jackets and coloured scarves like the rest of us. We preferred our overseers to have some legendary quality, some prowess, or an easy, reckless warmth. We did not like them to be simply clever men who could be flattered or who feared for their reputations. Erich von Schickler, on the other side of the camp, was the perfect overseer. He was reckless, and just. Every evening he drove a fast sports car into the city and

sometimes brought women back to the compound. People admired this. But Richter seemed to us small, without presence. He was kind and cheerful, but when we worked hard for him he did not seem to see it; we did not feel we belonged to him, as all von Schickler's men belonged to him, like retainers; we were only his technical subordinates, which left us with no legend to dream, and stripped all the work we did for him of awe. Having won his position by a slow and dogged fight, he was always fearing for it.

At first he and Johnson K. got on well together. They had the same kind of cunning understanding. But, though he respected Johnson K's work as everybody else did, Richter began to supervise his teams and interfere with his excellent preliminary arrangements more and more. He would visit the pits at all hours of the night, trying to talk robustly like the other overseers, but he made us feel uneasy, standing at the edge looking down at us while he asked unnecessary questions. He was always on the look-out for the slightest signs of insubordination, especially among the Italians, who behaved very naturally, unaware of the kind of cap-touching respect he expected from his inferiors. So the rest of us, trying to help him, were always most polite, using many Sirs and Herrs, though this only encouraged him in the illusion that he was becoming popular and thus indispensable to our work at the pits.

Johnson K. dealt with him very calmly and answered all his questions, but his work was being spoilt. The overseers had little to do in the camp compared with us,

but Richter was always importantly poring over maps in his tent, or taking useless compass bearings, or calling conferences where nothing was decided. He lost his temper easily, and swore at people in his thin, grating voice. I knew that Johnson K. would work slowly to get him sent away and replaced.

One night Johnson K. and I came in from the city on the last convoy, at about two or three o'clock. Our ^ocompund was working on the day-turn, and we had been drinking in the bars since early evening. We put up the light in our tent, and he began to undress at once. But I was excited and wide-awake from the drink and wanted to play cards or take ~~another~~ bottle into one of the other tents. I went outside, behind the hutches and kennels, at the edge of the silent, leafy wood, to pass water. I stood there in the dark and then, when I looked up suddenly, I saw Richter coming towards the rear of the tents, still in the blinding light from the arc-lamps. He had no hat ^{and} ~~was~~ was walking unsteadily, humming to himself. I was happy to see any man, especially if he were drunk, and I called out to him from the darkness where I was standing. He could not see me, but he recognised my voice and shouted back, "Hullo, there!" I told him to wait for me, then I came out into the light and took his arm. We stood rolling about, our arms locked together. It is odd, this love one suddenly feels towards a man one talks against, as if to make up, in quick bounty, for the shame that secretly means.

He whispered into my ear, "Where's Johnny?" and, feeling it was wrong, I drew him towards the tent without

a word. I pulled back the flap, and we stumbled inside together. Johnson K. was standing by his bed, bare-footed and in pyjamas. He was gazing at us, having already heard our voices outside, and said nothing when Richter, his voice uneven and lifeless, called out, "Hullo, Johnny!" He simply stared at him, his eyes very narrow and his lips tight together. Richter left me and went towards him, hardly able to stand up. Johnson K. gave me a very quick, unforgiving glance. Richter was just about to hug him round the shoulders, laughing, when he slipped on the carpet and fell forward, clinging to him. Then, too lazy to hold himself back, he pushed Johnson K. heavily down on the bed. They fell together, the thin wooden legs cracked underneath them, then the whole bed sank in the middle towards the floor. Johnson K. called out, "You - !" then he jumped up, flinging Richter off, and pulled him to his feet. They stood panting close together, Johnson K. staring furiously into the other man's eyes. Richter said again and again, quietly, "I'm sorry, now, I'm sorry". He looked down at the bed, broken and in a heap on the carpet, then he shrugged and walked towards the exit-flap. "I'll fix that," he murmured. But he never came back. Johnson K. strolled over to me, one of his fists clenched, and I waited for him. He came closer and closer until his face was touching mine, his untender eyes boring into me. He was just about to hit me when he lowered his hand, murmuring, "Why..." I began to undress while he pulled a low box under his bed to make a support for the middle. When he had finished I put out the light, and we said nothing more to each other. But I knew that his will was all the time burning furiously against me, and in a way I felt I deserved that.

I had been detailed to take a vehicle¹ to the maintenance-point at five o'clock that morning, and when I left the tent, just as dawn was coming up across the white illuminated valley, Johnson K. was still asleep. I worked at the maintenance-point for three hours, assembling the vehicles of our compound, then led them in a convoy back to the tents.

When I went to the edge of the woods to give my pointer fresh food, I saw at once that he had been wounded. I found him lying by the kennel, one leg stretched out helplessly, keening a little, a faint whistling noise from his throat, his head down on his paws, as if he were in terrible pain. I tried to raise him but he squealed each time, his left hind leg hanging limp from his haunches. I ran back to the tents, and there one of the men told me that the dog had been barking at the exit-flap of my tent soon after dawn and that Johnson K. had thrown one of his boots at him from his bed. Then the animal had run yelping away. I could not find Johnson K. But for three weeks afterwards we said nothing to each other about this incident. We lived as before, only I did less bad work now. I was more vigilant, determined to give him no excuse to show his fury.

The dog's foot was twisted outwards, badly, and above it the leg was broken in several places. Johnson K. must have thrown the boot with all his strength, ^{standing} up from his bed in a sudden vengeful passion. After three weeks the leg still had not mended, the plaster was useless because the dog usually tore it away with his teeth, and the surgeon told me that he must be destroyed. When Johnson K. passed by the kennels he never looked in the animal's direction, but seemed

quite cool, his eyes fixed straight ahead, his stride confident and slow.

At night I went with a torch to the edge of the wood, at the rim of the light from the great arc-lamps on the pylons, and watched the dog. But it never turned at my touch. Its stomach had shrunk, and the ribs were showing. I had asked the surgeon to feed it with a tube, but he told me this was a waste of time. Nor did the sharp grinding and drilling sounds rising and meeting together in echoes along the valley seem to startle the dog. Even at the sudden detonations by day the ears did not prick.

At dawn one morning in the fourth week I took my revolver out of its case, then carried him into the woods, up the hill, among the sodden, brown leaves, where water dripped down from the branches, so that we would be hidden. I loaded the revolver, all six chambers, and while I was doing this he stirred for the first time and looked up at me. He tried to move from the soft place where I had put him down, but he was too weak and the pain from his leg was too great. But he was vaguely troubled and kept turning his head this way and that, his eyes brooding, dark and half-closed. At first I bent down and put the barrel against his ear, but he started back and with a last great effort against death turned himself over and managed to leap away, falling on his side close by. And each time I bent down he did the same. I could not bear to fire into his ear, bending over him in that way, holding him down with my free hand, so that he would know what I was doing. So I took two paces back and held out my revolver at arm's length, closing my eye and levelling up the sights, my legs astride. I waited until he was absolutely still again, and took the front of his head as target. He was hardly aware of danger now because I

was standing away from him.

I pulled the trigger and at that instant he turned again, no wound appeared in the creature's head, but he yelped out and turned again, I could not see where the bullet had gone and as he writhed about, failing to understand, I pulled the trigger once more and then a third time, going closer, blind now in my aim, wanting to despatch him. But still no wound came in the head, and now he cried out again and again, in a long whining imploring cry, and at last I saw the tiny bright red buttons appear in his flesh. He could not understand, he was moaning dreadfully in his agony, and as he tried to drag himself by the front paws further and further back away from my stinging gun, he looked up at me with a speechless appealing gaze, his eyes calling out from the midst of the burning flesh, not you, not you, and in that gaze I saw there was recognition at last, of me as his murderer, and I could not bring him back, I wanted suddenly to bring ^{him} back into the world, but the bullets were there in his flesh. I was panic-stricken, standing a pace or two from him as his terrible weeping voice rose and fell, ^{in a} ~~the~~ last keening appeal for the mercy I could not give. My hands were trembling, I was dazed, my eyes were blind. I pulled the trigger another three times, the revolver shaking in my hand, determined to send the creature quickly into death, to stop him blaming me, to stop that terrible mute beseeching look in the dark, lovely, half-closed eyes. And each time the shot came his body jumped a little from the impact of the bullet, and seemed more broken, less and less able to pull back, more bent and withered in the position of death. But still the bullets were wide, and now I could see

the red quickly come to the surface on the haunches. I could not bear this whining, the blood beginning to shine out of his wounds, the eyes growing darker and darker with the coming of death, and I did not know where to run, how to put the creature out, with the bullets done. I stood staring down at him, my mouth open, calling out, "No, no..."

Suddenly I ran back down the hill leaping and leaping over the cracked branches and sodden brown leaves to where the tents were, trembling all over, all my senses clogged and muffled up, and near the kennels I found another worker of the compound. I pulled him back with me up the hill, asking him for bullets or something to put out my dog, and he followed me bewildered to where we could hear the long whining cries from out of the undergrowth. He stepped forward, saw the dog writhing there, its mouth half-open and blood beginning to trickle forth. He took up a stone the size of his hand, and with all his strength he brought it down on the creature's head. But still there was life there, still there was a last whining, full of tears like a woman's, mourning all the cruelty in the world. Then with the second blow the small head sank, the limbs grew quiet, the whining died, and the stricken blinded child, understanding nothing, his one and only suffering filling all the woods, now lay easily with the leaves, the black roots and boulders, all the fuss stopped, the sad after-quiet slowly calming down the wounded copse, and all the casual noises of the day came in again from behind us, - the drills, the hammers tapping on the stone, and the grinding of the vehicles. I went back to my tent without saying anything to the man. For nothing could put this memory out. Nothing could take down those hurt astonished eyes. I would never live again. Nothing

light could happen again; there could be no word from me or gesture without that stain, no promise I could make without that betrayal mocking from behind. And as I came down to the tents again, stumbling, my shoulders bent, locked and stranded in my hot shame, I looked up and saw Johnson K. standing a few yards ahead watching me, his narrow eyes seeming to say as he shook his head, "This fellow, really..." I went past him into the tent and lay down on my bed. Day after day the ghosts of that dying moment harried me, in the dark rim of the lamps at the edge of the wood, at dinner in the marquee, down in the pits by day, in bed. For a verdict on me had been taken into the grave.

I could hardly bear to meet Johnson K's eyes, so sure and silent was he in his victory. After a month Richter left the camp, for Johnson K. had complained about him again and again to the overseers with whom he could talk freely. He and I worked together as before, only I seemed younger now, even more the servant of moods, erratic and confused, while he became even neater, even more exact in his commands, everything about him marvellously ordered and precise.

And I began to feel, strangely, that I had only been the living instrument of his fury, and must bear it longer, years longer, than he.

~~London~~
Baghdad, 1953.