



*Until this day*

To a friendship  
in New Guinea

by

BURTON GRAHAM

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. . . stays close in the jungle of New Guinea with a young soldier during the last hours before his death. He is a soldier — any soldier — for he has no name and is therefore every young soldier who has died alone . . .

“But, somehow, it’s good to be alone when you’re going to die, because dying is a personal thing, something you must do alone . . .”

There is no story here and no plot — except the one that steals into your mind when you read it; there is only a simplicity and an infinite tenderness and you can feel the jungle about you, “the leaves and boughs whispering together, gossiping in confidential jungle-talk . . .”

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Burton Graham

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And all my life until this day,  
And all my life until I die.  
All joy and sorrow of the way,  
Seem calling yonder in the sky;  
And there is something the song saith  
That makes one unafraid of death.

RICHARD LE GALLIENNE.

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in New Guinea*



*Until this day*

The day had been one of passing moods. It had dawned tenderly, licking the jungle with a pale light, licking away the implacable, hazardous darkness until there was a tender, purplish haze over everything. Through the morning, it had been bright and steaming and there had been that soft, weighty dampness in the air, and you could smell the steam and heaviness of everything. As the sun had passed its zenith and sunk towards the West, the sky had

become swiftly overcast, bruise-coloured with a haze that had deepened gradually through the sunset into twilight. But with the dusk had come a slight, troubled breeze and the clouds had begun to darken. The leaves and creepers had begun to tremble and it seemed that the jungle was full of quick, hollow whisperings. It was a low, disturbing rustle, the leaves stirring in the slight, hot breeze.

There was a close and gentle silence. A thick, green silence. That's what you notice most of all. A jungle without birds. And you wonder where they have all gone. You seem to have come out of a wide, brittle world of fire and hate into something deep and soft and compact. From out of the deeper shades among the trees and foliage, you almost expect to see Mason and Sarg. and Tom and the others come

striding toward you into the pale shaft of light below the cassias. You almost expect to see the others who had died along the trail all the way along from Kokoda.

The young man lay still and thought about them. He even smiled and looked up, expecting to find them there. He thought to himself: I'll be with you soon. Hang on for a while and I'll be with you . . .

It's funny, he thought. You never think they'll get you. You never think that a Jap. will drop you like the others. There's always the thought that you're indestructible, somehow, and that you're going to get through, and that you're going to go home again when it is all over. Yet when you look back, you think of Mason. He used to say that. Mason didn't get as far as Myola. And yet he used to say

that no Jap. could get him, and that he was indestructible. It's funny that you actually believe that. But you know now, it's different.

The Jap. had been there and he had plugged you. And you are here still, where you had dropped. You are here on this heap of damp, brown leaves and your blood is running out and you are not indestructible at all. You will be here all night, and when the others find you, you will be dead . . .

The night had become restless, thunder muttering away to the north, each clap more hushed. The night seemed like an endless, black passage, through which he floated, with spectres skulking ahead. Away at the end, past incredible horrors, somewhere, it would be light again and Mason and Sarg. would be there. But here it was dark and the jungle was filled with

little chinks of sound. The leaves and boughs were whispering together, gossiping in confidential jungle-talk. It tried to capture the dullness and silence and hurry them on.

The young man lay where he had fallen some hours before and the night dragged on. Sometimes, a dark shudder of pain would come over him, and there would be a strange, low moan. But mostly he was silent. With the dropping down of deeper darkness, he felt in some way refreshed and strangely at peace with himself. There was that strange end-of-everything feeling, as though it were the end of the world; yet, over all, a mysterious elation. This dying is different, he thought. You wouldn't expect dying to be like this. You wouldn't expect to lie here and feel happy about everything and think about things like you do—such things as what you would be doing

to-night if you were back home. It was a night for strolling along the glistening streets and looking in shop windows, and going downstairs into a coffee lounge and sipping hot, sweet, black coffee.

You wouldn't expect to think of things like that. You wouldn't expect to think of things like circuses and the things you liked when you were young. Of the homeliness of your mother's kitchen. That was the place where you used to do your home-work, because the light was better and there was always peace and quiet. It was the place where your mother always wrote her letters. You wonder if she is sitting down to-night to write you a letter, and you wonder if she has any premonition about your death, or if she will be writing a brave, light-hearted letter. Perhaps it will be returned to her unopened, or sent back to her with a note from the Adjutant.

She won't know, will she? She won't know what the actual killing of you was like. She will be told that you were killed in action and that is all she will know. She won't know that you felt quite good about the whole thing and that there wasn't very much pain. If only she could know that your dying was like this. Mother always said to say your prayers and live cleanly. She was right, too, because it's always better to do that. It makes you feel better. It's always better to say your prayers. You've done more praying up here than ever before. She would be pleased with you if she knew that, but it's not the kind of thing you like to write home about, because the folks would think you were getting morbid, and besides, the censor would read it.

Perhaps, as you're dying, it would be a good idea to say some prayers. When you think of mother and things like that, you always want to say your

prayers. When you think of her gentle, sombre eyes, you know she would like to think of you saying your prayers before you died. You begin to say the Lord's Prayer and try to stay with every word you are saying, but your thoughts stray and you think intrusive thoughts of people and places that have no connection with praying.

You're thirsty. That's what you are really thinking about now, because your lips are dry and parched and the water from your canteen is all gone. That's one thing you want to pray for. You want to pray for water. But it seems silly to pray for water.

There seemed a hush upon the jungle. A warm, stuffy hush. Sudden, hollow whisperings came and went. But gradually, there was a low, disturbing rustle and leaves stirred in a slight, hot breeze. For

a time, the air seemed shaken, flurried. Little breezes scampered among the trees, trembled the ferns and shrubs in the slight movement of the hot, stuffy air.

Then, through the distant murmur of thunder, there came a steady patter of rain on the leaves of nearby trees, growing louder with each succeeding second. Suddenly great spots began to hit him. A torrent of rain swept steadily down upon the jungle. It drenched him and soaked him. It ran down his throat and soothed him, banished the parched dryness. Then, it cleared up just as quickly, leaving everything around dripping with moisture. His wet garments clung, sticky and uncomfortable. But his thirst was quenched.

Perhaps, his mind said, it was a gradual weakening of the senses, as though your sanity is in question. Perhaps it didn't really rain at all, or else you didn't

really pray for rain. Somehow, you have a deep sense of reverence, but you blame most of it on your mother, as though *she* must have prayed for the rain.

It seems a lot later, and you must have been asleep for a time. And now, you feel rather ill. You have the feeling that you are about to give out altogether from loss of blood. It must be getting on towards morning. There is no more rain. The air is shaken, filled with eerie whisperings. Far away, thunder mutters.

The moments like these, you'd spoken of so lightly. You'd spoken of danger and hardship in the tropics, of enemy bombs, of fever and loneliness. You'd even thought of this, too. But it seems strange to be here in the jungle alone in the darkness. It

seems strange to be dying. But when you think of Mason and the way he died so suddenly, so easily, you think that death is close to life.

You think of Sarg.'s grave back there at Sanananda, in the dark green jungle. It was raining when you buried him. By now, his grave must be over-grown and hidden forever beneath a blanket of fallen leaves. During the last few months, you've often thought about it. You've thought of his grave receding further and further behind in that belt of jungle, as though it were being swallowed in a haze of purple-tinted space. You seem adrift on the shoreless tides of sub-conscious thought. Other odd thoughts begin to pass you by. Strange thoughts that you have never thought before . . .

If Sarg. had been here now, he would be saying something fine and comforting. But, somehow, it's

good to be alone when you are going to die, because dying is something personal, something you must do alone. You can feel no anguish now. The darkness and gloom and horror of dying isn't with you like you thought it would be. But, then, perhaps dying has been made easier, just like exams. have been made easier during war-time, so that the more can pass them. A lot of other people are going to die in this war. Young, clean, ardent people like Tom and Sarg. But it's better to die. It's better than losing all that makes life worth living before you die. It's a pity, though. There were so many things you wanted to do before you died. There were all those notes you made in your diary. You'd thought some day you might write a book. But maybe you'd have never got round to it.

It's funny to think of this idea of death. You've often thought about it. You've thought of it off and

on all your life. It has always puzzled you. It puzzled you until Sarg. died, and then you knew that souls like his did not die. The mere stutter of a Jap. Tommy-gun and the mere breaking up of a body couldn't kill a soul like Sarg.'s. It seems as though he is with you now, and that he is kneeling there on the sodden leaves beside you, like he did with Mason when Mason died at Myola. And your numb mind goes back over the long and bitter months of the campaign all the way along from Kokoda . . .

The night became turbulent, unsettled again. A watery moon had risen like a pall that hung in ragged brightness above the pandanus trees, but at the first hint of its rising, small, patchy clouds had run across to help the boughs obscure its yellow, ghostly beams. Sometimes, the trees themselves seemed to tremble and

shudder, rustling their leaves and splashing great drops of cold water on to the bed of leaves among the shadows.

The lad lay still and shivered slightly. He was weak now, but calm and happy. The night of utter quiet had brought him back to a world he had almost forgotten. His mind, at peace at last, played with memories. It's funny, he thought. You always come back to the old home when you're thinking like this. Perhaps because it was always so well-ordered and happy. And yet, the old folks had had their tribulations. The mortgage and insurances and furniture and car bills. Perhaps everybody has them. Your father had once said: Yes, it's pretty hard to pay for everything as it comes along. The home's nearly all paid for now, though it's been a bit of a load round our necks, and I was never out of trouble with the

insurance companies and people like that. The months seem to go around so quickly. *You'll* find out, when the time comes, that keeping a home isn't as easy as it sounds. There's something that seems to crop up every week. And then the children begin to arrive . . .

You'd thought of that, too. Sometimes, you'd thought of a home of your own and a wife and children. You didn't know who the wife would be but you'd thought of the home. You thought of the girl sharing it with you. You always thought of her in a trim little house frock. You could see her romping with a toddler on the lawn. It's funny to think of all those things now . . .

Dawn was licking the sky. A faint lick like a kitten's. A kitten with a small, red tongue. A tongue of redness that stroked away the harsh blackness of

the sky above the nipa palms. A little further on, you could see the soft outline of zamia palms and poplars. There was a pale wafer of light coming from the east and the time seemed drowned in odour-laden ecstasies of waking creatures, murmuring boughs and ruffled birds. The cool morning air began to collect pleasant jungle sounds.

The lad grinned as he listened to them. It was a beautiful morning, he thought. A beautiful morning to die. Mother would be very happy if she knew about it. Perhaps the padre would write her a letter and tell her about it. It was a beautiful morning to be meeting Sarg. and Mason and Tom and the others. It would be wonderful meeting them and telling them all the things that had happened all the way along from Kokoda. . . .

Yes. The padre would be writing mother a letter. It would be a nice letter, and his words would bring her comfort and she would go into her room where no one could see her and have a little cry and then put on her apron and go back to her cool, clean kitchen. But she would love the padre's letter and would keep it always.

When Sarg. died, the padre read something to him from a little prayer-book, just to pass the time. Sarg. didn't like the silence, and he didn't like trying to make silly conversation because it's hard to think of anything to say at a time like that. That's why it's better to die alone like this. The padre had begun to read Sarg. some passages out of his prayer-book. It would be nice to have him here now, doing that. You could listen to it and the words themselves would be nice, and you wouldn't have to think about them.

Somehow, you think about it so much that you think he must be here with you. You can remember the words he said when he was reading to Sarg.:

“Come and let us return to the Lord: For He hath taken us and He will heal us: He will strike and He will cure us. He will revive us after two days: On the third day He will raise us up and we shall live in His sight. We shall know and we shall follow on, that we may know the Lord. His going forth is prepared as the morning light and He will come to us as the early and the latter rain to the earth. Your mercy is as a morning cloud and as the dew that goeth away in the morning . . .”

The lad was watching the morning clouds, tender and purple in the faint, etheric glow, and then his eyes closed and he might have been smiling. It was a beautiful morning.



