

To him who waits

Autor(en): **[s.n.]**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Der Kreis : eine Monatsschrift = Le Cercle : revue mensuelle**

Band (Jahr): **26 (1958)**

Heft 7

PDF erstellt am: **22.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-569372>

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To Him Who Waits

by Stornoway

Why Roger Mason und Charlie Fraser suddenly flew at each other's throats in a big punch-up for no apparent reason at all, no one on the tanker «Flying Angel» ever knew. They were both able seamen, doing the same watch, sharing the same cabin, and so far as everyone believed, were the best of friends. Just before the fight they were occupied in painting the lifeboat davits. However, the ship was at that vague indeterminate latitude when the warm tropics changes to bleak Atlantic, and all tempers are likely to become a bit frayed. The tanker, which had been based on Curacao for a year, was heading towards England, but not going there; instead, she was on her way to Hamburg. The two men had been squatting there side by side very quietly doing their painting, and maybe one of them said something to the other, to which exception was taken, and it was on.

The boatswain stepped in and separated them. «If you want to fight it out, you'll do it the right way, with gloves, when you've finished that job. Now get on with what you're doing.»

Sullenly they went back to work. They did not speak. They finished the job, went below and cleaned up, and came up on deck. Roger was there first; Charlie came up a few minutes later. The boatswain was waiting with two pairs of gloves, and a group of crew members, seamen and greasers off-watch and with nothing better to do, were hanging around. The sun was sinking below the horizon behind clouds, and the grey-green sea was bleak and cold-looking.

They were both medium-sized fellows, well built, and Roger was slightly heavier than Charlie. When Charlie arrived he looked first at the boatswain and then at Roger.

«I don't think I want to go through with it,» Roger said, as he caught Charlie's eye.

«But we've got it all ready,» the boatswain insisted. «You've got to fight.»

«I don't want to.» Roger was evidently going to be obstinate.

«Chicken!» The voice came from one of the seamen.

«Get on with it,» a greaser called.

«Roger is my mate,» Charlie said in a low voice. «I've got nothing to fight him over.»

Argument was useless. The crew wanted the fight and were determined to have it. Before the two concerned knew it, their fists had been pushed into gloves and the boatswain was explaining that the rounds would be two-minute ones and the fight would stop when he said so. Obviously reluctantly, they got down to it. Three rounds went by. They were just sparring at each other but not doing anything. Roger, about twenty-four, was fair-haired, golden skinned, and very lithe. Charlie, two years younger, was dark und stocky. They were an odd pair and had sailed together on other ships. Roger was a well-educated bloke and a bit different from most of the other lads. He liked to read books and listen to records, and could talk about all sorts of things, but though he always stood a bit apart from the others, he was always pleased to join in with a crowd when he met them on shore in a bar and buy his round of drinks, and on the ship he was always glad to help when anyone had a problem, such as filling in forms, writing difficult letters to wives or girl friends, and all that sort of thing. His higher education fitted him for this. The men liked him, though they did not entirely understand him. Charlie was just an ordinary London East-ender. When younger, he had been in some sort of trouble with the police and had come to sea originally from an approved school, but since

being at sea he had made good and was fairly popular all round. He had a dry Cockney sense of humour that went down well with the other men. He spent a lot of time with Roger, naturally, as they were on the same watch, and off watch, wherever Roger was, Charlie was usually close at hand.

It was a dull fight. They were just tapping gently at each other, both obviously disinterested. It looked as though they did not want to hurt each other.

«Hot it up,» someone called. «Take your finger out and let's see what you can do.»

«Yes. Get cracking you pair of pansies. You ain't at the Y.M.C.A. now.»

At the beginning of the fourth round Roger whispered something to Charlie which must have annoyed him, for he came in like a whirlwind. He chased Roger all over the place, a look of fury in his eyes. The round finished with Roger having a cut lip and another cut over the left eye. The crowd yelled its approval. In the fifth round Roger came back and it was his turn. Charlie was bleeding from the nose, his eye rapidly turning black, when he went down for a count of nine. On his feet again, just before the bell, he waded back into Roger. The boatswain pulled them apart and called it a draw. The crowd was disappointed and said so. Relieved of their gloves, the two went below to clean up while the others hung over the rails looking at the desolate and now dark sea. Some of them went off to get some beer.

Down below in the cabin the two men stripped off their trousers and shoes and went to the showers. They did not speak until they got back to the cabin.

«You all right Charlie?» Roger asked.

«Yes. I've stopped bleeding,» Charlie answered. «Let me put something on your eye.» He took a small first-aid kit from a drawer and awkwardly slapped a piece of plaster on the cut above Roger's left eye. «I'm sorry about the lip. I can't do nothing about that,» he added.

«It's all right. Charlie. It'll settle down.»

«You 'aven't 'alf given me a shiner,» said Charlie, examining himself in the mirror. «It's just as well we're going to Hamburg and not to London. My girl would say, 'You've been fighting again Charlie Fraser, and you can come and take me out when you look respectable, and not before.»

«You didn't hear from your girl before we left Curacao this time.» Roger said.

Charlie's face clouded a little. «No, but it doesn't matter. She's probably got someone else by now. No girl is ever true to a sailor.»

«You're not worried?»

«Should I be? They're all the same, women are; all, that is, exept my old mum. I'd like to see my mum right now, though she'd give me a telling-off too, for fighting.»

He sat down on Roger's bunk. Roger took half a dozen cans of beer from a locker and poured out two. He sat down by Charlie and gave him one.

«Why did you want to beat me up Rog?» Charlie asked innocently. «You went for me in that round as though you hated me.»

Roger drank his beer in one vast swallow and poured out another before answering. His grey eyes looked straight into Charlie's brown ones for long seconds before he spoke.

«I don't hate you Charlie,» he said simply. «I love you.»

Charlie choked over a mouthful of beer. «You what?» he demanded.

«I love you very much Charlie. I don't hate you at all.»

«Gorblimey!» Charlie looked amazed. For once he was lost for words.

«There was something about you on deck this afternoon that irritated me,» Roger continued. «I don't know what it was, but I looked at you and saw the sun shining in your hair, and although I've been in love with you for over a year now, ever since I've known you, I suddenly saw you as a girl-crazy little

bastard and I knew I didn't mean two hoots in hell to you and it made me mad. I didn't want to hit you; actually I wanted to kiss you.»

Charlie thought for a moment. «You do mean a lot to me, Roger, but you can't love me. That's, that's . . .»

«Go on, say it.»

«That's q u e e r.»

«So what? It happens, you know.»

«Yes, I know. But not with people like you Rog. You ain't q u e e r.»

«Some people would say I was. Some people might say you were also, if they knew you as I do.»

«Roger, you ain't going round the bend, are you?» Charlie demanded. «You ain't queer. You go with girls. I've seen you. We've been with girls lots of times together. It's the first thing we look for when we go ashore.»

«Only because you want to Charlie. I couldn't care less about it.»

«But you do it.»

«I know, just the same as you do. It's only a habit, and you do it because others do it. What do you get out of it anyhow? I've watched you lots of times Charlie. We go off. You get randy as hell, and you're not satisfied until you've found yourself a woman. You drag her off for ten minutes, and then you come back. Then you're quiet and depressed and unhappy. You just sit there drinking, and saying nothing. Then you want to come back to the ship. I've heard you say a dozen times 'Goddammed women. I hate the bitches'. Why?»

«O.K. why? You tell me. You're the educated bloke around here.» Charlie was angry.

«Why? Because, Charlie, I think you're queer as a fish, and you don't know it. That's why. What do you get out of the sluts you screw in whorehouses?»

Charlie looked pensive. «Not very much,» he admitted. «It gets something off my liver.»

«What, for instance?»

«Oh, I don't know. But it's something I have to do, if I get anything out of it or not. I've got to do it, even though I don't like the way I feel afterwards. I know how I feel, and that's my business, see. And I ain't queer, and you ain't either Roger. Those stewards, Charmaine and the Duchess are queer, but you're just crazy.» He smiled. «Come on Roger, let's be friends. Don't talk about being queer, and in love with me, and all that.» He broke off lamely, taking Roger's hand in his. «Let's go back to what we were, just being mates.»

Roger got up from the bunk, disengaging his hand.

«After a year of it Charlie, just being mates isn't enough for me. I want something more from you than that.» He threw aside the towel which was tied round his waist and drew on shoes, shirt and trousers. «I think you might be in love with me too, just a bit, and if you're not now, I think it won't be long before you realise that you are. I'll make you. Now you'd better get dressed. It's time to go on watch.»

«I don't understand it at all, Rog, honest I don't,» Charlie insisted, shaking his head. He dressed, and followed Roger up to the bridge.

Roger took the wheel for the first hour of the watch while Charlie acted as bridge messenger under the orders of the Second Officer. Then Charlie took the wheel for an hour. later handing over again to Roger. They each had two turns at the weel, and at the end of the watch they went below. They drank their remaining two bottles of beer and turned-in without making any reference to their earlier conversation.

A week later the ship was in Hamburg. Charlie, whistling, was putting on his best suit to go ashore. Roger was lying on his bunk, smoking, watching him.

«Time you got dressed, Cock,» Charlie said, trying to flatten his hair down with a brush. «We're going places.»

«I don't think I will, tonight,» said Roger.

«What? Our only night in Hamburg, and you don't want to go on the beach? The night life here is smashing.»

«I don't feel like it, Charlie. You go off, find yourself a woman and have some fun.»

«Now don't be like that Roger,» Charlie insisted. «You know we always go off together.»

«I just don't want to go tonight. I don't feel like prowling round the cat-houses and the bars.»

«If you ain't coming Roger, I don't want to go either,» Charlie said. Disconsolately, he sat down, lighting a cigarette. «But you're acting funny. I don't know what's got hold of you.»

Roger got up from his bunk. «Stop being a kid,» he said roughly. «Get up and get going. You want to go and I don't. We don't have to do everything together, do we? I might go off later, in which case I might see you around, but if I go off tonight, I want to go by myself.»

A hurt look came into Charlie's face, as though Roger had hit him, but Roger turned, ran out of the cabin, up the companionway and on to the deck. A few minutes later he saw Charlie walk down the gangway. Charlie paused on the dock, and for a while it seemed as though he might return to the ship, but very slowly, even reluctantly, he walked off towards the ferry. Roger went below again, took a shower, and changed into shoregoing rig. About an hour after Charlie had gone, Roger caught the ferry to Sankt Pauli. He left the ferry and climbed up the hill heading for the garish lights of the Reeperbahn. He walked slowly up and down the Reeperbahn which was crowded and in full swing. All the nightclubs were doing thriving business. He saw a few fellows from the ship but refused their invitations to join them. He kept an eye open for Charlie but did not see him in the Reeperbahn. After a while he turned down a side street and eventually came to Winkelstrasse. He ignored the 'off-limits' sign, which did not apply to him in any case, and passed through the small gateway which led into the street. Here again it was crowded, but only with men, walking up and down, criticising and admiring with coarse humour the women displaying themselves in the shop windows. In this street, if anywhere he would find Charlie, if he were not too late. Judging by what he knew of Charlie's timing, it should be about the right time now.

There were lots of girls available tonight. A fat negress in tights sitting all by herself in a shop window smiled at Roger. A faded blonde slid open a small panel and whispered something that he did not catch. A Latin wearing only a negligee swished it open when she saw Roger looking at her, and then closed it quickly, to the delight of a small group of Swedish sailors standing nearby. One of the Swedes winked at the Latin, and she promptly lost interest in Roger and winked back at the Swede. The man then disappeared through a half-open door, admitted by an old woman, and the Latin gathered up her negligee and retired from the window. Roger saw the Swede hand over some money to the old woman and then run up the staircase. A redhead took the blonde's place in the window.

There must have been a hundred women on display, and a thousand men looking them over. Every now and then a woman would disappear from the window as she made a deal, and new ones would appear. The bored-looking women tried to look vivacious and appealing as they tried to sell themselves; the men tried to bargain as they would in an oriental market.

Suddenly a door opened and a man came flying through. He humped into Roger nearly knocking him down, so hard was the impact. It was Charlie.

«Whoa there, Charlie,» said Roger with a grin. «Where're you going?»

«Roger! I thought you weren't coming off. Come on, let's get away from here.»

«What's the matter? Trouble?»

«No. I just want to get away.»

«I thought you hadn't paid and they were throwing you out.»

«I paid all right. Ten marks, short time.»

«All right?»

«The same as always. All right while it lasted;horrible, scruffy, smelly blonde afterwards. You looking for a bit of crumpet around here?»

«No Charlie. I just want some beer. I changed my mind about coming off, and I knew this would be the best place to find you.»

«If you'd come with me Rog, I might not have gone in there,» Charlie said reproachfully. «Let's go find a quiet place for a drink.»

Roger took him to a small place nearby. The proprietor shook Roger's hand, recognising him as an old customer. Roger introduced Charlie. They drank beer and ate bratwurst. Occasionally someone played a record on the juke box, but otherwise it was quiet. Some of the men in the room looked curiously at the two seamen but nobody bothered them. Charlie was quick to observe that here were only men in the bar.

«I like it here,» he said. «It's quiet. You don't have women bothering you all the time.»

Roger laughed.

«What are you laughing at, Rog?» Charlie was suspicious.

«Women never come here Charlie. They wouldn't waste their time.»

«You mean?» Charlie was puzzled; then enlightenment came. «All these men, they're...?» He raised his eyebrows.

«Yes.»

Charlie examined the company with interest. «They look all right to me,» he said. «You're a funny bloke Rog. You know your way around.»

«There are a couple of bars around here where men aren't allowed either — just women.»

«You mean Toms? Can't we go.»

«You want to go.»

«Yes. It might be fun.»

Roger laughed. «Now what do you want, Charlie? Make up your mind.»

Charlie flushed. «I just want to see how the other half lives. I met up with a Tom in Glasgow once. She had a motorbike and wore a leather jacket and a crash helmet. I thought I was going to make her girl friend, and so did she. so she squared up to me like a man and knocked me down on the floor. She said, 'Stand up like a real woman and I'll knock you down again'. I laughed so much I couldn't get up.»

«They wouldn't let us into this place, Charlie. I knew two chaps who got in once, but they got beaten up and thrown out. I'll take you somewhere else if you like, a bit brighter than this.»

«Is it respectable?»

«No.»

«Good. Let's go.»

They went back to the Reeperbahn and walked to the end of it, passing a couple of dozen nightclubs. Charlie's spirits had revived and it wasn't easy to get him past the pictures of nude women; there was one club which featured as a star turn two women wrestling in a mud bath.»

«This looks smashing,» he said.

«You want to take a look?»

«No. Women wrestlers must be Toms, and I just told you I don't like Toms.»

Roger laughed. «You just said you wanted to go to their club. I think you're frightened of them.»

«Could be that, too, Rog old boy.» He put his hand on Roger's shoulder. «I'm ever so glad you came off. I was miserable alone.»

Further down was a place with an unobtrusive entrance and no flashing neon signs outside. The doorman looked them over briefly, and admitted them without a word. Inside, once again, the proprietor greeted Roger as an old client.

«You've been everywhere Roger,» Charlie commented.

They sat down at a table and Roger ordered a bottle of red wine. The place was fairly full. There was a woman behind the bar but all the customers were men, a fact that Charlie was quick to notice.

«This another queer joint?» he asked.

«Yes.»

«What goes on here then?»

«Nothing very much. It's just a quiet place to have a drink. I thought that was what you wanted.»

Someone put some money in the jukebox and some couples started to dance. Charlie's eyes opened wide.

«Cor, look at that! Men dancing together!»

«So what? You've seen it before. You've done it before. I've seen you. You've danced with men on the ship, me included.»

«Yes, but that's different. It's not queer on the ship. There's no one else to dance with, and if you want to dance, you've got to dance, and if there are no women you dance with men.»

A fair-haired German boy came over to the table, smiled shyly, excused himself, and asked Charlie to dance. Charlie's eyes opened wide. «No, thank you,» he stammered. «I don't. I've just come to watch.»

The German boy bowed gravely, and went back to his table. Charlie's feet were restless under his own table. He drank his wine quickly and poured out some more. The music changed to some fast jive. Charlie stood up.

«Come on Roger. Let's get on the beat.»

Charlie jived well and with lots of energy. Dancing with Roger, he seemed completely unselfconscious of the fact that he was dancing with a man before a crowd of other men. By the time the record came to an end they were the only couple on the small dance floor, and when the dance finished they received an ovation which made Charlie blush to the roots of his hair. He had not realised that the other couples had fallen out one by one.

«Let's sit down, Rog. They're all looking at us.»

«Well, you put on a good show.»

«I'm glad the other fellows from the ship don't know about this place.»

«Why?» Roger laughed. «Think they'd all be along?»

«No. You know what I mean.»

The music started up again.

«Dance some more, Roger?» Charlie was now very excited. Maybe it was the wine, or the music, or the unfamiliar environment, but once started, he didn't want to stop.

«No thanks,» Roger answered.

«Aw, come on. Don't be wet.»

«Go and dance with that boy over there.» Roger indicated the boy who had previously asked Charlie to dance, and who was still watching them with shy interest.

«He'd think me crazy.»

«He's waiting for you.»

Hesitantly Charlie got up and crossed the dance floor. The boy got up to meet him. In a moment they were well away. After the dance Charlie brought him back to the table.

«This is Hans, Roger. I've asked him over for a drink.»

They talked and they danced. Charlie danced all the time, sometimes with Roger and sometimes with Hans. They drank a lot of wine. At about four o'clock they left as they had to be on board by six. Hans walked with them along the Reeperbahn and left them at the street where they turned down to take the ferry. Passing Winkelstrasse, Roger remarked as casually as he could: «Want to go in again? You've still time!»

«Do you? You haven't had anything tonight.»

«No.»

«I'll wait for you, if you do. I've had enough.»

«I don't want to go in, Charlie.»

«I'm glad, Rog. It's no place for you.»

Roger laughed.

«What are you laughing at, Roger?» Charlie said suspiciously.

«You.»

«Me?»

«Just you, Charlie.»

«Well, I don't mind, so long as it makes you happy.» Charlie slipped his arm through Roger's, and they walked down the hill together. «You know something Rog, I like that dance place better than I've liked anything for a long time.»

That day they spent most of their free time sleeping, as did most of the people on the ship. There were many who felt far from well. When asked what he had done the night before Charlie mentioned Winkelstrasse and 'a couple of night-clubs', but was reticent about details. Most of the lads had been in Winkelstrasse at some time during the night.

(To be concluded)

Book-Reviews

THE SERGEANT, by Dennis Murphy: Viking Press, New York

This is a good first novel by a twenty-five year old author. It is swift-moving, terse, engrossing. It is sincere, intelligent and tries to be compassionate. It has the stature of real tragedy: it purges through pity and terror. All the same, it is yet another novel with a homosexual villain and it ends in suicide. The main gross difference between this book and others of similar pattern is that the villain is made understandable and one feels sorry for him, finally.

Tom Swanson is a young American soldier stationed in post-war France. He has just met and fallen in love with a French girl, Solange. A new first sergeant arrives and takes over his outfit. Sgt. Callan is attracted to Tom and, against the boy's will, makes him his orderly room clerk. Callan, who joined the army at sixteen, is now middle-aged and a hard-boiled, ruthless egoist, a man who has never been in love, who has never had a friend, who is utterly alone and whose emotions exist in total darkness deep within. Blindly, through actual coercion and sheer force of will, he establishes an emotional domination over Tom who does not understand what is happening any more than Callan does. Tom stops seeing Solange and allows himself to be pressured into a routine of nightly drunkenness with Callan. Tom loathes this feverish, guilt-darkened way of life and longs to be free of it but partly through fear of the older man, partly through pity for his desperate loneliness, is unable to break away from him. At last Callan makes unmistakable drunken passes at him and they realize what their relationship is all about. At that moment Callan's emotional hold over the boy is broken. Tom beats him up. The next day Callan shoots himself. Tom is reunited with Solange.

Throughout the book Solange is characterized as «good» and «clean» and Callan is called «dark» and «bad». Now, as a matter of fact Solange comes through as a real person. She impresses the reader as an intelligent, civilized human being, genuinely sensitive in her relationship with Tom. And in Callan we have an abysmally ignorant, undeveloped and twisted man. Mr. Murphy doesn't need those easy adjectives. He makes all his points very effectively without them. And instead of raising the moral