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The Yoke of Guilt

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Abstract

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The Yoke of Guilt

YOU never get anything done! You're always late! You start something and you never finish it, and now this," his mother waved the report card angrily. "It doesn't look as if you'll ever get out of school. You'll end up a nothing, like your Father. You'll be a failure, mark my words!" She ended as always, in a flood of tears, looking at her only child in sorrowful disappointment through spread fingers that made a pretense of hiding her weeping . . .

"It was always like that," thought Max as he studied for the fourth time the slope that led up to the Chinese positions. "She was right, I never do anything right." He slumped back into the shelter of the rock and looked around noticing the dejected look of his men. They had been taking a beating and they looked it.

Three times they had charged up the slope and three times they had been driven back to the shelter of the rocks. It had cost four men out of his original twelve, so far. Two in the first attack and two in the second. No one had been hit in the last attempt. Only two or three of his men had responded to his command and those that had, had turned tail before covering half the distance.

Each attack had ended in failure. "It figures," thought Max dejectedly. The success of the regiment's attack that night depended upon the destruction of this enemy outpost. Max had known when the Colonel assigned him to the job that he would muff it. Hadn't that always been the story with him? If you wanted something done and done right,

the best thing to do was keep it away from good old dependable Max. This was going to be just one more failure — one more report card.

The private on his right wiggled cautiously to his side, keeping low behind the cover of the rocks.

“Lieutenant.”

“Yes,” Max knew what was coming.

“We aren’t going to try again, are we?”

“Yes.”

“Kee-rist.” The kid looked at him in disgust for a moment and then spit on the ground at his feet and turned away. He crawled over to the Sergeant. Max could see him whispering to Sergeant Schultz and motioning back toward him.

“I’m sorry kid,” Max thought. “I’d like to give it up too, but we can’t. We have to try again.”

“EASY 6 TO EASY 3. EASY 6 TO EASY 3.” Max shifted the strap of the walky-talky so that he could speak into the mouthpiece. He pressed the transmission button, (Click) “THIS IS EASY 3 . . . OVER.” (Click)

(Click) “EASY 3. HAVE YOU ACCOMPLISHED MISSION YET?” (Click) The Colonel’s voice always seemed to defy the qualities of field radio that usually stunt a man’s voice.

(Click) “EASY 6. NO. OVER.” (Click)

(Click) “WHY THE HELL NOT?” (Click) The Colonel’s voice boomed even louder and made it necessary for Max to pull the receiver away from his ear.

(Click) “WE HAVE ONE-THIRD LOSS ALREADY. WE CAN’T GET NEAR IT.” (Click) Max hated the apologetic tone of his voice.

(Click) “WHY NOT?” (Click)

(Click) “COULDN’T YOU LET US HAVE SOME MORTAR FIRE, SIR?” Max ignored the Colonel’s question.

(Click) “NO! GOD DAMN IT!” (Click) There was a long pause. (Click) “GET YOUR ASS BACK HERE. I’LL SEND SOMEBODY ELSE UP THERE. OUT.” (Click)

"Well," thought Max, "that's that." He could not understand why he was not glad.

He slammed the radio to the ground in disgust. The men were watching. Waiting.

"Do we move out of here?" called somebody to his right.

Max looked at the ground between his knees. Then he said simply, "No."

"Why the heck can't we just call in mortar fire and blast them off the map?" spoke a voice down the line.

"I told you why this morning. The Gooks will know something is up if we drop stuff along the attack route."

Somebody started screaming down at the end of the line, making everybody jump. "I ain't goin' up there! I ain't goin' up there!"

Max watched Private Holmes crawl rapidly toward him, his voice too high, his face streaked with tears that he no longer tried to hide from his buddies. Max wondered how he had lasted this long. Bringing Holmes out on a job like this had been a mistake.

"I ain't goin' back up there again! You can't make me! It's suicide!" Holmes was on top of him now, clutching at his jacket in terror. He was sobbing. "You ain't goin' to make me go back up? Please! I never done nothin' to you." There was a pause while his eyes searched his Lieutenant's face. Max said nothing. "Hey you guys!" Holmes twisted to face the stares of the watching men. "He's tryin' to kill us." Then he turned to Max as if for confirmation.

Max looked into eyes that were full of hate and tears for the second time in his life, and he could say nothing. He suddenly felt tired, drained. He could hardly hold his head up.

Sergeant Schultz, by this time, had crawled to the side of the two men. He slapped Holmes hard, knocking his helmet to the ground.

Holmes stiffened as if struck by an electric shock, and then dropped his head into the Lieutenant's lap, smothering the racking sobs that followed.

Nobody said anything. The only sound was the coughing

rasp of Private Holmes, crying.

Max sat, gently stroking the boy's head, staring blankly before him, his every sense occupied with a memory of so long ago.

After several minutes Max gripped the kid's shoulders and gently pushed him away.

"Take it easy boy. You don't have to go back up." Max wondered why he said that.

"That's right Lieutenant, there ain't none of us going back up there. There's four of us dead now and there ain't goin' to be any more."

Max turned and looked at the Sergeant and then let his eyes drop to the muzzle of the carbine that was pointed at his belly. The Sergeant's voice had been so low, so even, that Max had barely caught his meaning — but the carbine made it clear.

"That's right Sergeant," Max heard his own voice coming from a long way off, "you guys don't have to go back up. I'll go it alone."

The Sergeant's face showed his surprise.

"Look, Lieutenant, nobody wants you to go back up alone." The Sergeant selfconsciously dropped the muzzle of the carbine as if he had just realized that it had been pointing at the Lieutenant. "I just don't think it's worth it. We ain't about to take that hill."

"Yeah, I know. Get the men back to the company." Max turned away from them, wondering if he really would go up the hill alone.

"But . . ."

"You heard me!"

"Yes, Sir."

Max noted with surprise that it was the first time the Sergeant had ever called him "Sir."

Max lay back against the rock, cradling the extra grenades the men dropped into his lap as they crawled silently by. He watched them crawl as far as the ravine and then, when they reached low ground, they straightened up and started walking in single file back toward the main line of

resistance. Now and then one would stop and look back at the Lieutenant sitting alone, and hesitate for a moment, but none of them came back and soon they were gone — Max was alone.

...“Get a doctor, quick. For Christ’s sake run.” His father had screamed at him.

Max was seventeen. He had walked into the house just seconds after his mother had had her stroke. When he had opened the door, he had seen his mother, her face contorted with pain, her head cradled in his father’s lap, lying on the living room floor.

“Don’t just stand there, get a doctor! Hurry!” Neither of them had thought about the phone. It would have saved so much time. Max had turned and run out into the night, heading for the doctor that lived down at the end of the block. The doctor was not at home. He raced another three blocks, but that doctor had been out on a call. When Max had finally found a doctor and had led him back to the house, it was too late. His mother was dead.

His father had been drunk, confused, but he recovered long enough to stand weaving in front of Max screaming his accusations. Max had been too late. Max was always too late. Max was no good and because of him his mother was dead.

“It’s all your fault!” Max had looked into eyes full of hate and tears. “You killed your mother!”

That had been the last time he had seen his father. He had run out into the night sobbing hysterically and he had never returned — not even for his mother’s funeral.

“Well,” thought Max, rolling over to his knees and tensing his body for the sprint, holding grenades in both hands, “here goes nothing — as usual.” He broke quickly from behind the cover of the rocks and raced up the hill toward the now-firing machine guns.

“What do you mean he stayed out there!” The Colonel frowned suspiciously at Sergeant Schultz.

“That’s it Colonel. He just told me to pack up the men

and come in. He said he was going to take a crack at the outpost all by his lonesome." The Sergeant shrugged his shoulders. "What the hell could I do?"

"Do you still want Lieutenant Wilson's patrol to go out, sir?" spoke a captain standing at the Colonel's side.

"Of course. If Max couldn't take that position with twelve men, he sure as hell can't take it all by himself. Tell Lieutenant Wilson that this job has to be done and done as soon as possible. I want no botching this time."

"Yes, sir." The captain saluted and walked toward a group of men standing a short distance away.

"Why don't you leave it on for a while?" The congressman beamed at Max's father, "Your son would have wanted you to."

"I would," said Max's father, licking his lips and looking over the President's shoulder at the cocktails being prepared for the award spectators and the press, "I would, but it's heavy."

He reached up and finished taking the Medal of Honor from around his neck. He folded it neatly into the felt lining of its case, wondering why the medal should weigh so heavily around his neck.

— *Robert D. Crook, S. Fr.*

Somewhere in a corner of the universe
A mighty bowhand drew and loosed;
And man, the gaudy feathered missile that he is,
Leaped skyward, above the tree-tops,
Reaching for the white clouds.
But finding them too pure and vague to be grasped,
He turned earthward, plunging himself into the trees.

The bowman picked up the tattered shaft,
Gently straightened its feathers,
And replaced it in his quiver.

—*James Wickliff, Sc. Grad.*