

RETURN

(A Short Story)

The possibility of life lies in the forgetting.

J. Middleton Murry

By E. D. ORELLANA

AFTER the child was dead, they were silent and still for a long while. Quietly they looked at its face already grown whitely pale during rush of air, The ruddy light of the wick lamp blue in the lips and the brow.

The man rose rigidly to his feet, and moved toward the farthest window. He sat down upon the clothes chest beneath it and pushed open the sliding shutter noiselessly. The dawnlight flooded into the one room of the hut and in the accompanying rush of air, the ruddy light of the wick lamp upon a table in a corner quivered fitfully. The man breathed deeply into his lungs and gazed outside.

Webs of dew that had gathered in the night on the moist earth below sparkled in the wan light of the morning, and for a moment the man likened them to ornaments of bright beads he had seen of a Sunday in the marketplace in the far village. Then he looked at the brown cornstalks that rose tall above the bamboo fence, bending but slightly with their weight of large ears of the grainfruit, and running in rows for a distance away until they ended where began other stalks severed into short stumps; it was the midst of the harvest season. He hovered with his gaze over the cornfield, taking in the scarecrow-lines with their tatters of red clothing and the trees that fringed the far edge of the clearing, where a bull carabao grazed industriously. Then he followed with his eyes the hillsides sloping ruggedly away, far to a spur that reared blue cones in a cloudlaced sky. He beheld the far blue hills intently.

When he stirred himself it was to turn around in his seat as it were startled. He looked at the woman seated on the floor beside the dead child. She was weeping, but quietly except for the moan he had only a moment ago heard. Her head was bent over her breast which heaved even in her effort to still it, and tears filled her downcast eyes. Her hair hung in dishevel over her shoulders.

The man rose to his feet and stepped a pace near her. She did not move, and he made a movement as if to speak. But instead of being so he turned on his heels and stepped to the door. He unfastened the bar that held the door shut and propped it against the wall, then pulled the shutter slowly open. The room became more light as

the door squeaked in its hinges. He glanced back at the woman, then stepped forward and descended the narrow rickety stairs.

Some time later he came back, stepping up the ladder that led into the kitchen lean-to behind the hut. He stepped lightly across the slit-bamboo floor to the table in the corner, and casting a look at the woman, who was seated still but was now quiet beside the dead child, he reached his hand for the lamp. Then silently as he had come he went back down the ladder into the lean-to, his other hand cupped round the flickering light of the lamp.

Bending under the low roof over his head he started a fire in the clay stove, a spark from the lamplight kindling the dry sticks. The fire soon crackled into life and he placed a pot of water over the stove to boil. He snuffed out the lamplight, and then took down a pot of rice and a plate of roasted fish that hung from the ceiling inside a coil of rattan. The food were the remains of the supper of the evening before. He shook the rice out of the pot onto an empty plate. When the water over the fire began to boil, he brewed coffee well mixed with ground roasted corn. He was soon sipping

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RETURN...

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a cup of the steaming black liquid, seated upon a low stool. At intervals he took to his mouth and swallowed rather than chewed a morsel of the cold rice. The fish he left untouched. When his drink had run low in the cup he rose, filled the cup again, and taking the plates of rice and fish on one of which he placed the cup, he stepped up the ladder into the hut.

The woman looked at the food as the man laid the plates and cup upon the floor by her side. "The sun is risen high", he said, nodding his head at the food. She looked away and did not speak.

He repeated his invitation, and without waiting for her response, turned to look at the dead infant at her knees. The blanket that wrapped it was pulled up to its chin and round its ears over the top of its head, covering all but the blue-tinged face. The tiny eyelids were drawn close over its eyes.

The man turned back to the woman and, in a strained voice said, "You lie down when you have eaten." He stooped and took up a basin lying at his feet, sniffing at the strong smell of its content of vinegar and grounded herbs and leaves. With the basin in his arms he moved away back down the ladder into the lean-to.

When he came in again later, ascending by the front stairs, he found the woman seated still as he had left her. Her eyes however, showed no trace of a recent tear. But the food upon the floor seemed scarcely touched, although the cup was almost empty.

He crossed the room to the open window and, seating himself upon the chest beneath it, he said he would bury the dead child that same day.

He turned toward the woman, but she seemed not to have heard him speak. He looked quietly at her for a moment, then continued, his hands gripping his knees:

"The priest—the village, it will take two days . . ."

She looked up at him, but instantly removed her eyes. After a silence, he went on:

"I'll bury him now—in the hills yonder." He turned himself and looked out of the window, to the distant hills that in the early morning he had from the same place regarded with keen intent.

She raised herself, and her eyes followed his own out through the window. For a while they were silent as they gazed at the hills beyond.

Then she spoke, her head nodding slowly, her eyes holding the hills in their rapt gaze:

"Yes, Magno, you bury him, now."

He turned to her a face alight as with triumph. There was a tremor in his voice as he said he would build the coffin at once. He rose to his feet

and silently but quickly walked to the door and descended the creaky stairs.

An hour had not wholly passed when he came up the stairs with his accomplished task in his hands. It was a rectangular affair, of a light unshaven wood, the longer sides broader by a wide margin at the upper ends than the smaller, so as to hold secure a flat lid. It looked much like a chest for keeping in small farm or carpentry tools. But the woman only looked at it silently, with uncritical appraisal, as the man proceeded without a word to place the dead child in it.

She came forward to assist him. She seemed in complete possession of herself now, and her hair, so undone before, she had confined into a neat knot. Her eyes shown with a certain alertness. A quiet solemnity possessed them both as they bent over the dead child inside the coffin. As they wedged in the folds of the blanket and of the small mat that swatched it between its sides and those of the coffin, the man said he would have to start at once, he would not delay a moment longer. "You will have to stay of course", he added, looking solicitously at the woman.

She nodded her head quietly.

After a pause, she said he should take something to eat before he started. "Surely", she pleaded almost, "you are hungry. And you are going far."

He replied he was not hungry, he had just eaten. With a gesture of his hand, he said he felt quite strong to make the journey on foot.

"But, you will not go without the bull?" her voice was faint with admonition.

He shook his head: "The way is trackless, it will take better time traveling alone."

The woman did not pursue herself. After a while however, as the man fitted the lid of the coffin on its top, she insisted again on his taking food before he went. She said she would have their noon-day meal cooked in a little time; the hour indeed was approaching midday. He protested once more, but she seemed beside herself to win over his protest, ready, even to prolong the argument. He was constrained to spare her the necessity of cooking a hurried meal and he sat down on a stool at the table and fork in almost without chewing, what was left of the food they had eaten of earlier in the day.

There was a clear sky and a stillness in the air and the midday sunlight beat intensely on the ground outside, when the man started to go. As he raised the coffin, round which he had wound a piece of rope, onto his shoulder, the woman said he should not be benighted . . .

He nodded his head as in assurance.

She followed him down the stairs and stood beside it as he went forward on his way, without bidding a word of farewell. She watched him si-

lently stride on, his head bent slightly away from the coffin on his shoulder, a stout pick gripped in his free arm. She stood still watching him until he was at last swallowed in the blue in the distance. After a while, she turned and went up the stairs into the hut, and seated herself at the open window.

It was well late in the afternoon when he reached the end of his journey. He laid down the coffin beneath the shade of a tree, and after resting for a minute, went forth to search for a spot in which to dig the grave. It was not long before he came to a level space where the grass grew lush and tall and thick.

He began immediately to dig with the pick. His limbs were stiff and after the long trek, but he struck the earth hard underneath the dense deceptive growth and soft upper layer with swift, measured might. Soon he found himself deep in his breast in a hole large as to allow his body to turn freely in a circle.

He clambered out of the hole, casting the pick to one side, and went forth to fetch the coffin. Back at the hole with the coffin, he circled circled the rope he had brought along thrice round the coffin. In this fashion he lowered it gently into the grave. The end of the rope in his hands he threw in after the coffin.

Perspiration broded his forehead and trickled over his eyes. He paused to wipe it away with his hand. His breath came fast. He waited until he breathed easier, and blew upon his sweating chest.

At last he filled the grave with the loose earth, shoving it with his hands and feet. He squatted himself down even the better to do so. in large lump masses. Then he picked up the clods that remained and which had eluded his search. The mound piled high. This he stamped to level with his feet and the pick.

Finally, he gathered the grass that he had dug up and tossed to one side, and carefully placed them over everywhere the earth showed sign of the grave, as if the earth has never been before disturbed.

The sun was in the horizon in a magnificent crimson flame. He rose and flung the pick onto his shoulder. His legs swung wider, even faster now than he did before when he came. Soon the cool twilight breezes fanned his face and arms and night came on with the promise of starlight.

"I am glad you are back", the woman welcomed him as he mounted the stairs of the hut.

He smiled at her in return.

SEAU: Is It A Beginning...

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produced a new class of *nouveaux riche* from a motley crowd of former racketeers and political opportunists. As their stuccoed and towered mansions rose, the slums increased and the mass of the people were subjected more and more

to their ruthlessness. The new ruling class of plunderers fawned upon the cupidity of foreign interests to win them as an ally in further stabilizing their usurpation of power and authority. But as the oppressiveness of this class increased, the corresponding decadence set in and those very powers it once courted turned away from it. Even imperialist interests that gladly used it as a willing tool before, now think of discarding it for another set that still retains some confidence of the people.

It is in playing a leading role in ridding the Southeast Asian countries of these unworthy elements, it is in leading the move for a more sincere attention to the wants and human interests of the Southeast Asian masses, it is in showing the courage that a Southeast Asian nation is capable of in the face of both internal and external threats that the Philippines can truly demonstrate dynamic leadership and show that the SEAU, barren as it was, can be an auspicious beginning.

Report Of The ...

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Forces of an Allied Nation.

- (9) Authorization to reopen for one year the date for filing claims for personal property lost by military personnel under the Military Personnel Claim Act of 1945.

Among the other recommendations was one that the Veterans Administration make scientific studies of former prisoners of war to determine the degree of permanent health damage incurred as a result of malnutrition and injuries sustained during imprisonment. It is believed that the findings would be applicable also to civilian internees, although in different degree.

ENROL YOUR CHILDREN

Classes Begin

July 5, 1950

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