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The Black Lion

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The Black Lion

There was a red flag fluttering from the house at the corner, there were a few holes in it and it was a bit short.

One glance at the bullet marks on the walls was enough to tell the Black Lion that they had been here. And the minute his glance slipped down from the shattered plaster on the walls to the two men of the "R" guard, banging the door behind them, he knew for certain that *they were still there*.

He hitched his trousers up.

"Follow me!" he said briefly. With his tousled head he gestured to the two at his side to follow him.

"What's going on there?" asked one of them.

But they slipped in after him.

It was chilly in the passage, because the walls were faced with shining brown marble. Before they reached the stairs the passage turned and there stood the two "R" guards talking to the concierge.

Then the woman went back in and the smaller of the two men caught sight of them.

"You get out of here!" he said sharply.

"These two have come from the concentration camp," the tousle-headed lad with the broad flat nose objected; he threw a glance at his two companions, the Crumb and Curly. "They'd like to have a look."

"Be off with you!" the taller of the two with the armbands retorted briefly. And added more softly: "This is no sight for kids."

Then he turned round, and the shorter one with him. They hurried up the steps.

"I wouldn't bother," observed the Crumb.

"What are we going to get out of it?" asked Curly.

"This," growled the Black Lion scornfully, "will be the sight of your lives."

"What sort of a sight?" asked the Crumb. He was limping a bit because his boots were too tight and his heels all blistered.

"What are you asking so many questions for?" Curly caught him up. "There'll be some skunks in there, that's what."

"That's it," said the Black Lion.

Then on the steps he whispered: "May be worth seeing."

The shorter of the two men caught sight of him again. "Get out of my sight, you kids!" he bawled over his shoulder.

"We'll keep watch in the passage for you," said the Black Lion apologetically.

Curly and the Crumb slowed down a bit.

"Are you going or are you not?" the tall man with the red armband shouted at them. They had almost reached the attic, at least as far as the fifth floor.

"We want to see something happen," said the Black Lion despairingly.

The two men came to a stop in front of grey-green doors across the corner of the landing; they were covered with twisted ornament; two endlessly long snakes twisted in and out and stuck out painted cloven tongues.

There was a name by the bell. But the Black Lion could not decipher it because the taller of the guards stretched out his long hairy arm to the white push button and gave two long rings.

"I'm beginning to get curious," whispered the Crumb.

"It'll be worth seeing," the Black Lion responded, pleased. "Surely will." He took another step forward.

"What are you still here for, baby?" the shorter man shouted. "Off with you, or else . . ." and he patted his revolver holster.

"These two fellows have come from the concentration camp," the Black Lion growled again. "They'd like to see what's going to happen. It's only just."

The idea of justice had somehow got hold of him. He wanted to show them both something, the Crumb with his slightly slanting blue eyes, and Curly, who was so thin it was almost frightening. Because he thought they'd been through an awful lot and deserved it.

"Are they Germans?" he asked the shorter of the two "R" guards.

"As large as life," replied the shorter of the two in their odd khaki uniforms. They'd got hold of them from the Afrika Korps store. He spat into the corner of the landing. Then he rang the bell in turn.

"What'll we do in there?" whispered the Crumb.

"You can kick 'em, p'raps," said the Black Lion.

"Just dying to," answered the Crumb scornfully. But he thought to himself that maybe it wouldn't be so bad.

"P'raps we can get hold of some food in there," Curly said in a low voice.

The shorter of the two men overheard him.

"Hungry?"

"I told you they'd come from the concentration camp," the Black Lion said again righteously. "Our Dad's been hiding 'em in the wash-house. More than a month. They made a getaway, you know . . ."

"Not exactly hungry," Curly pulled a face, "but I don't half feel like something."

"First we must see justice done," said the Black Lion.

The tall man kicked at the door. "Here, you!" he yelled, "How much longer?"

The Black Lion jumped. Then he saw it was meant for someone on the other side of the grey-green wood of the door. He felt a strange tickling sensation, it ran over his back and over his whole body—he had never seen justice done, now here it was. And it's a good thing, he thought, that these two'll be in on it.

"You there, are you opening up?" he imitated the tall man. And he gave a little glance over his shoulder to see how the Crumb and Curly were taking it.

"It's time they opened," growled the Crumb. "We were never given as much time as this."

"Why don't you kick that ventilator in?" Curly spoke up.

"I'll take care of that," said the Black Lion, and stepping up on to the landing he went forward and kicked the door.

The tall man pushed him aside with his right hand. In the left he held a pistol, large and black. At that moment the door opened and the Crumb standing on the last step of the stairs let out an involuntary whistle. Between the halves of the door appeared a small woman in an apron with fear written on her face.

"What do you want?" she asked quietly, in bad Czech.

"Mrs. Grell?" the tall man asked briefly.

The woman nodded.

The two men with armbands of the "R" guard stepped awkwardly into the flat. With his pistol the tall man motioned the woman aside.

The shorter man tried to shut the door behind him, but it swung back and remained ajar.

The Black Lion hissed at the Crumb: "Come on!" and then: "Curly, come on!"

All three were consumed with curiosity, but it was more than that, the musty smell in the hall and the expectation of something which was really only the business of these old people and yet not only theirs.

"Where's your husband?" the tall man asked the woman.

"In bed," she replied respectfully.

The Crumb stayed by the door and the Black Lion kept his foot against the threshold so they could retreat easily if need be.

The tall man took two steps forward and threw open the door into a room.

A man in pyjamas was lying in bed.

The shorter man pushed the woman in front of him with his pistol and followed after her.

"Why didn't you open at once?" the tall man snapped angrily.

"Well?" the short one pressed.

"I didn't know . . ." the woman answered uncertainly.

The Black Lion took his foot out of the door and closed it behind him. All three were now standing in the rather dark hall, piled up with oddments, a ladder, a washtub, and a couple of carpets rolled up and leaning against the hallstand. From here they could see all that went on. And the Black Lion felt that the worst was over, getting in here at all. He felt sure that now the fun would begin. And he had not the slightest doubt that this woman, who looked as though she'd be sick any minute with fright, had been shouting "Heil" last week or maybe even yesterday, when it all finished, and saluting until her arm ached, and he felt not the slightest sympathy for her bent back and frightened face and the torn and patched apron she had on.

The tall man pulled back the eiderdown. He kept his weapon in his left hand and you could see he'd have no hesitation in using it.

With his pistol the short man again moved the woman forward, to the head of the bed.

But the man lying there was not armed.

The tall man's left hand fell a shade lower.

The Black Lion turned to the little fellow: "Narsties," he said. "They're going to get what's coming to them. Now they've got their pants full and only yesterday they were shooting."

"I know," replied the Crumb. He thought the woman ought to have a firmer voice and the man in bed ought not to be trembling so. He couldn't fit it in with the Germans he'd known, even though he knew they'd lost the war now.

"They're scared fit to die, anyway," Curly pronounced his judgment.

The short man felt the bedclothes.

"Cold, you bastard!" he shouted. "Get out!"

The man in pyjamas hopped out quickly. His eyes were grey and sharp and he was unshaven. He stood by the woman almost at attention, and couldn't stop trembling.

"Have you got any firearms?" asked the tall man.

"Speak the truth," hissed the short one.

"No," answered the woman after a while, because the man's chin was trembling so, he couldn't speak. "We . . ."

The Black Lion kept his eyes on her face. The woman must be frightfully tired, he thought, because she was leaning against something all the time. And the man doesn't know what he's at. But the day before yesterday he was quite different, because somebody was shooting from the windows here in this house, in this street, over here, shooting at people in the Old Town Square. Now justice is going to be done, he thought, that's why. And he was glad that Curly and the Crumb were in on it, and that he'd managed it for

them and so they'd be bound to be thinking what he was thinking. The ticking sensation that he was going to see the sight of his life, that he'd never forget, did not leave him.

"Identity card!" barked the tall man again.

The woman hurried to the wardrobe. Her face was greyed over.

"What's that over there?" asked the tall man, pointing to a white door.

"The kitchen," she answered. And again it sounded as though she was saying something quite different, as though she was beseeching.

"They're as scared as hell," whispered the Crumb. "I've seen that before."

"Looks like it," growled Curly.

The short man kicked the white wooden door. It opened easily. Hot air and a smell of smouldering wool poured out.

"There's something roasting there!" called the Black Lion.

"Have a look in there," said the tall man.

The Black Lion dashed over to the stove. He was happy because the tall man had really acknowledged they were some use there now. That's fine, he thought, now we're all in it together. He bent over the stove and from the side looked just like a man with a small, shaggy lion's head; he was burning with impatience.

Curly and the Crumb went after him, but much more slowly and indifferently.

The Black Lion opened the stove grate. The kitchen filled with smoke.

"Here's the poker," said the Crumb.

"A uniform," the Black Lion hissed between his teeth.

"S.S.?" asked Curly curiously. And: "It is, all right . . ." and drew back.

"A big bug, too," observed Crumb. "Praps it's a general's." And he couldn't imagine, suddenly, that a general could look like that creature in striped pyjamas.

"Skunks!" hissed the Black Lion. And he was sure, as he covered the grate again, that this must be making an impression on Curly and the Crumb, because this was justice being done. And he thought of the man in the next room. They had wanted to burn it and hadn't managed it.

He carried the smouldering scraps of cloth into the next room on the poker. It made the room smoky.

"Are you an officer?" asked the tall man.

"No . . . Yes . . ." stammered the man in pyjamas.

"He had to be," whispered the woman.

"Be quiet!" snapped the short man. And turning to the man: "Were you a member of the Nazi Party?"

"We had to be," answered the man with the trembling chin.

"Is this your wife?" asked the short man.

"Yes," replied the man. He couldn't see what the two "R" guard men

getting at and his chin wouldn't stop trembling. "She had to do it as well . . ."

"Somebody was shooting from this window," the tall man said darkly, all at once.

"Oh, no," the man answered quickly.

"From this window," the tall man repeated and looked from the window to the couple as if he was searching through everything.

"It wasn't us," said the man hastily.

"It wasn't us," the woman repeated.

"No, no, it wasn't us," the man said again.

"Who was it then?" asked the short man.

"The General's personal aide," muttered the man in the pyjamas.

"Are you one of them?" asked the tall man.

"No," answered the man hastily. "They've left. They went yesterday."

The brevity of this interchange delighted the Black Lion. So this is what justice looks like, he kept repeating to himself, and those two, Curly and the Crumb, could be in on it, because they had deserved it, the same as the fellow in pyjamas and his wife had deserved it, only the other way round. A good job he thought again, that I brought them with me. Somewhere something was bound to happen, and though he didn't know exactly what, he knew it would be awe-inspiring justice. Because somebody had been shooting from this window and in this room the General's own bodyguard had been standing. And mattresses piled in the window for breastworks, probably, because that's what they did in all the German flats on this side of the street up to yesterday. And squeezed between the mattresses they had the barrels of rifles and machine-guns, or anti-tank grenades. Let it come, then, he thought again. And he was sure it would.

"Get to the wall!" the tall man barked out suddenly.

The Black Lion turned to the Crumb: "You ought to get a bit of your own back on them first . . ."

"There's no point," the smaller lad whispered. He thought what was going to happen was probably right, but that he didn't have to be there to see it.

"Face the window!" the tall man said again, darkly.

"Lads," said the shorter man calmly, "you go into the kitchen."

And the Black Lion guessed what was going to happen, as he saw the two figures turned to the window as he went out. And all three went into the kitchen, leaving the door open just a bit so that they could see in. He hoped it would happen soon, so as they wouldn't have to wait. He was afraid, in case something happened to make things change. And he felt excited as never before. Because the war had only finished yesterday and these were *narsties*, who had been shooting yesterday, maybe, and maybe

even this morning, when the people in the window underneath had been hanging out the flag, shooting from this window into Paris Street, and nobody had managed to hit them. Until now. They were on the top floor. In his mind's eye he saw the steep drop to the paved abyss below. He remembered what the street looked like with the paving stones dug up. A little way from the pavement a tank lay on its side, all busted up; by it the drying stains were no longer spreading, all that is left of a man who gets hit in the head or the chest almost at the very last moment of the war. He thought again of the blue sky and that it still hadn't rained and that the stains were still there and they'd get even darker. That's what it would be like under this window, too, the window it had been coming from and because of it there was that pile of dead bodies down there on the pavement.

"Crumb," he whispered.

"What's the matter?"

"Curly," he went on.

"What?"

"They're going to judge them in there."

"Well, what of it?" said the Crumb. "We've found some grub here."

And Curly: "Have some?" And: "Tinned apricots."

The Black Lion felt a strange mixture of surprise. They're stuffing themselves just at this very moment, he thought. And disappointment flowed over him, and then a feeling almost of admiration. And he immediately thought they were both doing it on purpose so as not to feel excited like him, but that they really knew all the time that this was the moment of supreme justice.

He turned to the half-open door again and looked to see how things were getting on in there. The two men with the "R" armbands on their sleeves were standing close together, side by side, very straight, pistols in hand, and in front of them, facing the window, stood the two Germans. In the middle of the floor the smouldering uniform lay in a heap and outside the window the strips of color on the flags could be seen.

"What can you see from that window?" asked the tall man.

"Nothing," answered the man in pyjamas humbly.

"What did that man over there with a bandage on his head do to you?"

"I don't even know him," the man whispered.

"You shot him!"

"And what about you?" the tall man shouted at the woman. "Can't you see anything either?"

"People . . ." she stammered.

"For how many days were you firing from here?"

"We didn't shoot at all," the man answered. "I swear. My word of honor as a soldier . . . I don't shoot at civilians."

"We didn't shoot at all," said the woman.

"Was this window shut?" asked the shorter man.

"No . . ." the woman blurted out.

"It was . . ." said the man.

In both their voices there was fear now, and infinite tiredness.

All at once the Black Lion clutched the smaller lad's shoulder. "They're going to have to jump," he said feverishly. He was tremendously excited. So that's what justice looks like.

"I needn't see them," the little chap said with a sigh.

"I'm not very interested either," added Curly. "If they take the high jump I s'pose they've deserved it."

"They'll have to," growled the Black Lion. "That's justice."

The Black Lion's eyes were boring into the backs of the two people, and taking in the window-frame which was like a great blue and white light in the dark room now. The smoke was forcing its way out and reflected in the windowpanes, that was the path.

"I demand a trial," the man whispered. But you could see he had no faith in his request.

"Yes . . ." repeated the woman, tired and bent, "that's . . ."

"We'll hand you over," the tall man said quietly.

"We haven't done anything," the woman sighed. "We didn't shoot." There was relief in her voice.

"We found an S.S. uniform here," the tall man snapped. "Someone was shooting from this window. At that corner where the man with the bandage is standing is a pool of dried blood. Twelve dead. That's enough to hang you. Both of you."

"Look down there!" the tall man said in a throttled voice. "Look down from the window!"

The woman closed her eyes.

"Go on, look down," the tall man said to her sharply.

"For God's sake!" the woman groaned.

"Oh, no," whispered the man, "not that."

"We didn't do anything," the woman said again. She still kept her eyes shut.

"We didn't shoot," she gasped, as the man said nothing. In her voice there was a sob which had dried up.

And then when she stopped speaking you could hear in the silence that it was not a sob but constriction of the throat.

The Black Lion closed his eyes. Justice was at work. He was convinced that this was what he was thinking of.

"They'll have to face it," he repeated obstinately. And again in a moment: "They'll have to face it." And at last again: "They'll have to face it because they were shooting at our people from up here."

"When they're down there," he said suddenly, very quietly, "we'll have

to go out of the house." And all the time, even when he shut his eyes, he could see the dark pool down there on the pavement.

Something slumped to the floor in the next room. The woman had fainted.

The man in pyjamas rushed to her.

"Don't move a step!" said the tall man.

The woman half opened her eyes.

"In a little while," the shorter man began to speak, "they'll come to take you away. Give me your keys. All of them!"

The tall "R" guard opened the wardrobe.

"Where are those fellows from the concentration camp?" he asked.

The Black Lion emerged from the kitchen. "Here they are," he said.

"Take whatever you need," growled the tall man.

Suits smelling of camphor were swaying on the pole in the wardrobe. The Crumb bent down carefully, because there on the floor of the wardrobe he had caught sight of a white linen bag with something lumpy in it.

"What is it?" Curly growled behind him.

"Sugar," said the little fellow, "lump."

"Whatever you need," the tall man repeated. "And then get out."

The Crumb caught hold of the bag and straightened up.

"I'll take this," he muttered.

"Nice bit of grub," Curly pulled a face.

The tall man with the "R" armband suddenly laughed.

"Out you go," he said in quite a different voice.

Then they left the flat, sooner and faster than the Black Lion. And down there on the street they could kick the splinters of glass and bits of masonry about to their hearts' content, there was plenty of it. And then they walked over the dark stain at the corner without noticing it. And the Black Lion, with the pride he had been feeling all the time, took Curly and the Crumb home with him, because he had the indelible impression that he had seen justice done at last. And suddenly he felt happy because the man and woman up there had not jumped after all.

"Give it here," he said to the little fellow contentedly. "I'll give you a hand with that sugar."

Translated by Iris Urwin