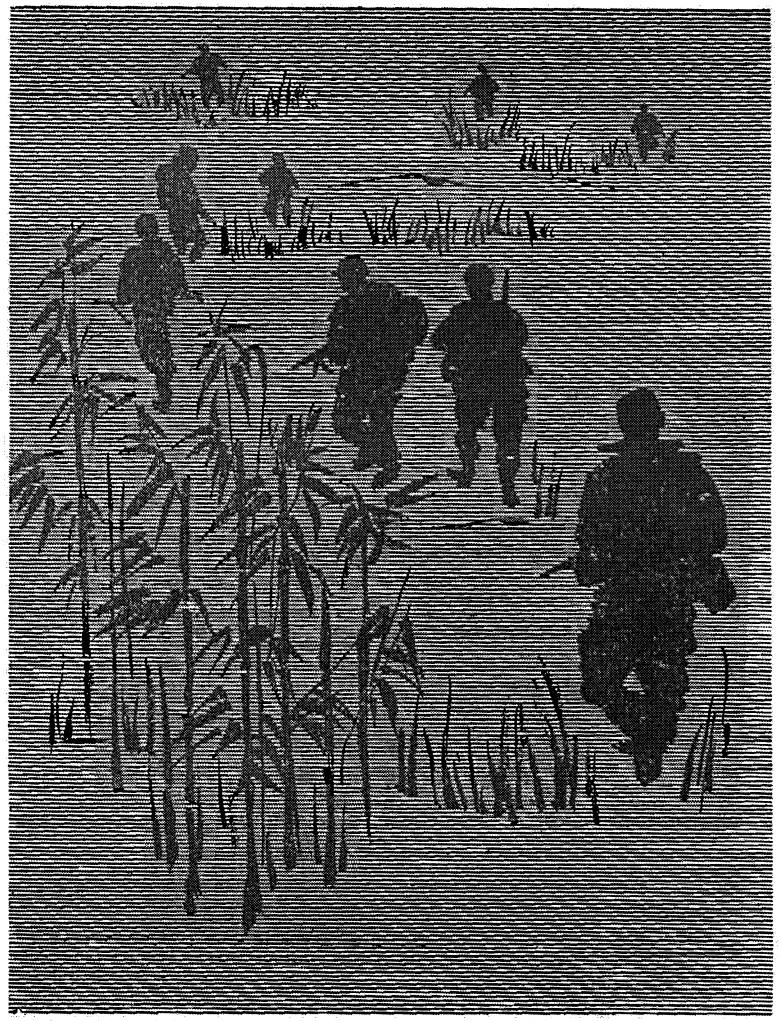

Night Patrol.

STREET WITH-OUT JOY

By

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Sometimes, there occurs an almost irrelevant incident which, in the light of later developments, seems to have been a sign of the gods, a dreamlike warning which, if heeded, could have changed fate—or so it seems.

One such incident occurred to me in October 1953 in Cambodia, at Siem-Réap, not far away from the fabulous temples of Angkor-Wat. I had been in the field with the 5th Cambodian Autonomous Infantry Company and was now in need of transportation back to Phnom-Penh, the capital of Cambodia. Siem-Réap, a quiet and pleasant little place with two hotels catering to the tourist trade and a few French archeologists working around the ruins of Angkor, might as well have been a small garrison town in southern France, such as Avignon or Nîmes.

A few French officers were still around, mainly as advisers to the newly-independent Cambodian Army. Their chores were light; there were no Communists in the area and the handful of obsolescent "Renault" trucks and World War II-type weapons needed

a minimum of maintenance and care. An assignment to Siem-Réap was as good a sinecure as could be found in Indochina in October 1953 and the officers made the most of it.

When I went to the Transportation Office that afternoon at 1530, the Cambodian orderly told me apologetically that *"le Lieutenant est allé au mess jouer au tennis avec le Capitaine"* and that they might well stay there for the rest of the afternoon. Since a convoy which I expected to catch was supposed to leave at dawn, I decided to stroll over to the mess in order to get my travel documents signed there.

The Siem-Réap officers' mess was a pleasant and well-kept place; with its wide Cambodian-type verandahs, its parasol-shaded tables and the well-manicured lawns and beautifully red-sanded tennis court, it was an exact replica of all the other colonial officers' messes from Port Said to Singapore, Saigon or even Manila, wherever the white man had set his foot in the course of building his ephemeral empires.

I found the two officers at the tennis court, in gleaming white French square-bottomed shorts (no one in Europe would be caught dead in the ungainly Bermuda pants called "shorts" in the United States), matching Lacoste tennis shirts and knee-long socks. Their skins had lost the unhealthy pallor of the jungle and taken on the handsome bronze of the vacationer engaging in outdoor sports; their wives, seated at a neighboring table, were beautifully groomed and wore deceptively simple (but, oh, so expensive!) cotton summer dresses clearly showing the hand of a Paris designer. Both officers played in the easy style of men who knew each other's game and were bent less on winning than on getting the fun and exercise of it. Three Cambodian servants, clad in impeccable white slacks and shirts, stood respectfully in the shadow of the verandah, awaiting the call of one of the officers or women for a new cool drink.

Since the men were in the midst of a set and I had little else to do, I sat down at a neighboring table after a courteous bow to the ladies and watched the game, gladly enjoying the atmosphere of genteel civility and forgetting for a moment the war. At the next table, the two women kept up the rapid-fire chatter which French women are prone to use when men are present. The two men also

kept up a conversation of sorts, interrupted regularly by the "plop-plop" of the tennis ball.

Then emerged from the verandah a soldier in French uniform. His small stature, brown skin and Western-type features showed him to be a Cambodian. He wore the blue field cap with the golden anchor of the *Troupes Coloniales*—the French "Marines"—and the three golden chevrons of a master-sergeant. On his chest above the left breast pocket of his suntan regulation shirt were three rows of multi-colored ribbons: *croix de guerre* with four citations, campaign ribbons with the clasps of France's every colonial campaign since the Moroccan pacification of 1926; the Italian campaign of 1943 and the drive to the Rhine of 1945. In his left hand, he carried several papers crossed diagonally with a tri-colored ribbon; travel orders, like mine, which also awaited the signature of one of the officers.

He remained in the shadow of the verandah's awnings until the officers had interrupted their game and had joined the two women with their drinks, then strode over in a measured military step, came stiffly to attention in a military salute, and handed the orders for himself and his squad to the captain. The captain looked up in surprise, still with a half-smile on his face from the remark he had made previously. His eyes narrowed suddenly as he understood that he was being interrupted. Obviously, he was annoyed but not really furious.

"Sergeant, you can see that I'm busy. Please wait until I have time to deal with your travel orders. Don't worry. You will have them in time for the convoy."

The sergeant stood stiffly at attention, some of his almost white hair glistening in the sun where it peeked from under the cap, his wizened face betraying no emotion whatever.

"*A vos ordres, mon Capitaine.*" A sharp salute, a snappy about face. The incident was closed, the officers had had their drink and now resumed their game.

The sergeant resumed his watch near where the Cambodian messboys were following the game, but this time he had squatted down on his haunches, a favorite Cambodian position of repose which would leave most Europeans with partial paralysis for several hours afterwards. Almost without moving his head, he

attentively followed the tennis game, his travel orders still tightly clutched in his left hand.

The sun began to settle behind the trees of the garden and a slight cooling breeze rose from the nearby Lake Tonlé-Sap, Cambodia's inland sea. It was 1700.

All of a sudden, there rose behind the trees, from the nearby French camp, the beautiful bell-clear sounds of a bugle playing "lower the flag"—the signal which, in the French Army, marks the end of the working day as the colors are struck.

Nothing changed at the tennis court; the two officers continued to play their set, the women continued their chatter, and the mess-boys their silent vigil.

Only the old sergeant had moved. He was now standing stiffly at attention, his right hand raised to the cap in the flat-palmed salute of the French Army, facing in the direction from which the bugle tones came; saluting, as per regulations, France's tricolor hidden behind the trees. The rays of the setting sun shone upon the immobile brown figure, catching the gold of the anchor and of the chevrons and of one of the tiny metal stars of his ribbons.

Something very warm welled up in me. I felt like running over to the little Cambodian who had fought all his life for my country, and apologizing to him for my countrymen here who didn't care about him, and for my countrymen in France who didn't even care about *their* countrymen fighting in Indochina . . .

And in one single blinding flash, I *knew* that we were going to lose the war.