

SHORT STORY

BLACKOUT by Roger Mais (Jamaica)

The city was in partial blackout; the street lights had not been turned on, because of the wartime policy of conserving electricity; and the houses behind their discreet *aurelia* hedges were wrapped in an atmosphere of exclusive respectability.

The young woman waiting at the bus stop was not in the least nervous, in spite of the wave of panic that had been sweeping the city about bands of hooligans roaming the streets after dark and assaulting unprotected women. She was a sensible young woman to begin with, who realised that one good scream would be sufficient to bring a score of respectable suburban householders running to her assistance. On the other hand she was an American, and fully conscious of the tradition of American young women that they don't scare easily. Even that slinking black shadow that seemed to be materializing out of the darkness at the other side of the street did not disconcert her. She was only slightly curious now that she observed that the shadow was approaching her, slowly.

It was a young man dressed in conventional shirt and pants, and wearing a pair of canvas shoes. That was what lent the suggestion of slinking to his movements, because he went along noiselessly - that, and the mere suggestion of a stoop. He was very tall. There was a curious look of hunger and unrest about his eyes. But the thing that struck her immediately was the fact that he was Black; the other particulars scarcely made any impression at all in comparison. In her country not every night a white woman could be nonchalantly approached by a Black man. There was enough novelty in all this to intrigue her. She seemed to remember that any sort of adventure might be experienced in one of these tropical islands of the West Indies.

"Could you give me a light, lady?" the man said. It is true she was smoking, but she had only just lit this one from the stub of the cigarette she had thrown away. The fact was she had no matches. Would he believe her, she wondered? "I am sorry. I haven't got a match."

The young man looked into her face, seemed to hesitate an instant and said, his brow slightly wrinkled in perplexity: "But you are smoking."

There was no argument against that. Still, she was not particular about giving him a light from the cigarette she was smoking. It may be stupid, but there was a suggestion of intimacy about such an act, simple as it was, that, call it what you may, she could not accept just like that.

There was a moment's hesitation on her part now, during which time the man's steady gaze never left her face. There was pride and challenge in his look, curiously mingled with quiet amusement.

She held out her cigarette towards him between two fingers.

"Here," she said, "you can light from that."

In the act of bending his head to accept the proffered light, he came quite close to her. He did not seem to understand that she meant him to take the lighted cigarette from her hand. He just bent over her hand to light his.

Presently he straightened up, inhaled a deep lungful of soothing smoke and exhaled again with satisfaction. She saw then that he was smoking the half of a cigarette, which had been clinched and saved for future consumption.

“Thank you,” said the man, politely; and was in the act of moving off when he noticed that instead of returning her cigarette to her lips she had casually, unthinkingly flicked it away. He observed this in the split part of a second that it took him to say those two words. It was almost a whole cigarette she had thrown away. She had been smoking it with evident enjoyment a moment before. He stood there looking at her, with cold speculation. In a way it unnerved her. Not that she was frightened. He seemed quite decent in his own way, and harmless; but he made her feel uncomfortable. If he had said something rude she would have preferred it. It would have no more than she would have expected of him. But instead, this quiet contemptuous look. Yes, that was it. The thing began to take on definition in her mind. How dare he; the insolence!

“Well, what are you waiting for?” she said, because she felt she had to break the tension somehow.

“I am sorry I made you waste a whole cigarette,” he said.

She laughed a little nervously. “It’s nothing,” she said, feeling a fool.

“There’s plenty more where that came from, eh?” he asked.

“I suppose so.”

This won’t do, she thought, quickly. She had no intention of standing at a street corner jawing with - well, with a Black man.

There was something indecent about it. Why doesn’t he move on?

As though he had read her thoughts he said:

“This is the street, lady. It’s public.”

Well, anyway, she didn’t have to answer him. She could snub him quietly, the way she should have properly done from the start.

“It’s a good thing you’re a woman,” he said.

“And if I were a man?”

“As man to man maybe I’d give you something to think about,” he said, still in that quiet, even voice.

In America they lynch them for less than this, she thought.

“This isn’t America,” he said. “I can see you are an American. In this country there are only men and women. You’ll learn about it.” She could only humour him. Find out what his ideas were about this question, anyway. It would be something to talk about back home. Suddenly she was intrigued.

“So in this country there are only men and women, eh?”

“That’s right. So to speak there is only you an’ me, only there are hundreds and thousands of us. We seem to get along somehow without lynchings and burnings and all that.”

“Do you really think that all men are created equal?”

“It don’t seem to me there is any sense in that. The facts show it ain’t so. Look at you an’ me, for instance. But that isn’t to say you’re not a woman, the same way as I am a man. You see what I mean?”

“I can’t say I do.”

“You will, though, if you stop here long enough.”

She threw a quick glance in his direction.

The man laughed.

“I don’t mean what you’re thinking,” he said. “You’re not my type of woman. You don’t have anything to fear under that heading.”

“Oh!”

“You’re waiting for the bus, I take it. Well, that’s it coming now. Thanks for the light.”

“Don’t mention it,” she said, with a nervous sort of giggle. He made no attempt to move along as the bus came up. He stood there quietly aloof, as though in the consciousness of a male strength and pride that was justly his. There was something about him that was at once challenging and disturbing. He had shaken her supreme confidence in some important sense.

As the bus moved off she was conscious of his eyes’ quiet scrutiny, without the interruption of artificial barriers, in the sense of dispassionate appraisal, as between man and woman, any man, any woman.

She fought resolutely against the very natural desire to turn her head and take a last look at him. Perhaps she was thinking about what the people on the bus might think. And perhaps it was just as well that she did not see him bend forward with swift hungry movement, retrieving from the gutter the half-smoked cigarette she had thrown away.