VINTAGE

THE BRIDGE ON THE RIVER KWAI

PIERRE BOULLE

VINTAGE CLASSICS

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About the Book

‘Unforgettable’ *New Statesman*

1943. The British POWs are commanded to build one link in the infamous Bangkok-Rangoon railway. Colonel Nicholson refuses, as it is against regulations for officers to work with other ranks. He is a man prepared to sacrifice his life, but not his dignity. The Japanese give way, but to prove a point of British superiority construction of the bridge goes ahead – at great cost to the men under Nicholson’s command.

About the Author

Pierre Boulle was born in 1912 at Avignon. Boulle spent the Second World War fighting in Yunnan, Calcutta and IndoChine, where he was captured by the Japanese. After the war he lived in Malaya, the Cameroons and, finally, Paris, where he settled until his death in 1994.

Also by Pierre Boulle

Planet of the Apes

The Bridge on the River Kwai

Pierre Boulle

Translated from the French by Xan Fielding

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No, it was not funny; it was rather pathetic; he was so representative of all the past victims of the great Joke. But it is by folly alone that the world moves, and so it is a respectable thing upon the whole. And besides, he was what one would call a good man.

Joseph Conrad

Part One

1

THE INSUPERABLE GAP between East and West that exists in some eyes is perhaps nothing more than an optical illusion. Perhaps it is only the conventional way of expressing a popular opinion based on insufficient evidence and masquerading as a universally recognized statement of fact, for which there is no justification at all, not even the plea that it contains an element of truth. During the last war ‘saving face’ was perhaps as vitally important to the British as it was to the Japanese. Perhaps it dictated the behaviour of the former, without their being aware of it, as forcibly and as fatally as it did that of the latter, and no doubt that of every other race in the world. Perhaps the conduct of each of the two enemies, superficially so dissimilar, was in fact simply a different though equally meaningless manifestation of the same spiritual reality. Perhaps the mentality of the Japanese colonel, Saito, was essentially the same as that of his prisoner, Colonel Nicholson.

These were the questions which occupied Major Clipton’s thoughts. He too was a prisoner, like the five hundred other wretches herded by the Japanese into the camp on the River Kwai, like the sixty thousand English, Australians, Dutch and Americans assembled in several groups in one of the most uncivilized corners of the earth, the jungle of Burma and Siam, in order to build a railway linking the Bay of Bengal to Bangkok and Singapore. Clipton occasionally answered these questions in the affirmative, realizing, however, that this point of view was in the nature of a paradox; to acquire it one had to disregard all superficial appearances. Above all, one had to assume that the beatings-up, the butt-end

blows and even worse forms of brutality through which the Japanese mentality made itself felt were all as meaningless as the show of ponderous dignity which was Colonel Nicholson's favourite weapon, wielded as a mark of British superiority. But Clipton willingly gave way to this assumption each time his CO's behaviour enraged him to such an extent that the only consolation he could find was in a whole-hearted objective examination of primary causes.

He invariably came to the conclusion that the combination of individual characteristics which contributed to Colonel Nicholson's personality (sense of duty, observance of ritual, obsession with discipline and love of the job well done were all jumbled together in this worthy human repository) could not be better described than by the single word: snobbery. During these periods of feverish investigation he regarded him as a snob, a perfect example of the military snob, which has gradually emerged after a lengthy process of development dating from the Stone Age, the preservation of the species being guaranteed by tradition.

Clipton, however, was by nature objective and had the rare gift of being able to examine a problem from every angle. The conclusion he had reached having somewhat calmed the brainstorm which certain aspects of the Colonel's behaviour caused him, he would suddenly feel well disposed and recognize, almost with affection, the excellence of the CO's qualities. If these were typically snobbish, he reasoned, then the argument need be carried only one stage further for the noblest sentiments to be likewise classified as such, until even a mother's love would eventually come to be regarded as the most blatant sign of snobbery imaginable.

In the past, Colonel Nicholson's high regard for discipline had been a byword in various parts of Asia and Africa. In 1942 it was once again in evidence, at Singapore, during the disaster which followed the invasion of Malaya.

When orders came through from Headquarters to cease fire, a group of young officers in his battalion had planned to make their way down to the coast, get hold of a boat and set sail for the Dutch East Indies. Although admiring their zeal and courage, Colonel Nicholson had hindered their scheme with every means at his disposal.

To begin with, he had tried to win them over by pointing out that this venture was a direct contravention of the instructions he had received. Since the Commander-in-Chief had signed the surrender for the whole of Malaya, not one of His Majesty's subjects could escape without committing an act of disobedience. As far as he could see, there was only one line of conduct possible: to stay put until a senior Japanese officer turned up to accept the surrender of himself and his unit and of the hundreds of stragglers who had managed to escape the massacre of the last few weeks.

'A fine example it would be for the men,' he had exclaimed, 'if their officers failed in their duty!'

His argument had been rendered additionally forceful by the piercing look of resolution which he always assumed in moments of crisis. His eyes were the colour of the Indian Ocean on a calm day; and his features, which were always in repose, were the clear reflection of a guiltless conscience. His fair, reddish moustache was the moustache of an unruffled hero; and his ruddy complexion was evidence of a sound heart regulating a smooth, easy circulation perfect in its efficiency. Clipton, who had served under him throughout the campaign, never ceased to wonder at this living example of 'the Indian Army officer', a type which he had always considered legendary, but whose reality was now proclaimed so loudly every day that it invariably caused him these alternating bouts of anger and affection.

Clipton had pleaded the young officers' case. He approved of it and said so. Colonel Nicholson had taken him to task and declared himself painfully surprised to see a middle-aged man in a highly responsible position sharing the wild

aspirations of a lot of hot-headed youngsters and encouraging the sort of thoughtless escapade that can cause nothing but harm.

Having explained the reason for his attitude, he had issued strict and definite orders. All officers, NCOs and men were to stay put until the Japanese arrived. Their surrender was not of their own choice; none of them, therefore, should feel in any way humiliated. He, and he alone, would shoulder the responsibility on behalf of the whole battalion.

Most of the officers had given in to him; for his power of persuasion was considerable, and his authority immense, while his unquestionable personal courage made it impossible to attribute his conduct to any motive except sense of duty. Some of them had disobeyed orders and disappeared into the jungle. Colonel Nicholson had been genuinely grieved by their behaviour. He had posted them as deserters, and with growing impatience had waited for the Japanese to appear.

In preparation for their arrival, he had worked out in his head a ceremony which would bear the stamp of quiet dignity. After considerable thought he had decided, as a symbolic act of submission, to hand over the revolver which he wore on his hip to the enemy colonel in charge of the surrender. He had rehearsed the gesture several times and had made certain of being able to take the holster off in one easy movement. He had put on his best uniform and seen that his men tidied themselves up. Then he had ordered them to fall in and pile arms and had inspected them in person.

The first to make contact were some private soldiers who could not speak a word of any civilized language. Colonel Nicholson had not budged. Then a NCO had driven up in a truck and motioned the British to load their arms on to the vehicle. The Colonel had forbidden his men to move. He had demanded to see a senior officer. There was no officer, either senior or junior, and the Japanese did not understand

his request. They had turned nasty. The soldiers had assumed a threatening attitude, while the NCO broke out into shrill screams and pointed at the rifles. The Colonel had ordered his men to stay put and not move. Submachine-guns had been pointed at them, while the Colonel was unceremoniously pushed around. He had kept his temper and repeated his demand. The British began to look rather worried and Clipton was wondering if the CO intended to get them all massacred out of loyalty to his principles and for the sake of form, when a car full of Japanese officers at last appeared. One of them wore the badges of rank of a major. *Faute de mieux*, Colonel Nicholson decided to surrender to him. He called his unit to attention. He himself saluted in exemplary fashion and, taking his holster off his belt, presented it with a flourish.

Faced with this gift, the astonished major first stepped back in alarm; then he appeared extremely embarrassed; finally he became convulsed by a long burst of savage laughter in which he was soon joined by his fellow-officers. Colonel Nicholson simply shrugged his shoulders and assumed a haughty expression: none the less he gave his men the order to load their rifles on to the truck.

During the time that he had spent in the prison camp near Singapore, Colonel Nicholson had made a point of observing a strict Anglo-Saxon code of behaviour in the face of the enemy’s disorderly conduct. Clipton, who had been with him all the time, was not sure even at that early date whether to bless him or curse him.

As a result of the orders he had issued, orders which confirmed and amplified the Japanese instructions, the men in his unit behaved well and fared badly. Bully-beef and other miscellaneous supplies, which the prisoners from other units sometimes managed to ‘win’ in the blitzed outskirts of Singapore in spite of, and often in connivance with, the sentries, were a welcome supplement to the

meagre rations. But this sort of looting was not permitted on any account by Colonel Nicholson. He made his officers give lectures condemning such behaviour as undignified and pointing out that the only way for the British soldier to command the respect of his temporary masters was to set them an example of irreproachable conduct. He saw to it that this order was obeyed by carrying out regular inspections, which were even more thorough than the sentries'!

These lectures on the standard of behaviour which every soldier was supposed to keep up when serving overseas were not the only fatigues which he imposed on his battalion. During that period the unit was by no means overwhelmed with work, since the Japanese had organized no labour to speak of in the outskirts of Singapore. Convinced that idleness was prejudicial to the spirit of the regiment, and frightened at the prospect of a drop in morale, the Colonel had drawn up a full programme for every off-duty hour. He made his officers read out and explain to the men whole sections of *King's Regulations*, after which he examined them and issued rewards in the shape of certificates bearing his signature. Discipline, of course, was not the least important subject in this curriculum. At regular intervals it was brought to the notice of all ranks that correct saluting was compulsory, even in a prison compound. Consequently the privates, who were also obliged to salute every Japanese irrespective of his rank, ran a double risk every time they neglected instructions: on the one hand, they risked the kicks and blows of the sentries; on the other, a dressing down from the Colonel and some punishment imposed by him, such as having to stand to attention for several hours during recreation periods.

The fact that such Spartan discipline had been generally accepted by the men, and that they had voluntarily submitted to an authority which was no longer backed up by the powers-that-be, but was only wielded by an individual at

the mercy of the same abuses and ill-treatment as themselves, was a frequent source of amazement to Clipton. He often wondered whether such obedience should be attributed to the personal respect which the Colonel commanded or to the privileges which they enjoyed thanks to him; for no one could deny that his intransigent attitude was successful, even with the Japanese. His chief weapons, when dealing with them, were his insistence on a proper code of conduct, his tenacity, his ability to keep harping on one particular point until he obtained satisfaction, and the *Manual of Military Law* containing the Hague Convention which he calmly waved in the Japs' faces each time a breach of international law was committed. His personal courage and complete disregard for the blows he received were also no doubt largely responsible for the high regard in which he was held. On several occasions, when the Japanese had exceeded the recognized rights due to a victorious army, he had done more than protest. He had personally intervened. He had once been badly beaten up by a particularly brutal guard who had issued an order contrary to international law. He had eventually scored his point, and his assailant had been punished. He had then proceeded to issue his own version of the order, which was far harsher than anything the Japanese could devise.

'The main thing,' he explained, when Clipton suggested that in the circumstances he might exercise a little leniency, 'the main thing is to make the lads feel they're still being commanded by us and not by these baboons. As long as they cling to this idea, they'll be soldiers, not slaves.'

Clipton, who could see both sides of the question, had to admit there was something to be said for this and realized that the Colonel's action was prompted, as usual, by his sterling qualities.

2

THE PRISONERS NOW recalled those months they had spent in the Singapore camp as a period of palmy days, and sighed with regret when they compared it with their present plight in this uncivilized corner of Siam. They had reached their destination after an endless train journey right across Malaya, followed by an exhausting march in the course of which they had grown so weak from exposure and malnutrition that bit by bit they had jettisoned the heaviest and most valuable items of their wretched equipment, without any hope of ever getting them back. The rumours about the railway which they were going to build did not cheer them up at all.

Colonel Nicholson and his unit had been moved a little later than the others, and the work was already under way by the time they reached Siam. After the hardships of their cross-country march, their first encounter with the new Japanese authorities had been far from encouraging. At Singapore they had been up against soldiers who, after the initial frenzy of victory, and apart from a few isolated outbreaks of primitive brutality, had proved to be not much more oppressive than any Western army of occupation would have been. The officers in charge of the Allied prisoners on the railway were evidently quite a different proposition. From the very start they had acted like savage chain-gang warders and were liable to turn at a moment's notice into sadistic executioners.

Colonel Nicholson and the remainder of his battalion, which he still prided himself on commanding, had at first been transferred to a vast reception centre serving as a

transit camp for all the convoys along this route, part of which, however, was already in use as permanent quarters. They had stayed there only a short time, but long enough to realize what they were in for and how they would live until the job was finished. The poor devils were put to work like beasts of burden. Each of them had to complete a task which was not perhaps beyond the strength of a man in good condition and on an adequate diet; for the pitiful, emaciated creatures that they had become in less than one month, it was a job that kept them busy from dawn till dusk and sometimes half the night. They were worn out and demoralized by the curses and blows which the guards rained down on them at the slightest sign of faltering, and haunted by the fear of even worse punishment to come. Clipton had been appalled by their physical condition. Malaria, dysentery, beri-beri and jungle sores were rife, and the camp MO had told him there might be far more serious epidemics, against which he could take no precautions at all. Not even the most rudimentary medical stores were available.

Colonel Nicholson had frowned without saying a word. He was not ‘in charge’ of this camp, and considered himself almost as a guest there. To the British lieutenant-colonel who ran it under Japanese orders, he had only once expressed what he felt; that was when he noticed that all the officers below the rank of major were doing their share of manual labour on exactly the same footing as the men, in other words they were digging and carting like navvies. The lieutenant-colonel had hung his head. He explained that he had done his best to avoid this humiliation and had given in to brutal compulsion only in order to avoid the reprisals from which everyone would have otherwise suffered. Colonel Nicholson had nodded in a manner that showed he was far from convinced, and had then taken refuge in haughty silence.