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TO CAROL

*Europe after
the Rain*

Chapter 1

WE WERE APPROACHING the river. The modern bridge had been demolished, a wooden one constructed. Passengers were ordered to get out and walk across. The way led from the metalled surface of the road over deeply frayed planks. Seventy yards away the permanent bridge, massive steel and concrete, was still half completed. Danger threatened the wooden bridge – ice pressed against the log piles supporting it. Explosions broke the silence as a soldier with a pole placed packages on the ice. “It’s moving,” she said. Slowly the ice pack oscillated and a large piece broke away to be carried by the current fast beneath the bridge.

In the bus, all the seats were occupied. “Don’t worry,” she said. “When the control comes, the people will have to get out.” Two passengers could not find their tickets. They were taken off to some sort of centre, or so I was told. Genuine passengers were driven to the outskirts of the frontier town. The driver was pleasant enough: “Of course it is bad here, but not so bad as you might think.”

At the first building, I asked her: “Won’t it be closed? It’s already well after seven.” “Someone is bound to be on duty.” A light shone. “You were right, someone is here.” In a room lit by a bulb, a middle-aged woman sat knitting. She did not glance at us. I was left alone with her; a man came in; the three sat in silence; I wrapped in my coat.

The girl returned. “Drink?” “I don’t drink,” she replied. “Never?” “I don’t like alcohol.” The man asked her to

dance; she glanced down at his boots, and danced with him. "You'll have to dance with all of them. Let's leave – it's no use waiting. I'll pay the bill." The man made a movement with his hand. "We must pay the bill." He did not reply.

We were separated. I objected: "She is in my care until she has contacted her family." We had to stand in front of a desk. She understood that the words used were a message of welcome. They appeared to have a most enjoyable conversation. He walked backwards and forwards; I waited – I knew I would have to wait.

The rooms were littered with paper and rubbish. Room after room showed the same sight. A photograph lay in the dust on the floor of one room – she picked it up, glanced at it, then flicked it back to its former place. "Upstairs it's a bit risky," she warned. "Have you got a torch?" Everything had gone, even the floorboards. The staircase to the top floor was planks battened together. "That's the door," she said. "I shall wait for you here." The door opened slightly; the eye of a girl. "Do you mind waiting a little? Someone isn't really dressed yet." She showed no marked sign of being other than healthy. "We were two patients to a bed. My fellow patient was a man who died. They left him with me for two days before taking him away." There was no trace of hysteria. "It was nice of you to come."

We walked fast in a strong cold wind, among loose stuff lying about. A viaduct led to the destroyed bridge; we ran down stone steps to reach the street – whole steps were missing, the gaps protected by wire. Single walls crashed. Music sounded from a church – people with dogs waited at the entrance; the stairway was packed with a stationary crowd of listeners. Two new trolleybuses were being

tested. I counted thirty wooden huts. Girls stood in a circle singing a patriotic song. She would not join them.

We knocked. We said we could not stay.

We went to two cinemas.

Someone called for her. She discussed her plans. "As a matter of fact, I have not got any plan." "You have names and addresses." "I am probably standing on a dead body." She bought two and a half pounds of sweets. Anyone could buy sweets. Everyone did a little buying and selling. Loot. Though there was little left. There were other ways. Casual labour received high wages. She did private work in the evenings. Quality work. One house was famous. The owner sang those songs. She sang the one we had heard in the street.

At the orphanage we were told that orphans arrived in a number of ways. "The police find them. Or neighbours bring them. Some arrive on their own." A boy of twelve had just arrived. He presented himself. A woman came with two children – she was their neighbour; their father had had an accident. They were disinfected and medically examined. They went through the hands of an examiner – a heavy woman with a strong face, cold, distrustful; a woman on the other side of the writing desk. She tested the children. She showed us her equipment. "I have to carry out my tests. Most of the children are of normal intelligence. The history of each is written down. When it is a case of a brother and sister, this is marked on both cards. The building has three floors. Each floor is isolated to prevent the spread of infection. Children from three to eight are encouraged to play with toys." "Who sends them toys?" "And there are kitchens, and there are laundries." The interview, though it produced no useful information, was

most pleasant. There were no armed guards or admittance permits. She was a member of the aristocracy. We could speak direct. “What do you want? Where would you like to go? No, it is too dangerous.” “Someone must make a start.” “I shall see what I can do.” We saw the kitchens. We tasted the food. It was the same. The food was available. They achieved the maximum flavour by careful cooking. “A soup well made is the best means of deriving the most benefit.” The shops were filled with food. The children got milk for breakfast twice a week. A fine piece of work.

A boy. The sun. The windows. The rays of the sun streamed direct from the heavens. The boy talked to her: “We got on a boat, a train, they caught us, back you go, they bought us tickets, we hid till the train went, we came out, why are you not on that train? It’s gone, it’s your fault, you told us the wrong time. Wait here for the next train. Before we started out we collected anything we could find, and our friends gave us things. When we got hungry we sold everything.” They asked his name. No one knew his parents – they had disappeared, absolutely; he wasn’t sure of his name – it had been signed away to someone else. They took his clothes, bathed him, turned him over, gave him other clothes. He asked for his own. She said: “With very little you do a great deal, and do it well.” On our way to the dining room the boy stopped us: “I’m glad you’ve come. I thought I had been forgotten.”

Up two flights of steps, a room: forty feet by forty feet, thirteen feet high. The walls and ceiling were painted white. On each wall, a fresco: undamaged cities, a dancer, an eagle five feet square, done in black on scarlet, no intention of flight, massive legs – it was not an eagle. A continuous table, along three sides of the room, had been laid for

supper: plates of excellent ham, thin slices of sausage made from meat, fish in oil, boiled eggs, salted and spiced, various salads and cheese. But eating would not take place for some time. Sweet biscuits of several kinds were placed on the table. Conversation started. They recalled the tortures in the building. An undercurrent of recklessness. "We can stand anything, if you know what that means." We had to ask questions. It had been agreed that I was to remain. I asked about the boy. "I don't know whether I should tell you. It was done without my knowledge. These young people. If I had known I should not have allowed it." I noticed her eating the biscuits. "Look at the roof – just above the room with the high windows. You see? The yellow tiles are new. Crawling and working on a steep roof. A drop of forty feet from the gutter." A hasty whispering took place. It was time for us to go. "Do you mind waiting? We shall have to give you an escort – that is, if you wish to return."

We drove back across the bridge. The river ran past the town from south-east to north-west. We went round two sides of an open square. The doors of the car would not close properly. The driver demanded to be paid. I refused.

I bought her a belt for her birthday – a broad band of lemon yellow. She said: "Today is a day. I don't notice any difference from other days. We visited the blind. Nurses gave their lives. I have no time. I have work to do. But now I must go to sleep."

We had identical conversations with high-placed officials. I asked if we had a chance of finding the right direction. They laughed. She said afterwards: "If you overwork them, they collapse. Something happens. They break down."

They worked by candlelight. The electric cable had not been relaid. Hesitation was not tolerated. Each was

required to correct mistakes. The standard of attention demanded was high. Questions were snapped at them, incorrect attitudes eliminated.

Police headquarters had been repaired. Electric lights functioned. I was standing at the back of the office when she entered. She explained the reason for her visit. It was not always easy to understand what she was trying to say. She would have to have lessons. She had no map. She tried to draw a map.

For years she had lived an abnormal life. She had been intensively trained. This had lowered her capacity to concentrate. She had formed habits of thought. Here was a powerful and unknown force. Her structure had been completely destroyed, in blood and burning. The structure of this girl was a new and unknown factor in history. It would be known only in the future. It would be something quite different from what her teachers had intended.

I had a haircut, a shave; my suit pressed, I collected clean clothes from the laundry. At my door a shoe-cleaner waited; he cleaned my shoes, and with his assistance I bought some books, locks and bolts, a basket of bread, a pail of eggs, cakes and flowers. I put the cakes and flowers in her room. The flower shops were filled with flowers. No one was allowed to have more than one room – few had more than the corner of a room. They needed a few flowers, and rich cakes with layers of thick cream; twenty shops sold such cakes – cakes had never been so rich or so plentiful – every woman who could made them at home and sold them to the shops.

Carrying my case, I walked back to the hotel. I had a pleasant surprise. I had not expected to be allowed into my room, but the hall porter handed me the key. On entering,

I found her things lying about. There was no handle to the door of the room, so that, should I have closed it, I could not have opened it again. Someone knocked on the door and pushed it open: "Remember me?" I saw a young girl – I knew that I knew her well, and that she was someone I really liked, but I could not place her. Asking her to be seated, I went to my suitcase to fiddle about with its contents while I was trying to remember who she was. "How did you know I was here?" I asked. I remembered buying her flowers a few days before. "There are lots of things I should like you to explain – for example, the flower shops." She replied: "Flowers are good. Every office has a canteen. The hundredth trolleybus has been repaired. Thank you for the flowers. They are a great help." "And the man who cleans my shoes?" "Offices have canteens." She showed me hundreds of duplicated typewritten sheets. She handed me one. Her views were sane, but they were not her own.

I asked her questions. We had continually to change the place to avoid attracting attention. Carts hauled away rubble; these vehicles were long and narrow – wedge-shaped troughs – the sides were loose planks; the wheels had been taken from army lorries, as had the tyres, balloon tyres, and the ball-bearing axles. The standing figures, in groups of twos and threes, watched. She made some futile remarks about them. She was reading as she walked along, licking a finger tip, turning over a clinging page. It was late. The building was being cleaned and repainted – they were cleaning the high crystal windows. We discussed *Gone With the Wind*. I tried to attend. The crowd was too dense. I studied the outside of the buildings: house joined to house in a continuous row. The height of the rooms was eleven feet, and the floors were one foot thick – the houses were

dead and derelict fortresses; vitality in one or two rooms, warm and lit. This was the heat of the life of the town.

We sat on benches along the walls – the centre of the room had been cleared for dancing. We played draughts with the board between us on the bench. The dancing was due to start. I mentioned the songs. She said something to one of the others, who, immediately, but without interrupting his game, started a song. The girls sang as a choir, the boys played instruments. They broke off to gaze at me. A hurried talk, then three of them formed themselves into a row, and three stood behind them. By keeping close they made a compact group, their bodies rigid; they kept time with sharp marionette movements of hand and head. It was effective, even menacing, but I could not interpret it. I knew it portrayed something powerful, and perhaps reckless. She said that the choir prepared concerts for its own pleasure – it had never performed outside the building. While they were singing, she cut strips of coloured paper and stuck them onto a piece of white card. She made an intricate paper box: a square building freshly painted white. She talked to me. She had found some books belonging to her father – her trouble was where to hide them. It was not easily done. They had strict control over the bridge. She had taken the youngest and prettiest girl, and they had pretended. The books were stored and completely lost; she could not find where she had hidden them. She became hysterical. We moved to another room. The windows were holes in the walls; the plaster had fallen away; there were gaps in the floors. Her two brothers had been killed, her father had disappeared – she wanted to get back to a normal life. “I was mad with joy. I could not understand it. I thought they wanted to kill just as I

wanted to kill. After this I do not believe anything. My brothers were sent to work in the forests. I don't know where. I have not heard of them since." Forty people were jammed in the room – everyone was compelled to stand upright. They formed against the walls, leaving a small square free. Her group was to sing as a choir. There were nine of them. I had a special interest in them. There was some bustling in the next room, and from time to time the connecting door opened. Then it was flung open and she ran in, dressed in odd bits of coloured material and a few ribbons, in an effort to resemble a gay costume. She sang the same song and finished with an attempt to dance. She had shown great ingenuity in using coloured paper for her costume. She wore a coloured paper cap, and concealed her hands from everyone.

In the morning I found her with the children, carrying steaming pails of soup across the courtyard. I watched her cross the cobbled stone yard. The steam was dense. She was in charge of ladling out the soup, and could not be disturbed. The old woman told me that she could not be interrupted. Through a glass door on one side: the old woman in a black jacket, in the dim light of a box-like room, on and on – motionless body. She got up from her chair, opened the glass door and invited me to enter: "It is warmer here." I said I wished to speak to the girl. She needed help. "We give help," the woman replied. "We have a list. We make enquiries. We have had contests in swimming with eight hundred spectators." I said I had to see the girl on official business. I was informed that she was engaged: I would have to wait. There were several men there – they seemed worried, and whispered together. A man walked from the room. The woman spoke to me:

“What shall I tell her?” “Tell her I want to see her.” I heard a voice behind a closed door: “Who is there?” I went in. “This is no place.” The room was half a room, screened – two beds, a small table, a coke stove with a pan on top. “It’s too dark to read here. We have a window, but it is boarded up – the boards are warmer in winter.” I replied: “So far the winter has been mild.” “Twice I have lost everything. This time I hope I shall be able to keep what I have got. Nothing is going to be stolen from here.” She showed me the bread she had made. The walls were decorated with paper figures from fairy tales; the home seemed so rich with things of wood made by hand. “I am sorry I came so late,” I said, “and now I have come at an awkward time.” “I’m afraid I must break off this conversation.” “I hope I am not making things difficult for you. I know where you intend to go. It is a prohibited area. No foreigners allowed.” “I don’t need you. I can travel alone.” “They are at war. You have heard of their attempts to pacify.” “There are all sorts of rumours.” “How do you manage alone?” “It is difficult. I have to fight. I have to say to myself loudly and continuously that I can fight and win – I can save myself. When you failed to come, I sent a message that you were not to come back.” “What happened then?” “You came.” There was a bed with one thin blanket. We lay on the bed. “Show me your hands.” She held out her hands. I wore my coat. We discussed my proposal to visit the town where her father had last been seen. It was a question of transport, the state of the road, the actual condition of the surface of the road, the presence of bandits. Buses had been stopped and the passengers robbed.

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