

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Mark opened his eyes. At first he could see nothing that was familiar in the semi-darkness, but he could hear voices. Two men, at least two men, were talking, not English, nor French, nor Spanish, a language he was not familiar with and did not understand. A shot rang out, followed by another, and the voices came closer. They were somewhere above him and when he strained and moved his head he could just see the pale sky and two dark figures standing on the edge of the crater. He held his breath and wondered if they could see him. He realised they must be Moors and that the shots he heard were them dispatching wounded and dying comrades.

They seemed to stand there for an eternity, looking down upon him. Surely, any minute now one would take out his revolver and point it downwards and pull the trigger. He was helpless. He could barely move. To attempt to do so would be folly. Then one became animated and said something to the other and they disappeared. Shortly after another shot rang out, then a second more distant than the first. And blue sky gradually filled the spot where Mark had seen them first.

The sun arced its path across the sky and crept down to skulk behind the hills, ashamed of what it saw on the ground below it. From time to time Mark could hear voices which would approach, then recede. He did not again see anyone. When he had counted up to ten thousand without either hearing a Moor or having to start again, he concluded it might be safe to try and extricate himself. It was not easy, but the earth was soft and with patience he was able to scrape it away from beneath him and loosen the tree's grip. His initial reaction was to climb the hill and try and follow the road back to the City, but he recalled the advice he had given to Shaun and Phil and, anyway, the Moors were now between him and the front line.

So, slowly and not without pain from the wound in his leg, he cautiously made his way down the hill side until he reached the stream that trickled along its path in the valley floor. The water should have been crystal clear and pure, but in the failing light Mark could see that it was a sickly brown and quite undrinkable. He knew there was a small village upstream, on the road to Arganda. In all probability the Moors had overrun it and moved on. If he could reach it there might be shelter for the night and possibly food and water. He might even be able to find somewhere to rest before he tried to rejoin his comrades. At the worst he could hide in the woods.

A thin column of smoke reaching straight up into the still evening air indicated that the village was still inhabited. The smoke came from an outbuilding next to a low, white walled, red tiled, house standing beside the stream and situated a little way out of the village. It looked ideal, but first he had to wait and watch to see who was there. It could be Falangist soldiers for all he knew. Exhausted, he lay in a dry, shallow, ditch and tried to observe the house, but his eyes were heavy and sleep soon claimed him. Once or twice in his slumber he thought he heard voices, women's voices. Natacha was there, asking him to turn a page. Christina was there, asking him whether his paintings were now ready for the exhibition. He was at a loss for an answer.

It was a girl's voice that awoke him, young, thin and shrill. As he raised his head he caught sight of a slim figure, arms raised and waving above her head, running away, now disappearing into the white house. Seconds later an older woman with striking red hair emerged, grim faced, carrying what appeared to be a baseball bat. Mark thought that it was a rather strange vision, especially if it was to be his last.

They stopped some distance off and the girl, who followed the woman, clutching at her skirt, said something in Spanish to which the woman shook her head and answered her. Then, cautiously, bat raised, they advanced towards him. "Well, you're not dead!" she said suddenly.

"Thank God, you can speak English" said Mark, weakly. "Could you help me? I need food and shelter."

"Who are you?" the woman asked sharply, looking him over and keeping the bat

raised ominously.

"I?" he said, thinking desperately. "I got caught up in the fighting. I must try and get back to Madrid." There was a risk in saying this, but this woman, although she had a wild and agitated look, did not strike him as being a fascist agent or sympathiser. And he felt so tired that he was nearly past caring.

"You cannot get to Madrid," she snapped. Mark thought she sounded rather like a school teacher telling a child that he could not play his favourite game. "The Moors came through here yesterday," she spat, "looting, pillaging, raping and burning. Three of them took Maria. I never thought I would see her again. And I don't think you will get very far on that leg, anyway." She turned and said something further to the girl and then looked back at Mark. For a moment he thought she was going to tell him to go, or simply beat him unconscious. There was a ruggedness about her that convinced him she might be capable of such a deed. "It is all right," she said. "She thought you might be my husband and that you were dead. Anyway, you now have the Moors between us and Madrid, arresting and shooting any foreigner they come across. Can you speak Spanish? Not that would necessarily help. They are shooting a good number of Spaniards, too. There are bodies everywhere and overnight fresh ones appear. The locals call them *fiambres*. Maria thought you were one. Anyway, we had better get you indoors and into relative safety. Can you walk?"

Mark tried to stand but as he did the scene seemed to slip sideways and start to revolve. The pain in his leg was almost unbearable and he nearly called out. He heard the woman call "Maria!" as he started to topple forward. Then they were half dragging him, half carrying him, across the ground to the house, up the narrow stairs and into a small, low, room where he collapsed onto the welcoming surface of a bed.

"I am not sure just how long I can safely keep you here," she said when he next opened his eyes. "I have had a quick look at your leg and it needs dressing. I have removed as much of the wood as I can find, but I expect there'll be more when I cut off your clothing. I think it will be all right in the long term, but it could be a week at least before you can attempt to put any weight on it. And even then I would not like to guess how mobile you may be."

"A week? Madrid could have fallen by then."

"In which case we will have a whole new set of worries, and you should make straight for the coast or the Portuguese border. It will not be safe here in Spain. Not for anyone. Not even Americans."

"There are Americans fighting in the Brigades."

"I know. That is one of the reasons why I am concerned for my husband's safety. He has been gone several days now. I have to hope that he is trapped in Madrid and doesn't fall into Nationalist hands."

"How will you find out?"

"I do not know. The same way as the Spanish women, I suppose. You search the ditches and hedgerows, or go to the mortuaries. There is one in Arganda. I am surprised they have not set one up here, in Castellar de las Barras."

"Is that where I am?" murmured Mark, not really knowing where he was.

"On the outskirts, if you can describe the village as being substantial enough to have outskirts. There was a time when it sufficed to visit the mortuaries. Now the authorities have given up collecting the bodies. You will see the women walking around, looking aimlessly. If one is found, a crowd of them will suddenly gather to see if it is a loved one. It's usually the same thing. It is no-one you know, just some unfortunate brought out from the city, shot in the back of the head or garotted, and dumped. And it is essential to go out first thing, before the heat of the day. That is what Maria was about to do. We should both go shortly. You will be all right if I leave you? I will take another look at your leg when I get back."

It crossed Mark's mind that she could just be planning to go to the authorities and report his presence. But what could he do? He would not get very far on a leg that would not support his own weight. She must have read his mind because she smiled for the first time and said, "you don't have to worry about me. I am not about to turn you in or anything like that. And, by the way, I am Rebecca. Hi!"

"I am Mark," he said, managing a weak smile.

“Right, Mark, just you rest and we'll be back in two shakes. All right?”

He closed his eyes and thought of Natacha. He had been constructing a mental image of the chalet in which she had stayed and the Chateau to which she had been taken. He could see the shadowy picture of the Count, the village and its church, and of all the other things mentioned in the letter Michael had showed him. It was now his habit to wander through this imagined corner of France, always looking, always seeking an answer, always hoping that what he believed in his heart was not true. It was the draught which gently eased him into unconsciousness. It was the waking dream that wrenched him from his slumbers and propelled him back into reality.

“You were talking in your sleep,” she said, bending down and pulling back the single blanket that covered him. “This may hurt quite a lot.” Mark closed his eyes again as Rebecca cut off the leg of his trousers. Maria brought hot water and bandages. “Please be very brave now,” Rebecca whispered close to his ear. “I think that we have caught it in time, but this may be very painful.” It was.

The very next day, Mark opened his eyes to find Natacha standing at his bedside. “I had to come when I heard that you had been wounded,” she said. “This really is very careless of you, Mark! Who is now going to stand and turn the pages of the music. I cannot imagine that the Count will be prepared to do it and Miss Crotchet has a broken arm and it is in a sling. Can you imagine that? Anyway, I have been asked to give a recital for all the top Fascists. It is a great honour. Hitler and Mussolini will be there, and General Franco will also come if he can get away from his fighting. He has said that he will try. It depends if they meet their League of Nations quotas for civilians killed. Who arranged it? Don't be silly, my husband did! Yes! The Count and I are married! Oh, the tale about me falling out of the window? That was sheer fiction, just to get rid of that awful old crone who thought she was going to teach me how to play music. She teach me? That taught her! Anyway, I went upstairs and to the balcony, watching her creep through the shrubbery and out into the churchyard. Did I say creep? Skulk would be a better word to describe it. She skulked!”

“It was the Count's idea, the fall. We didn't think that you would have wanted to come to the wedding if all his right wing friends were going to be there. He is very Right Wing. Even my wedding ring has a swastika on it. Do you want to see? Here!”

“Does it hurt Mark? Falling out of the window didn't hurt at all! I expect that's why so many people were fooled by it. I think it only hurts if you live.”

“Don't try to follow me, Mark. Don't try to come up to the Chateau to find me. The Count and his friends enjoy the sport of kidnapping communists and setting them free in the woods where they go hunting. They hunt them instead of the boar and deer. I don't think I would like it if you were hunted as well.”

“Did you know that I am a Countess now? You could not have done that for me, could you? The most I would have become had I been foolish enough to marry you was a Lady but, then, you never did ask me, did you? Countess sounds much better, much, much better. La Comptessa Natacha de - I forget what it was! Never mind. It doesn't much matter. What does matter is that I am a Countess which makes me superior to you and your family and vastly superior to all the vassals. So, don't come and try and find me. You would not be welcomed.”

“I see that you have hurt your leg. The American woman says that it is badly burnt and perforated with deep splinters of wood. It will take weeks to heal. Do not believe her! She is only after your body having lost that of her husband. Maria says all men are rapists and is scared sick of you. I cannot imagine anyone being scared of you. Why did you pick the wrong side? Why have you suddenly become a traitor to your class? I do not understand why you have done this. I do not see why you could not have been true, like me.”

“I could never have married you, Mark. Not whilst you cling to your left-wing views. I could never have married a traitor.”

“Is your leg hurting? God has sent it as a punishment for your wickedness, for your betrayal of your family, your class and people. He is on the side of the Fascists. The Jews are the anti-Christ, not Hitler. There will be a new Inquisition in which all but the righteous will

perish. The Earth will be purged and cleansed of its scum. He will descend like a pestilence on the land, setting loose the Horsemen of the Apocalypse. And Death shall be upon all those who are not pure in blood and race. The Day of Judgement is upon us! Be warned, Mark. Listen and heed my warning less you perish with the rest, for perish they shall!"

"Here, sip a little water. Gently, now. Just one tiny sip at a time. The fever is passed."

"Where am I?" croaked Mark.

"You are exactly where you were three days ago."

"Where? Natacha! Is she here? She was saying such strange things to me."

"No," Rebecca said softly. "Natacha is not here. She has never been here. It was the fever. But you did mention her name a great amount whilst you were delirious. Is she your wife?"

"She was a close friend," he whispered.

"Was?"

"She died in an accident in France some months ago."

"And now you fell desolate and alone? I know how you must feel. I have still not heard anything of my husband. I have travelled to Arganda to visit that mortuary. Every day as I paid the woman in charge she has said that it was worse than the one before. She means, of course, that the authorities have brought in fewer bodies, but still the killing goes on. Now it's the Nationalists. Before it was the Republicans with their *paseo*. But no matter where I have looked, I have not found my husband. I may never find him but, then, if that is the case it is a fate I will share with many Spanish women. They came last night to Maria's house and took away her father and brother. I fear for their safety, too."

"Is there any news of Madrid? Has it held?"

"Rumour has it that it has. It is said that the Nationalists are trying to cut the Madrid to Valencia highway. I do not know if they have succeeded. Everything is confused."

"If Madrid has been held, I must get back there."

"You cannot!" she said sharply. "To attempt to at the present would be suicide. Apart from having to sneak past the Moors and the Italians, you must rest your leg. If you do not it will not heal and you might face a more serious problem. You must stay here until it has healed completely."

"Am I not a threat to you?"

"I think not," she said slowly. "As a precaution I have asked Maria not to tell anyone that you are here and to say that you are my husband and that you hurt your leg in an accident in the kiln if anyone does come. Can you turn crocks?"

"I don't think so," said Mark, puzzled. "Am I supposed to be able to do that as well as being married?"

"If you are to be my husband, you can. That is what we have here, a pottery."

Mark closed his eyes again and tried to marshal his thoughts. What had Natacha said when she visited him? This woman was only after his body? So now he was to play the role of a married potter as well as being a soldier, he whose only talent in life, other than painting, was to turn pages of music.

It was a further five days before he was able to lift the skirt of the coarse night shirt that Rebecca and Maria had manhandled him into and painfully negotiate his way down the narrow, uneven, stairs. "Hey, you should have stayed in bed!" was his greeting. "Here, let me help you. And do stay away from the window!"

He took her arm and gently lowered himself onto a chair which stood before a large wooden table. All around the room was lined with shelves packed with pots, urns, pitchers, vases, bowls, and pottery of every kind. "Some of our products," Rebecca announced. "It seemed such a good idea at first. Come over to Spain and open a field pottery. We exported most of our production to the US of A before the troubles started. And we did rather well, whilst the going was good. But now, well if it wasn't for Peter who said we should stay, though I don't know why, I would have packed up and gone back home."

"Do you paint your pieces, before glazing?" he asked.

“Sometimes, but neither Peter nor I have that steady a hand when it comes to it. Isn't that silly? We can turn a pot on a wheel to as fine a tolerance you could possibly desire - oh, don't worry, the eccentricity you can see is quite deliberate - but neither of us can paint all that well. Can you?”

“A little,” he said. “May I try? If I am to be stuck here it may take my mind off of things and it will be something to keep me occupied. Who knows, I may even earn my keep?”

“I wouldn't have thought you would be that good,” Rebecca declared and appeared doubtful at first. However, after a while she conceded and set him up with brushes, pigments, solvents and a few sample pieces. Mark happily spent the whole of an afternoon decorating a bowl in a Greek style from memories of one he had once seen in the British Museum. “Very impressive,” said Rebecca sternly. “I take back part of what I said, but you are hardly likely to be commercial at that rate.”

“I think it is rather good for a start,” said Mark defensively, holding up the bowl and rotating it. “And if you cannot get your products out of the Country at present, it might be better to go for quality rather than quantity.”

“It has quality, I will grant you that. But, actually, I was thinking more of getting me out of the Country rather than my goods.”

“What about your husband?”

She shook her head slowly. “I think that if he was coming back he would have been here by now. No, they have got him or he has got out. He cannot be in the Modal. I reckon I have joined the thousands of widows of Spain. That is all that this Country produces now, not pots or baskets, just helpless widows.”

Mark looked at her closely. She did not appear to show any signs of grief, just resignation. He wondered why, but decided not to ask. “Perhaps we had better both think about getting out of here?” he said.

“You should go as soon as your leg will carry you. There's talk of the Moors pulling back. I imagine that they will be less benign in retreat than they were when advancing. It might be best if you were not hereabouts when that does happen.” They agreed that it would be at least a fortnight before he could walk at all, and possibly a month before he was fully mobile. She was not sure that they had that length of time, but for the present he could paint, what he wanted, when he wanted and, she conceded, in whatever style he wanted.

“Tell me about Natacha,” Rebecca asked one morning as they sat together in the kitchen and watched the goose waddle in and out of the sun-drenched doorway.

“Someone I love,” said Mark. “Someone who died, or they say is dead. There are days when I believe them, and days when I don't. Everyday is a day when I do not wish to believe them. Why do you ask?”

“I think I told you, you mentioned her name repeatedly when you had the fever. I just wondered if you wanted to talk about her and what happened to her?”

Rebecca listened in near silence as Mark told her how he use to turn the pages of her music, how he painted her portrait, how she had asked him to go on holiday with her and he had made excuses why he would not, how he would never forgive himself for doing that, how she went on holiday without him and never returned. He went over the contents of the Count's letter and Miss Crotchet's account. And he explained his mission in life. “It is all I have left,” he said. “I will go and find her and discover the truth.”

“How sad and how moving,” she said softly when he had finished. “There is nothing I can say that will ease the pain except it is odd that we find ourselves in much the same situation. You do not know for certain whether the woman you love is alive or dead, and I do not know whether my husband is alive still. What a dreadful world we have made for ourselves to live in!”

Mark did not answer, but he did remember for a long time exactly what Rebecca had said.

“You said, I think, that you thought the Republicans have been every bit as bad as the Nationalists?” Mark said, one afternoon when he was engaged in the elaborate decoration of a

bowl.

“Did I? At times I think there is little to choose between them both in the words they use, in the actions they take, and in the effects they have on the people. There was a time when I would have taken sides and given my support, but no more. I suppose all civil wars are the same. We Americans ought to know. And what will come at the end of it? One side will win and suppress, by what ever means possible, the other. But it will not be Spaniard against some foreign foe. It will not provide a rallying call such as el Cid did against the Moors and unite the people. It is Spaniard against Spaniard and it is and will remain cruel and divisive until there is no more misery to go around.”

“But surely the Republican movement is the legitimate movement? That must count for something!”

“It might if they had been united and more accommodating towards those they sought to dispossess. But they were divided from the start. And it is their treatment of the people by which they and the Nationalist must be judged. It was the Republicans who created the *paseo*, who have littered the roads with *fiambres*. Visit Casa de Campo. In the woods there you will find all the evidence you might want of the way the Republicans treat their political opponents! I stress political, not military. The Nationalists do exactly the same thing only more efficiently. I have seen them turn up at day break in their large grey lorries and go through a village waking and detaining all the men, dragging them from their beds, telling their women that they were being taken to a camp or prison. It was pitiful to see the woman, half dressed, half asleep, and possessed with morbid terror, running out into the middle of the road with some hastily snatched personal possessions for their husbands, wrapped in a napkin, only to find the lorry had moved off. When I saw it first happen I could not do anything but weep with them and for them. Even now, just the thought as I picture their pathetic desperate faces as they sought comfort from each other brings me to the verge of tears. There is nothing to choose between them. They are equally as cruel and each has, as far as I am concerned, forfeited any mandate they might have claimed to govern. The whole thing is a wicked, wicked business which could go on for years and years. God knows how you stop something like this. Perhaps it goes on until there is no-one left to kill. Whatever, Mark, you should not go back to Madrid. You should not do any more that might prolong by a single second this awful war. You should leave the country and go and find your Natacha.”

He hung his head, feeling that he was as guilty as the men who drove the lorries for the Nationalists, or the cars that were used to collect the Republicans victims. “I cannot, at least not straight away. I must go back to Madrid and join my comrades. At the very least, I must find out if they have survived.”

“I understand your motives, Mark,” she said levelly, “but I think you are doing wrong, and the wrong thing.”

“Mark! Thank goodness you are still alive!” exclaimed Phil. “We had given you up for dead. Trust us to assume the worse and that you weren't going to make it. Poor old Shaun didn't, I'm afraid. One minute he was a few paces behind me, the next I was flat on my face and he was gone. But, what have you been doing all this time? Where have you been? Sit down - sit down and tell me all about it.”

“Shaun?” said Mark. “What about his parents? Will someone be informing them?” As he said it, Mark wondered for the first time how his mother and sisters would take the news of his death were it to happen. But he was not going to die, not yet. He had a mission.

“The authorities will. Don't ask me how, but they will do it. But about you? What have you been doing?”

“There is not a lot to tell. After you left me I had a tree fall on me. Then the Moors came through but mercifully they didn't see me otherwise I would have been shot like everyone else they found alive.”

“At least Shaun was saved that,” murmured Phil.

“Anyway, somehow my leg was injured. I don't know how, but I crawled out once they had passed and made my way to this place where this American runs a pottery. She - .”

“She?”

“She took me in and attended to my leg and looked after me until I was fit enough to return here - and, indeed, could.”

“Yes, we have pushed the Nationalists back again. But they'll be back, I fear. But, this American woman?”

“She thinks her husband may be here in the City. Either that or he is dead.”

“An American widow, eh? What was she like?”

“Youngish, with red hair, freckles, and blue eyes, slim, with smallish feature, high cheek bones and a long neck. Quite good looking, I suppose.”

“So there is no need to ask what you did all the time?”

“I painted pots,” said Mark defiantly.

“And what did she do?”

“She made them.”

Rebecca had done more than make pots. She had looked after him when he most needed it. She had been both nurse and mother to him during the period of his convalescence. For that, he was eternally grateful. It had crossed his mind that she might have wanted to become a lover, too, but he had been careful not to respond to the little, subtle, hints, or her gentle touches. He was careful because of Natacha, careful because he had no wish to take advantage of this angel who had nursed him and shown him such kindness and compassion. And careful in case he embarrassed both of them, or simply upset her.

Their parting had been horrendously difficult. There was something in her eyes, in her look, that made him wonder if she saw far more in their relationship than appeared on the surface. “You should not be here,” she said again as he stood in the doorway and lingered. “You should not be here at all.”

“I'm sorry,” he said, not knowing how to answer the question he thought she wanted to ask.

“Don't misunderstand me,” she said looking up into his face and bringing hers very close to his. “What I am saying is that you should not be here fighting in this war, you in particular. You are still a boy at heart, still innocent, and there are other ways of demonstrating that you are a man when the time comes. For you, and those like you, this is not one of them.”

“Are you asking me not to go back to my comrades and the lines?”

“Asking you? Yes - no! No, I would not do that as it could be for selfish reasons. You know how I feel about this fighting, but men and boys make their own ways in life heedless of the wishes of the women around them. How do your mother and sisters view what you are doing or the risks you are taking? But you make your decisions. If women made the decisions, none of this would be happening. There would be no war. What is there really to fight about? All we women can do is coax and counsel, and watch. And I have watched you, Mark. If a Moor came through that door now, could you really kill him? Could you take a knife from the drawer and plunge it into him? No, do not answer. I am not going to ask you not to go back. Nor am I going to ask you not to fight. But I would ask you never to stop thinking about why you are fighting, whether you should be fighting, and what the consequences will be, not just for you, but for those who survive and have to live here long after you have gone. I would also ask you one other thing. Will you, if you survive, come back for me? I will need to know that you are still alive and that all my nursing did not turn out to be wasted. I have lost one man. I do not want to lose another. Now go, before I become all sentimental and start to cry!”

Mark had dwelt on her words as he carried them on the journey back to Madrid, but he felt compelled to find an answer, a justification, for him being there, for the War. If there were tyrants, dictators and aggressors, men would fight. Men should fight. What other way was there? If there was a cause worth fighting for, men would fight for it. Here there was just such a cause. No, he told himself, Rebecca was wrong. He should be there. He should fight. Yet her words did not leave him, but continued to slip into his thoughts and undermine his stance. By the time he reached Madrid, he sensed he was losing the battle and it was only a matter of time.

“We stopped them again!” exclaimed Phil. “We halted them in their tracks. So much for the elite Africa Corps. One up for the proletariat! And we routed the Italians. Nothing gave me more pleasure than the news that they had turned and fled leaving all their vehicles and equipment behind them. They were no match for our glorious Russian tanks, or at least that's how our Company Commander appears to have described it. You can never be absolutely sure that the translator has got it right, but there was a resounding cheer when he said it. He also said the Chatos fighters are superior to the Junkers, so we are advancing on all fronts. But you should see the road to Valencia - did you come that way? It looks like a Nationalist scrapyard! Nothing can stop us now! Not now the full proletariat have been mobilised! There's talk of there being over one hundred and thirty thousand men in arms in the City! All we now is for Miajer and Pozas, our beloved Generals, to see eye to eye.”

“I am glad to hear that things have gone so well,” said Mark reservedly. “They will be back. Franco is simply regrouping and reinforcing.”

“And we will defeat them again! And again!” shouted Phil, triumphantly. “No matter how many times they come, we will repulse them and drive them back, back into the Mediterranean!”

Mark did not answer. He had doubts. He had seen how easily the Moors with their artillery had over-run their positions. Perhaps they could hold out in the City, for week, possibly months, but they would be like rats, trapped, huddled together with nowhere to escape. Perhaps they would repel attack after attack with their one hundred and thirty thousand men, watching this total dwindle as their comrades fell beside them. Some of Rebecca's words hung heavily upon him. Every repulse would strengthen Franco's resolve and that of his German and Italian allies who were always prepared to supple materials and men. Every demonstration of resistance would increase the urge for revenge.

In time Madrid would be surrounded and cut off from its supplies. What then? The city would fall and so would everyone left alive in it. It would pave the way for a degree of retribution and suppression on a scale not seen in Spain for over a century. Perhaps Rebecca was right when she said that the Nationalists had actually joined with the Communists and Anarchists in a crusade to purge the Country of its youth, its intellect and its hope. Here he was, part of that unspeakable conspiracy. Perhaps, quite simply, Rebecca was right.

He was suddenly gripped by an overwhelming urge to return to the small white house and the pottery and see her, to tell her that he had been wrong, that he had no business there, an Englishman setting out to kill Spaniards who were no direct threat to him, his family, or his country. How could he rightly see himself as any thing other than a mercenary, setting Spaniard against Spaniard, house against house, father against son, taking part in a war which threatened to plunge the peninsula back into the dark ages? Besides, he wanted to know that Rebecca was safe, to see the colour of her hair and her eyes, to hear her voice, and to feel her touch. There was no doubt about it. Mark now had two reasons to live.

Then there were the cases of the disaffected just laying down their arms and slipping away. He had also heard of deserters being shot upon recapture. Maybe it was easy for Rebecca to suggest he should leave. And there were the others on his platoon to consider. He wondered what the attrition rate was and how soon it would be before its effects were felt. Phil had said that the losses amongst the British had amounted to one in three during the latest campaign. Soon there would not be enough to fight.

“Don't be silly,” said Phil. “I told you that there's over one hundred thousand armed men defending the City facing no more than thirty thousand fascists. We can hold out indefinitely. Pozas is confident of it! Didn't you hear his speech?”

“Rebecca did not have a wireless. And I wouldn't have risked asking her to listed to Republican broadcasts with Nationalist troops all over the place. Anyway, she doesn't agree with us fighting this war.”

Phil nodded knowingly and closed his eyes. At least the figures quoted by Phil gave Mark some comfort. If he did decide to take the risk and follow Rebecca's advice and defect, his absence would have only a minimal effect. Who would miss one man in one hundred thousand? It would be one less to provision or supply with ammunition, although he had not

used much, having been lying in a ditch for most of the time at Jarama and held back amongst the reserves at Brunete. "Your time will come," said Phil, yet he had not fired a single shot when they were there, on the hill side. When he thought about it, everything pointed to him going, but he stayed.

"I have promised that I will go back for her," he told Phil.

"Promised who?"

"Rebecca, of course!"

"Oh, your red-haired American widow. You think that she will wait for you?"

"Presumably."

"And not leg it off with some spaghetti sucking General? They say Count Rossi insists on having a different woman every night. Come on, Mark, face up to it. She's probably gone already. And she may not be a widow, anyway. Her husband may be serving with the American Brigade, sat over there amongst them as we speak. Best forget the bitch."

Mark could not forget Rebecca. He now placed her next to Natacha in terms of importance and, in accepting Rebecca in this way, he finally and irreversibly accepted that Natacha was beyond his reach. It was not a choice that he examined or paraded, or turned over to see what was on the other side. Now he had seen death in all the manifestly horrid forms it could take, he accepted its existence and knew how it stalked the land cutting down victims regardless of age or worthiness. He now assented to the contents of the Count's letter and Miss Crotchet's account. The finality, the hopelessness, made the pain all the greater and increased his resolve to fulfil his mission. He would go and see her for the last time.

He thought of Shaun, the large, gentle, English-hating, Irishman, who had been beside him at Jarama and Brunete, who he had come to love as he had loved no other man, who had decided that the issues in Spain were more important than the recovery of the seven counties. Now he was dead. His kindness, his intellect, his wit, all the things that had been a manifestation of his existence, were gone. Shaun would never again breathe the cool clean air of the morning, or brush against the dew soaked grass, or feel the sun's rays touch and warm his skin, as he had done with Rebecca.

Oh, he now knew death. It had been easy to sit there, above the London offices of the Crimson Flag and plot the future and revenge against the Moselyites. He had no idea it would be like this, so real, so crushing, so brutal, so final. Now he was having to change his words into actions and make them speak louder. And still he could not answer Rebecca's question. What would he do, faced with an adversary?

"If you don't, they will kill you," said Phil. "Especially if its a professional soldier. They are trained to kill and you've got to stop them. Make no doubt of it, Mark. When you come face to face with them, it is kill or be killed."

It could be another Shaun, this man who was pointing a rifle at him and who he had to shoot. How could he? Everything pointed towards him going. Yet still he stayed.

And then it happened. It seemed to be sudden, without warning, without allowing him the time to prepare for the what might be seen as the inevitable. Barricades were going up in the streets and, like an incoming tide groping and seeping its way up a beach, they were there, moving from house to house, advancing through the suburbs. Mark found the situation almost surrealistic and he crouched behind the vehicles, carts and mattresses thrown hastily across the road near the University in the expectation that this could stop the ingress.

A deep sense of gloom and foreboding appeared to have descended on Phil who walked around muttering that this was "it", "the big one" or, more ominously, "the end". "We are commanded to hold this position," he reminded Mark, repeatedly. "Not to advance, or retreat, but stand here and die here. How long will we hold out against the German tanks?"

"You have repeatedly told me that the Russian ones are better," Mark said.

"So they are, but what have we got in support? One? Look at it! What will one do against a whole brigade?"

Tired and weary, yet greatly excited, the remnants of a platoon from the 6th Brigade joined them, having retreated under fire. Phil went over to find out what their situation was.

“They claim that we are virtually cut off,” Phil said, returning to their post. “They've already suffered heavy losses and, unless a relief column can reach us, all us are going to be wiped out here!” He looked around wildly as if he was seeking a way out, some magical portal through which they could step to safety and freedom.

“I cannot die,” Mark said aloud, but to himself. “Not until I have visited Natacha and found Rebecca. God, please bring me through this. Let me live so that I can do these things. Let me come through this then I am yours to do with as you, in your infinite wisdom, please.”

“Better pray to the Devil,” yelled Phil above the sound of the tank manoeuvring behind them, “I think your God has forsaken us as he did Shaun.”

Someone suddenly shouted and pointed. There, positioning himself at the corner of a building some sixty yards in front of the barricade, was a soldier armed with a bulky sub-machine gun. Bullets ripped into the barricade and flew over their heads, ricocheting in all directions off the tank. One ripped through Mark's sleeve and grazed his arm but he barely seemed to notice or care. The blood that seeped through his trouser leg came from the unknown man who had been standing next to him and who was now writhing in pain at his feet.

Their tank responded. The roar was deafening and Mark felt a gust of warm air as a shell hissed overhead and thudded into the wall of a building beyond the position of the machine gunner, ripping a hole through which a highly polished table and several dark green potted plants fell out onto the road. A second shell exploded against another wall yards in front of the soldier and when the smoke and dust cleared Mark could see his body sprawled close to the table. A muted cheer went up along the barricade but this died down when several figures were seen darting behind the debris and they started sniping.

Mark raised his rifle and fired his first shot in anger. He never knew where his bullet went or whether it found a victim because simultaneously the whole contingent at the barricade started firing at these targets as soon as they presented themselves. Several were seen to fall and be dragged off by other, but still the first lay amongst the remains of the potted plants. Phil appeared at his side, brandishing a couple of what looked to Mark like large iron hooks. “We are surrounded. There's fighting going on behind us. And they are bringing up their armoured columns. Can you hear them? Listen!”

There it was, squat, stained, straddling its steel abdomen across the middle of the road before them, a German tank. It was the signal for their tank to open up again. It was the signal for Phil to grab Mark's arm. “Come on, come with me. We haven't much time!”

“What are you doing,” cried Mark as he was half dragged towards a tanker which suddenly exploded in a ball of flame. The blast blew them off their feet and when Mark opened his eyes he could see Phil bending next to the lorry struggling with something that was sticking out of the road surface. The sight made no sense and Mark closed his eyes again, awaiting the inevitable.

“Come on!” yelled Phil, reappearing at his side and shaking his shoulder. “Quick! Give me a hand! It is our only hope!” With Mark's assistance a hole in the road appeared revealing a slime-covered, rusty ladder which led downwards into darkness. Mark could hear the sound of water running somewhere below. Another shell exploded on the pavement beyond the lorry as Phil disappeared into the hole. “What about the others?” Mark yelled as he picked himself up.

Phil's taut white face looked up at him. “Blow the others! Are you coming?”

Mark looked around him at the chaos, at the fallen, at the tank which was now on fire. He thought of Rebecca and Natacha. God was answering his prayer. The cover made a dull echoing thud as Phil slid it back above them. Then all was darkness.

Many hours later, weary, parched and hungry, they emerged into the light of a high, full, moon. For a moment the city appeared eerily silent, then somewhere far off the tranquillity of the night was broken by a short burst of gun fire.

“Have you any idea where we are?” gasped Mark, taking in lung-fulls of fresh air. Phil looked at the burnt buildings and wrecked cars around them.

“I would guess we have come South which means we are not out of trouble yet.”

“We are behind their lines?”

“It would appear so. They will have imposed their own curfew so we had better be very cautious and work our way from building to building. We must try and get out of the suburbs by daybreak. If we don't we will have to try to find somewhere safe to hide and that won't be easy.”

“There's no chance of getting back to our forces?”

“Are you mad? No, we are out of this war, but we are not out of danger, yet. Come on!”

Mark longed to see the open fields and trees, and to come to the end of the gutted shells and heaps of rubble that they had to dart between. The first rays of dawn, which should have brought hope, only effused them with despair. “There!” Mark said, pointing. “Make for the church. We should be able to hide there.”

It stood, gaunt, partly roofless, long, black, stone fingers reaching upwards from its glass-less windows. Inside all was desolation. The remains of the pews, which had been piled in the middle of the aisle and set afire, were still smouldering. Every statue and image had been taken down and smashed. The font lay on its side and the altar had been overturned and propelled down the communion steps. Yet there was still holy water with which Mark crossed himself. “Is nothing sacred?” he whispered. “Do they have to destroy God's house as well?”

“I told you to make your pact with the Devil,” hissed Phil. “If he exists, he is the one who is winning. Anyway, don't jump to any hasty conclusions. This looks more like the work of Anarchists and they've done far worse than this. Perhaps the priest was a Nationalist? Let's find somewhere to sleep.”

They were able to force open the door of the sacristy and crept below a table, pulling some of the debris back around them to conceal their presence. Phil was soon asleep, but Mark fell into a twilight world, somewhere between sleep and consciousness, a hyper world where he dreamed yet was still aware of the sun as it probed the corners of the room through the narrow window. Suddenly there was a dark bearded figure kneeling beside him, resting a reassuring hand on his arm, gently restraining yet comforting. “Do not be afraid,” said a deep voice. “I watched you enter. I have brought you bread and water which I have blessed. Take it and be refreshed. I shall watch over you and you will be safe here, for the present.” Then he was gone.

“It was a priest,” Mark whispered as he handed bread to Phil. “I am sure that I did not dream it. Anyway, here is the proof.”

“Whoever or whatever it was, it was a bleeding miracle,” declared his companion.

Their parting came early next morning when, in full moonlight, they reached the outskirts of the city and open countryside. Mark's arm was painful and had started to fester. Phil was beginning to limp from an injury he thought he received from shrapnel when the lorry exploded. “Perhaps we should think of giving ourselves up?” Mark suggested. “We might get some medical care.”

“Are you crazy? To whom? The Fascists would just take us out and shoot us. They have their own injured to worry about. No, we will have to keep on until we reach safety or find our own forces.”

“I've to go and look for Rebecca,” murmured Mark.

“And that's sheer madness, too! All that area must be in the hands of the Nationalists. You will have no chance, none at all!”

“I've still got to do it. I said I would!”

“In which case, this is where we must part. I wish you good luck and all the help that this God of yours can give you, Mark. You'll need it! Perhaps if we make it through this we can get together in London and have a few beers?”

There was nothing to write on, nor nothing to write with. Mark told Phil his address and Phil said he would remember it. Mark doubted that he would. Then he was gone, limping away down the road, clinging to the hedgerow. Mark hesitated, watching the ghostly figure grow smaller until it merged into the shadows and could not be distinguished any more. There was a temptation to run after and join him. After all, he owed his life to this man, but he had

promised Rebecca, a promise he had made before he was placed under any obligation to Phil. Eventually he turned on his heel and started off in the opposite direction across an open field. It was dangerous and foolhardy, but Mark was seized with the conviction that he was destined to find his way safely to the pottery. He did not know how he found the desolate wooded hill where the three of them had lain in the hole in the ground, and where Shaun had fallen. From that spot, as the first fingers of dawn clutched at the sky and drew back the night, he descended into the valley, for he knew the way. In anticipation and mounting excitement he followed the course of the small, crystal-clear stream which had once run blood-red. In half an hour, perhaps slightly longer, he would be there, secreted in the relative safety of the pottery and once more in the care of his American widow.

A black-frosted priest stood up and approached with a look of suspicion as he paused in the church doorway and crossed himself. "Monsieur?" he said.

"Je cherche Mademoiselle Bernstein, Mademoiselle Natacha Bernstein. Est ce que elle est ici?"

At his question a tall, dark-haired, man, who had been kneeling at the communion rail, stood and turned, frowning. At his approach the priest bowed slightly and deferred. "Vous êtes Anglais?" he said. "Eh, bien. I speak perfect English. I was educated at Oxford. But you, Monsieur? You ask about Natacha? What business could she have had with you, or you with her?"

"I am - was a close friend," Mark said, looking beyond the man as if there might be clues as to where she might be.

The Frenchman looked him up and down with obvious disdain. "And you have then come to pay your last respects?" There was a note of hostility in the voice, an edge that Mark detected but did not understand.

"I understood that she is here," he said, still looking around at the Stations of the Cross.

"She is," said the man, reverently. "She is laid to rest in my family crypt."

"Your family crypt! Oh, I am sorry. I did not realise! You must be the Count, the Count de Manienne."

"I am the Count de Manienne, but there you have the advantage of me. Just whom am I addressing?"

"I am Mark - "

"Mark! Of course!" exclaimed the Count. "Mark! M-a-r-k! It all is clear now. It is all so very clear, now!"

"I am sorry but I am not with you. What is?"

"Look," said the Count, resting his hand on Mark's shoulders. "When you came in and I first saw you I thought you were some tramp or vagabond, maybe a gipsy. You have obviously travelled a long way and had a most arduous journey. Come back with me to the Chateau. Let me provide you with fresh clothes and refreshment, and a hot bath. Then we can talk, because we do have much to talk about, you and I. And, after we have talked, we can come back here and you can see and be with her. Will you come with me, as my guest?"

Mark nodded his assent and, still on the Count's arm, stepped out into the sunlight.

"I was sat here, in this very chair, when I heard her fall. I cannot describe the sound as she struck the pavement. There is nothing quite like it in the World. And I cannot describe the feeling of desperation and morbid terror which overcame me as I struggled to stand and go outside, suspecting, fearing the worst, yet hoping and praying, pleading with God to turn back time and give us all another chance. I never want to go through it again, although I do, in my dreams, in my nightmares. And I have tried so hard to remember the seconds before, the last moments when she was alive. I am sure that I heard a little delicate "oh", an expression of shock, of utter disbelief. I have no doubt that it was a dreadful, dreadful accident. I am convinced that she did, at no time, intend to take her own life."

"Your letter said that there had been an earlier accident, that she had been burnt. How serious were the burns?"

“The Specialist who came from Paris, one of the leading men in France, said he could not tell for certain what the long-term effects would be. He would not begin to predict whether her playing would be affected. Obviously there was a possibility, but we kept that from her. We never discussed it before her, or within her hearing. He said it depended on how deep the damage went and how well she healed and responded to therapy afterwards. Of course, now we will never know.

“She was still alive when I ran out to her. I couldn't believe it and I thanked God for every precious second that he allowed her to stay with me. I felt so helpless, so wretchedly helpless, having to kneel there, cradling her head and watch him take her from me, watch the life ebb out of the one person I loved more than anyone else in the World. If I could have done anything, if I could have exchanged positions with her and given her my life, I would have done so, a million times over. Instead I had to kneel there and share her pain, and do nothing.

“I told you in the church that it now all made sense. When she was there, dying, she said one word several times, faintly but quite distinctly. It did not make sense and I did not understand what she meant, but I said “yes”, “yes”, to comfort her. Now I do understand. It was your name that she was repeating. She died with your name on her lips, not mine. I would envy you that privilege, but to do so would dishonour her memory.

“I wanted her to marry me. I offered her everything that I could think of to entice her to accept my proposal, this house and gardens, my title, prestige, honour, great wealth. There were moments when I thought she might accept, but there was always something that seemed to hold her back, something in the background. Now I realise it was you.”

“I would willingly have married her,” said Mark softly, “but I do not think that it was me who stopped her from marrying you. I think it was her career. Did you hear her play?”

“I heard her at Nice. That is where I saw her first. She came onto the stage and I was captivated before she as much as laid her hands on the keys. She should have been placed first. I have no doubt that she won the competition hands down, but the judges - pah! And then she came here and played, filling the house with such a sound that you could have cried with joy.”

“I used to turn the pages of the music for her. She told me I was quite proficient at it.”

“Ah,” said the Count, smiling, “I regret I was never afforded such an honour.”

Mark related his experiences in Spain, of the shelling and his escape from the Moors on the hill side, of his painful journey along the bed of the valley, and of Rebecca. Of his departure from her and his return to the City. Of the hours spent in the darkness and stench of the sewers. And having to wade waist deep through the effluent, of having to pick his way with his companion through rotting piles of dismembered corpses. Of the perilous journey out of the city and the assistance given them by the unknown priest. Of bidding his companion farewell and making his way across countryside to the pottery. And, of what he found there.

The Count listened in silence, nodding or shaking his head at appropriate places. “It is a terrible business, a civil war,” he said suddenly. “People will unite against an external foe, but in an internal conflict no-one knows who the enemy really is. So it can be used as an excuse for settling old scores, enmities, jealousies and vendettas. People become motivated by greed and vengeance, or by sheer power, and then try to conceal it with a respectable religious, political or moral cloak. We saw this all too well in France, and your Rebecca's forebears would have experienced the same during the American Civil War. And then what follows? Another regime no better than the first. It is as though the kettle has boiled itself dry on the stove in a desperate effort to rid itself of its water. But having done that, what then happens? Along comes the cook and fills it with water and it is back where it started again!

“Fortunately we are somewhat isolated from all these kind of events up here. Governments come and go, Countries even, but all of this passes my family and people by. We pay our taxes and dues, of course, and affirm our loyalty. But in our way we have a small corner of paradise, and that was what I offered Natacha. However, we must return to you and your account. What do you think happened at the pottery?”

"I do not know," said Mark. "I have gone over it time and time again in my mind. When I got there the house and outbuildings were completely gutted and there was no sign of Rebecca nor Maria. The kitchen was knee deep in smashed pottery and other debris, but no matter how hard I looked, I could find none of that I had painted. That raised my hopes as I imagined that she had escaped safely and taken the pottery with her. Then I went back outside and saw, for the first time, a long mound of earth. It clearly was a grave, relatively freshly dug. I agonised over it for quite some time, tormented by the thought that I had found her, but hoping that the occupant would be someone other than my Rebecca. I knew that if I left without knowing the truth, I would regret it for the rest of my life. I had to know who was buried there!

"After a search I found a spade and started digging. Anyone who had come along might have thought I was mad as I started by going at it in a frenzy! But all I found was pieces of pottery, painted pottery, pottery I had painted! I removed the first pieces carefully as none was broken. Indeed I soon realised that it was all neatly stacked. There was no body there. Someone had simply buried all of the pottery that I had painted. I replaced it all and covered it again. At a nearby shack I found an old woman who - although my Spanish still is none too good, I think I understood her drift - who told me that troops had come through the area and had burnt virtually everything that would burn. They had spared her in deference to her age. When I asked about the American woman, she just shrugged."

"But you think that there is hope?" asked the Count.

"I would like to think that Rebecca buried the pottery and made her escape before the troops reached there. That was her way of telling me that she had left. But I sometimes wonder whether I am deluding myself. She could have still been caught almost anywhere."

"Will you look for her? She could still be in Europe and America is a large country."

"I would if I had something to go on. But all I know is that her name is Rebecca and that she comes from the State of Wisconsin. It seems absurd that I never learnt her surname, but these things happen, I suppose."

"But you will try and find your Rebecca," said the Count. "I know you will. I can hear it in your voice. And I wish you luck, with all my heart."

They stood side by side, together, in the crypt, staring at the brass plate on which were inscribed the cold, lifeless, inadequate words, "Natacha Margaret Bernstein".

"Margaret was her mother's name," said Mark softly. "She never liked to be referred to by it. I don't know why."

"You think it should not have been put on the plaque?" asked the Count anxiously.

"I do not think for one moment she would mind. Not at all. I think she would be grateful, if anything."

"Do you want to see her. There is a glass observation port, here. She has been embalmed and she may remain as she was in life for many years."

For the last time Mark looked down on that pale angelic face that had so often been radiant with laughter and joy. Now she looked peaceful and at rest, simply asleep, not dead.

"Will you leave her here?" asked the Count. "I come every day to see her and pray for her soul. I think she is happy and at peace here."

Mark hesitated, as if he expected her to give him a signal, an answer. It was the last thing he would do for her. From this point on he had to start his life again, go forward into a new future without his Natacha. "I would, I think," he said, and felt a pang of guilt as he thought of Rebecca. "I am not being unfaithful to you, Natacha," he thought. "I will love you until the end. But I also found someone else who I think I can make happy whilst I serve out my mortal sentence. Please forgive me." He stepped back and the Count closed the wooden flap. "Yes," continued Mark. "I do not think that she should be disturbed now."

"Thank you. Will you convey these views to the family? You may tell them that she is at peace, loved and mourned. That is all that is left to us, to fill our remaining empty days with mourning. Life can never be the same again."

They stepped out into the sunshine and made their way to the churchyard. "What do

you plan to do now?" asked the Count. "Will you go back to Spain?"

Mark shook his head. "I think I will go home now."

"You are welcome to stay here with me as a guest, for as long as you wish."

"No," said Mark reflectively. "It is very kind of you to offer, but I think I should go home. I have been away too long."

"Will you return?"

Mark looked back at the church where so many of his previous hopes for the future lay interred. "I don't think so," he said quietly.

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