

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“How do you spend your time up there in Norfolk?” asked Christina. “There cannot be very much to do, surely?”

“There isn’t all that much to do under the present circumstances. There won’t be until we go back into Europe and there is no saying when that may be. Of course I could be re-deployed. I must admit I have been half-expecting that. Possibly onto bomb damaged buildings in this Country.”

“So what do you do when you have nothing to do?” she persisted.

“Well, I’ve now got the team saving the church at Swotham. It was bombed by the RAF in error, though I doubt that I am supposed to tell you that. It is supposed to have been hushed up.”

“There’s certainly been nothing about it on the news or at the cinema. But bombed? In error?” Christina’s eyes flashed.

Michael nodded and swallowed. Why should he feel guilty? Yet he did. “The pilot pressed the wrong button in the cockpit. He was supposed to be taking photographs but somehow he bombed it. They have now put large, prominent, labels on the buttons now, saying BOMB and PHOTO.”

“I should think so. Was anyone hurt?”

“No. The pilot brought the plane back safely.”

“Don’t be an ass, Michael. I am not talking about the pilot. I am talking about the civilians. I don’t give two-pence for your pilot.”

“Well you should. They are a lot rarer than civilians.”

“It’s their job to get killed.”

“I wouldn’t let anyone hear you talking like that,” said Michael, horrified. “They might think you were an enemy sympathiser.”

“But it is their job, isn’t it? It is not like being a milkman or a postman. Anyone in the armed forces is there to fight and, if it so happens, be killed in the line of duty.”

“He wasn’t fighting, this pilot, it so happens.”

“He was acting in the line of duty, I assume,” snapped Christina.

“I suppose you could say that,” conceded her husband. “And, in answer to your earlier question, no one was hurt. Fortunately the church is a little way from the village. It is built on the only area of raised ground for miles around. It appears that the builders thought that the village should flood before the church did. Anyway I sent my team in to secure the remains and tidy things up. And they made a pretty good job of it, I must say.”

“So, that is what they do. What do you do?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I just wondered. I am down here doing all manner of voluntary service to help the war effort, driving lorries, distributing food, helping evacuees and the homeless. I just wondered what my husband was doing whilst all this was going on.”

“Is it bad, down here? I mean, it is difficult to judge up in Norfolk. I know that our pilots have given Jerry a good bashing, but - - .”

Christina sighed. “It is bad. It is worse than ever I could have imagined. If you want to see how bad it is, go out to the St Paul’s area, or down to the East End, around the docklands, or Bermondsey. And when you look at the ruins, most of which are far beyond the kind of help that your team could give to them, remember that these were people’s homes, containing all their worldly possessions, the sum total of their life’s work. You could talk to the families who huddle in the Underground every night, trying to get some rest and not knowing what they will find, if anything, when they come to the surface again in the morning. I sometimes wonder if there will be anything left at all when this is all over. Is it bad, you ask, Michael? It is dreadful!”

“I am sorry,” he said, hanging his head. Somehow she had made him feel guilty about it, as if it was his responsibility, his alone. But there were so many things which, as a result of his action or inaction, were his responsibility in the eyes of his wife, things she would remind

him of from time to time. "So you are not writing at present?" he asked.

"I have been asked to write a number of radio plays," she said, a little brighter. "Something to do with the war effort but they have to be bright and uplifting; the right kind of stuff, of course."

"And you think that you are safe staying here, in London?"

"I do not think I am safe. I do not feel at all safe. Each time a warning sounds and I scurry off to the shelter I wonder if I will ever hear the All-clear again."

"You could go down to Newington."

"I could not. I would feel that I was running out on the people who have no alternative but to stay here, and I am not sure that it would be any safer down there. It is a lot closer to France and the Germans have a nasty habit of flying across the Channel to machine gun or bomb East Kent. Anyway, Mama has a load of Canadian officers billeted on her. It is better that I stay here."

"I am sorry," repeated Michael. "I do not know what else to suggest. There isn't really anything I can think of doing."

Christina looked away and did not answer. Michael was not certain as to what else he could say. He could not bring himself to admit that he had little to do when he was on the Base and that he spent most of his time writing and drawing together his book. "There is the question of Mark's studio," she said suddenly, standing with her back to him. "Someone should go and see what is there and sort matters out."

"He did ask me to do that. Do you want me to go during this furlough? There isn't all that much time and I do not know what it will entail."

"It has waited this long," she said coldly. "I suppose it can wait a little longer."

"Now that we've finished the second row of arches and buttresses it would be a good idea if we put back part of the roof. It would give the men somewhere to shelter when it is raining."

"What are we talking about, Peterson? The Swotham church or the Abbey?"

"The Abbey of course. We followed your instructions to the letter concerning the church, going in, propping up, and clearing up. It took a lot of doing but it all looks very neat and tidy now, I may say."

"Yes, yes," said Michael impatiently. "I've seen what you did. I just wanted to be sure what we were talking about."

"You see, I reckon we can get all the necessary wood and other materials and it will give our chippies a chance to working on something more sophisticated than struts and props."

"All right," said Michael, anxious to get back to his work. "Do what you think is required."

"They really have made a good job of the arches and the walls. All the mouldings and cusps are back in place. It looks like new. You really should come up and see it."

"Where on earth did you learn terms like that, Peterson?"

"McMahon taught me them. He appears to be quite knowledgeable."

"Evidently."

"Will you come to see it?"

"When I have time."

"I have called you in to see me, Bernstein, because I am receiving a rather large number of rather rum complaints from civilians and investigations have shown that it is not my chaps at fault. I can understand the whole of the lead disappearing from the roof of Swotham church. It was probably the handiwork of some light fingered scrap metal dealing thief. I do find it far more difficult to understand why someone should remove most of the roof timber."

"Have they, Sir? Perhaps they were damaged in the bombing?"

"I have read your initial report which makes it plain that most of the roof remained intact when it fell in. And it is not just the roof. Apparently, according to the vicar a number

of Army trucks turned up and took away a large amount of the stone from the tower and walls.”

“I think that must have been part of the clearing up exercise, Sir. We did set out to leave it tidy.”

“Tidy? Apart from blowing the church up, half of it has now disappeared off the face of the earth! And whilst I am on the subject of blowing it up, I believe you had some kind of a hand in that?”

“No, Sir, it was nothing to do with me.”

“And are all these other reports I receive something to do with you, then? Pig sties disappearing overnight, stone walls and barn sides carted off. I suppose none of that has anything to do with you or your team of tidyers?”

“I suppose some materials may have been requisitioned to help the war effort.”

“Requisitioned? Requisitioned? When we requisition things we use paperwork. Paperwork, Bernstein! That shows that we have some authority and also means that the person whose property has been requisitioned will eventually get paid some compensation. We do not descend on farmers like a pack of wolves in the middle of the night. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Sir,” said Michael.

“I don't know who you were or how important you were in civvy street. None of that counts one iota here. It is bad enough to have you and your non-combatants under my command without you pillaging far and wide and causing me all this trouble. It will cease forthwith. Do you understand? We've got a war to run, in case you'd forgotten.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Anyway your chaps won't have much opportunity to ravage the countryside as I understand that we are all moving up shortly. In the meantime I want to hear that they are doing something useful and warlike. I want them on the rifle range at 06.00 hours tomorrow. You included.”

“But, you said yourself, we are non-combatants.”

“Rifle range, 06.00 tomorrow, Bernstein. Be there. That is all.”

Michael went to find Peterson. “The C in C says that we are moving up and wants us to get some target practice before we do. Tell the lads they are to be on the range at 06.00 tomorrow.”

“But we are non-combatants,” complained Captain Peterson. “We didn't join the Army to fight. None of us did.”

“And when you are faced with a Gestapo officer crazed with blood lust and intent on blowing your head off you propose to tell him that you are a non-combatant?”

“I didn't think that we were supposed to come to face with any Germans of any rank.”

“You never know. I agree with the C in C. We could be cut off, or there could be a small pocket that had not been flushed out in the sweep up. You can imagine them all coming out of hiding in a crypt or climbing down from a church tower. We have to face such a possibility and be prepared for such an eventuality.”

“What about the Abbey?”

“I suppose we had better go up there and clear away all the equipment. It shouldn't take very long.”

“It will take several days. If we are moving up it would be better if we concentrated on that and preparing the equipment rather than rifle drill.”

“Maybe so,” said Michael, “but the C in C said target practice, so target practice it is. Spread the word.”

The news of the Normandy landings brought Michael's heart into his mouth and filled him with anticipation. How long had they been stuck there, in Norfolk? Two years? Two years of waiting, kicking his heels, assembling his book, waiting for something to happen, trying to keep his small troop happy and occupied.

He sat down and wrote to Christina. She would know that the landings, if they gained a foothold, if they drove the German army back, inevitably meant that he would follow in

their wake. Whatever it was that he was to do for the war effort and for the better world that would follow as a result, was about to now start. He pictured her, first sat at her writing desk writing patriotic works for the BBC. Then he saw her, grim faced but trying to be soothing, tending to the wounded or serving in a soup kitchen. He supposed that she did all these things that she said she did, this wife that he rarely went to see and rarely thought about. Perhaps Peterson and his men had noticed it. Perhaps they talked about it, the fact that his furloughs down to London had become increasingly infrequent. Perhaps they surmised that there was trouble at home and whispered amongst themselves. The plain truth was when he went home Christina was usually committed to her good works and when she was not they seemed to have nothing to talk about. They had grown like two strangers who might occasionally meet in the foyer of a hotel, or on a train. They would exchange pleasantries but there would be no depth to the conversation which flowed between them, no intimacy, no feeling for the other.

He had gone down to London after the house in Belgravia had been destroyed. It had been a very large bomb, they told him; a direct hit. No-one in the house at the time would have know what happened. Michael had stood outside in the road, contemplating the pile of bricks, stone, timber and mortar, and felt sorry when he thought of how it had once been. It was virtually all destroyed. The piano that Natacha had played and on which Mark had turned the pages of the music lay buried there, somewhere. His father's study, which had for so long been a source of terror, was no longer recognisable. He might not feel sorry for that, but he did for Sophie whose precarious life with his father had seemed to hang by a slender thread which had now been cut by another's hand. He thought of his father, but without emotion.

"Some real toffs lived there," said a voice at his elbow. It was a road sweeper, bent, dirty and wizen. "It is good to see that ol' Hitler's bombs fall on them as is well off as well as then who is not," he went on. "Does us a power of good."

"Yes," said Michael sadly, still studying the ruins, feeling there might be comfort in a misery shared.

It was during that visit to London that Michael had taken the key and made the long postponed trip to Mark's studio. He was somewhat apprehensive and fearful as to what he might find when he opened the door. He recalled Mark's abject refusal to go back there once he had returned from Spain and some of the enigmatic things his brother-in-law had said. But, then, he had also said that Michael would know what to do when he did go there. He was relieved to find the door still locked and showing every evidence, if the copious cobwebs were to be believed, that it had not been opened for a considerable time. The air was stale when he unlocked it and went in. At first sight there was nothing untoward. The room was stacked with canvasses, dusty, cob-webbed, all turned to the wall so that he could see only their backs. When he selected one at random and turned it to face the light he received a mild shock. It was a painting of Natacha. Michael spent the next two hours in the studio, examining the paintings one by one before reverently locking the door once again and returning to Bloomsbury.

"Well?" demanded Christina.

"The studio is full of paintings," he reported. "I counted some one hundred and twenty finished canvasses and there must be a dozen incomplete works. But all there are, are paintings of Natacha, in every conceivable pose, with every conceivable expression, in different lights, different clothes, against different backgrounds. All he painted over those years when he was in there painting was Natacha. Nothing else. There was no other subject there, no bowls of fruit, landscapes or seascapes. Just my sister. It was as if he was trying to achieve perfection from this one subject, almost a quest for the painter's Holy Grail. I have brought one home with me to replace that lost at Belgravia. It is finished although it was still on the easel. I think it must have been his last work."

"I don't want it hanged here," said Christina coldly.

"No? Then I will arrange for it to be sent down to Newington. I am sure that your mother will be pleased to hang it."

Perhaps when he now thought of London it was the vision of all the canvasses, all the portraits of his sister, stacked against the walls in Mark's studio, that came to mind. He had left them much as he had found them, turned, face to the wall. What now to do with them was

an unwelcomed intrusive burden which often assumed a greater degree of importance than the military tasks he was called upon to perform. Something had to be done with them, eventually. He could not bring himself to destroy any of them. He could not necessarily rely upon German bombers to undertake the task for him and, anyway, he recalled Christina's comments about people losing their life's work when they were bombed out. The contents of the studio were Mark's life's work and appeared to be testimony to his unrequited love.

And what of his own unrequited love? What had he to show for it? Only dim, distant, memories, thrust deep to the back of high, out of reach, shelves in dark, inaccessible corners. Perhaps the Nazis would take care of his problems, too.

"I had better make an inspection of the Abbey," he told Captain Peterson. "I haven't been up there for weeks and as we are pulling out I'd better see what has been going on and check that everything is safe. We wouldn't want some civilians to come to harm, would we?"

"Very well," said Peterson. "I will alert the men."

They were all standing there, smart and to attention, on a sunny mid-summer day, smiling, looking pleased, forming a guard of honour as their Major came to inspect the three arches they had restored, or so he thought. "Have we come to the right place?" he demanded as the jeep stopped. "This isn't how I recall it. What the devil had been going on?"

"Well," said Peterson slowly, "once we had restored the second row of arches and the wall arcades, then roofed over the area - McMahan thinks it was the refractory - we decided we would tackle something more difficult, such as the wall tracery to the chapel itself. You can see that we had moderate success. We would have done the whole of the cloisters too, except we couldn't find the right kind of marble or, at least, we couldn't find it in places from which we could extract it. You will see that we were able to restore some of them. What do you think?"

"I am almost speechless. Pray to God that the C in C does not find out!"

"Had we the time and the right materials we could have done much more. It is very rewarding. Even Foster found it so. Oh, yes, we did take one liberty."

"Only one?" said Michael thinking of pig sties, farmers' walls and the church that had once stood, proud and elevated, at Swotham.

"We put you up there, see, in the middle."

Michael smiled. "I see. I assume that McMahan has taken his rightful place, too?"

"Yes. Up there, at the end. We are all up there. What ever we may do on the Continent, we have made our mark here. Future generations will come and look and wonder who we were. We will be part of the folk-lore. Of course, you could include the Abbey in your book."

"Not for a while I couldn't."

As he strolled through and between the restored buildings, Michael thought of Newington and wondered for moment whether he would be happy to have the ruins restored in this way. Maybe not, he decided on reflection. Better to leave them as they were, resting peacefully and quietly in the countryside, gradually decaying. He had not been to Newington for years. Christina had mentioned the Canadians there. Perhaps they were restoring the ruins or pulling them down. There was a pang of anxiety in response to the thought and he said a silent prayer that they should be left intact and not adulterated. "I am very impressed," he said. "In fact, I am astounded."

"You are pleased?"

"I am overwhelmed."

"It is one of our missions to improve the cultural life that people can enjoy after the War is over. I think that we are leaving a legacy here which may do that in a small way."

"I think we have," said Michael.

"Where the hell are we? And what is this place? Doesn't anyone know?" Michael had just woken up after falling asleep in the back of the jeep. "Have we been going around in circles?"

Captain Peterson was studying a map. "Well, we are still in France," he said, "unless

we have crossed into Belgium.”

“I can figure that much out, Peterson.”

“And I am not exactly sure where, but I thought this looks like a likely place to bivouac down for the night.”

“What does? What is - was it?”

“At a guess it was a hotel or country club, if they have such things here.”

“And it is safe? There's no Germans hiding in there?”

“Foster and Branson are checking it out now. It looks as if it is now entirely deserted although the Hun have been here. That's not hard to see. They've left nearly everything behind.”

Michael looked to the northern horizon. “Judging by the noise up ahead we cannot be too far behind the front line.”

“About fifteen miles I would say. We ought to be all right here.”

“Right! Sort me out a room and get someone on the RT to find out where we are and where we are supposed to be. Are there any beds?”

“There's beds and linen, and showers with running water even if it is cold.”

“Thank God for that,” said Michael wearily. “All we seem to do is spend all day driving from one barn to the next, all over the place, and never get anywhere in the bargain. You say that the Germans were here?”

“Not only here, it may have been a local command post. There appear to have left in a hurry. We might as well make ourselves comfortable with the things they've left behind, unless you fell squeamish about doing that.”

“Squeamish? The way I feel I would make myself comfortable if it had been just vacated by the Devil.”

“Right! I'll sort you out a main bedroom and I'll get Foster to organise some food. If there's any left he'll find it.”

“You had better ask him to taste it before he serves it up, just in case the Germans have laced it with something. And make sure my room is on the dry side. Just in case it starts raining again.” In the gathering dusk, Michael could make out the hole in the roof where a shell had penetrated, scattering tiles and splitting rafters. It had exploded in the roof space, removing one side, and judging by the orientation it had been fired by the advancing Allies. “Probably an American shell,” he told himself.

The building appeared to have three floors and was constructed in a light stone with bright green shutters. Wide stone steps led up to an imposing portal over which a number of brackets hinted that a board had once been fixed there. Clearly it had been well maintained during the occupation. Inside the furniture and fittings were commodious and tasteful but ghostly marks on the walls bore witness to the removal of paintings. Michael assumed that other portable items and ornaments would have been carried off as the Germans made their escape.

The entrance hall was a hive of activity. One of his platoon pushed past, muttering about a generator. Another was busy refitting a lock to the front door. McMahon appeared at the top of the sweeping staircase, triumphant. “There's enough beds for all of us here!” he announced.

Some bottles remained on the bar in a corner of what had been a large lounge although part of the ceiling had collapsed revealing the floor boards of the room that had been above. “I have found a well-stocked cellar,” reported Foster as he went past. “There's wine of every kind, if you like that sort of thing. Me, I prefer a good vintage port.” Michael stared after him. He had never considered Foster to be a port man. Beyond the lounge Michael found a smaller room in which was a large, inlaid, desk and several leather chairs.

“I'll make this my study,” he told Peterson when he arrived in search of him.

“Very good,” said Captain Peterson. “I'll get a label put on the door. I must say this place has got everything. There's food, water, drink, beds, a generator, fuel - what more could be want? We could bunk up here for several weeks, for just as long as we are allowed to. It is as well that the radio is out of commission.”

“The radio is not working? When did that happen?”

“When Branson dropped it coming in. We have found a German set but none of the parts appears to be compatible.”

Michael sighed. So far nothing had gone the way that he had anticipated it might. They had shadowed the advance of the front line, poised, ready to rush in at a moment's notice to prop up and save some prestigious and priceless work of great architectural merit. There were cathedrals in France and Belgium, were there not? Surely these could not have come through all the fighting unscathed? Yet no request for his team's services came. After a number of weeks of moving from place to place Michael had sought to see his Company Commander only to be told that the General had things on his mind other than saving buildings no matter how meritorious or important they might appear.

They did receive requests to blow up buildings. When Michael queried the vires of the first he was asked, rather forcibly, what the problem was. “We were sent out here to save buildings, not blow them up,” he said.

“The CO says he has no buildings he wants saved, but he does have one he wants blown up. Surely you are capable of blowing up buildings as well as saving them? The CO will think that you are going to be of pretty little use to him if you can't do something that simple.”

McMahon admitted he had worked once in a quarry, although on the first occasion he used a liberal amount of explosive and succeeded in removing more than had been intended and scattering the remains over a wider area than was thought possible. Thereafter his judgement was better and the incidence of demands for demolition increased. At least it kept them occupied when they were not driving, seemingly aimlessly, around the French countryside. If the radio was now out, there would be no fresh demands for the present.

Michael lowered himself into a chair in front of the desk. Outside, in the dark, it started to rain again. He could hear it, soft at first, then more insistent. Somewhere close a gutter was overflowing and the water was cascading to the ground. Further off he saw a flash which, he thought, could have been lightning. The next day, weather permitting, he would have to instruct the team to look at the roof.

He took out a notebook. There had been no question of him bringing any of his work over because of its size and the need to make reference to so many other books, and for the fear of losing it. There was some lesser risk in leaving it in London, he thought. Without the manuscript to hand he had started writing ideas in notebooks as they occurred to him and this had gradually grown into a kind of fragmented, irregular and unstructured, diary interspersed with notes and thoughts on his Opus Magnum. He had found little inspiration in France, not due to a lack of material, but because he did not appear to have the time to go and look at churches as they advanced behind the Front. He had hoped to get the chance to examine some of the Norman cathedrals, being particularly anxious to trace the origin of the pointed arch and interlocking vaulting. Had the Normans stumbled upon the possibility of a pointed arch, or had the inspiration come from early Moorish architecture? It seemed certain the pointed arch had developed before the first Crusade.

He accepted that his interest had drifted away from the original intention. He had meant to start with Wren and Gibbs because they had seemed to him to be the first English architects to dispense with the Norman tradition and adopt what was then a modernist style. Amongst their churches were examples devoid of pointed arches. He had intended to trace their influence forward yet when he came to Victorian architecture he was faced with a Gothic revival and the presence of the pointed arch everywhere. It was as if it was accepted that the pointed arch was symbolic of ecclesiastical building.

At this point he lost control of the direction of his project. What had set out as a fairly simple study had spread up and down the ages, revealing all manner of unexpected factors and new avenues to explore. He now considered that every influence needed to be identified, traced back to its origins and forward to its extinction. It would only now be a matter of time before he started to pronounce on the authenticity of these traits and whether they were of Christian origin, or Pagan.

The small battle he had begun in Norfolk had developed into a major war, spread widely across the architectural plains, with unresolved conflicts on many different fronts.

There were times when he thought he would never finish and that he would simply be overwhelmed. There were other times when he sat in the back of the jeep and enjoyed great, revealing, moments of lucidity and insight. Yet when he came to write it down in the notebook, the words, as now, eluded him. He could not simply give it all up. He had to finish it. He had to leave something behind him, something to show that he had existed, walked on the face of the Earth. Most of all, there was this compulsion to show that he had created something that was good and lasting, something other than a partly restored abbey in Norfolk, which was not of his creating, anyway.

He must have dozed off. Quite suddenly he was awoken by the sound of laughter and jeers. For a moment he forgot where he was and he was still dazed and confused when he made his way through the deserted lounge and out into the hall. It was empty and there was no sign of anyone on guard at the front door. "Who is on guard duty?" he demanded when he found Captain Peterson emerging from a doorway.

"Branson is, but I thought as we are well behind our lines - . "

"We are not well behind our lines! There could still be enemy personnel around here! Get him out there. And what the devil is going on? What is all the noise about?"

"Its Foster. He found a ciné projector and some rather dubious films. Branson fixed the projector and the lads are watching them. You really ought to come and see. They are hilarious, especially the subtitles."

Michael followed him down a flight of wooden stairs into the cellar. It was dark and cool with a sweet musty smell. "It must have been used by the Germans for their entertainment," said Peterson, opening a door to reveal a poorly lit, low, room at the rear of which Foster stood, illuminated by the stray light from the projector he guarded. At the other end, over the heads of the team, Michael could see some fuzzy black and white pictures, so overexposed he could not distinguish what was being portrayed. "There's a couple in colour," said Peterson, enthusiastically. "Oh good," he added as Foster started a new reel running. "This is one of the best; a girl and a whole rugby team. It is quite amusing."

Michael stood and stared in abject disbelief. He could watch the film for only a short while because there, on the wall at the other end of the room, was a body he might have possessed. There, mauled by fifteen pairs of hands, were the breasts on which he had been asked to give an opinion. And there, looking out at him, heavily made up, imploring, beseeching, yet reproachful, was the face of Jenny Forbres.

"Where are we now, Peterson?" said Michael, rousing himself. "And doesn't it ever stop raining in this place?"

"I reckon we are about thirty-five miles east of Cologne. We are not going to make it tonight, obviously, so we had better find somewhere to put up for the night. We can be there first thing tomorrow. Well, nearly first thing. I must say the men are excited at the thought of working on the Cathedral."

"That is if the Americans have not razed it to the ground. It is reported to be in a perilous state. So don't let them get their spirits up too much."

They stopped at a farm. The house was gutted and inhabitable. The whole place appeared deserted. They settled in a large barn. "There is absolutely no-one about," announced Captain Peterson. "It is as if the entire civilian population has fled. Where has everyone gone? To Cologne?"

"I would have thought that is the last place you would go. Anyway, post the usual guards. We are in enemy territory and we don't want to take any chances, not now we have come this far. So everyone is to stay on the alert."

Michael sat in a corner as the team swung into their bivouac routine. He had just enough light to look at his latest notebook, but he did not write anything. He felt nervous. The Cathedral rose up before him, tall, black, threatening, overwhelming. It was ready to fall, outwards, forwards, on them, two arms reaching out from the facade and raining stones down on their heads.

"Its going to be a bit rough and ready," said Peterson.

"Yeh," said Branson who was passing, "nothing like that place in Belgium. Shame

we ever had to leave the place. I should never have repaired the radio!"

Michael stretched out on a blanket spread across the surface of the straw. He tried to read from the notebook but his eyes were too tired. When he tried he could write, but he could not read what he had written. "It is at times like this," he wrote, "that one really appreciates the comfort of a real bed. And thinking of a real bed invariably makes one think of home and wonder. Soon the War will be over and all this wastage and destruction will come to an end. We will all go home - to what? And to whom? Even if our wives are still there, are they going to the same people we left five years ago? Can we just walk through the front door, presupposing there is a door to walk through and a house in which to have a front door, and say - Darling I am home - as if it was just the end of a work day? And, when it is all over, what will we all have achieved? The World will still be the same. Maybe not on the first day, or in the first week, or even the first year. But the issues and problems, the greed and national pride, run deep. They are like perennial weeds, continually re-sowing themselves. You can cut off a head and they sprout up again with every bit as much vigour as before. You think that you have uprooted them, but there will always be a tiny fragment of the root left, unnoticed, unsuspected, which will, in the fullness of time, produce a clone of the parent, and the whole wretched matter starts all over again. It is depressingly predictable and hopeless."

"When we go home we must also face the inevitable question of why we survived and others did not. It may be asked of ourselves by others, or it may be asked by ourselves. How will we answer? How will I justify that I did not lay down my life for my fellow man when others did? I may have to account for why I thought it more important, more justifiable, more comfortable, more secure, to see to the needs of buildings rather than those of my fellow human beings."

"Even as I lie here, Russian guns and planes are pounding Berlin into the final submission. My comrades are risking lives and taking lives, immersing their hands in the blood of others and damning their eternal souls. And I sit here, not prepared to make either sacrifice, not of my life, nor of my soul. That is what it comes down to on an individual basis in the final analysis. You give your life or you damn yourself to eternal torment. And I have avoided making that choice."

Michael stopped writing, overcome with a sudden melancholy. He thought of all the aspirations he had carried with him after he left University, of all his plans, of his self-esteem. Just what had he made of his life? He had wealth, position, and possessions. He had a successful and famous wife. Yet none of it was the direct result of his efforts or achievement. Everything he had he owed to someone else. He would not be lying there, relatively safe in the middle of the German countryside, had it not been for his wife. And there, it was Captain Peterson or Corporal McMahon who sorted things out and organised everything right down to the decisions he needed to take. How they must laugh at him behind his back!

It was wrong. It was all wrong. He was wrong, his life was wrong, the way in which he lived was wrong. What was wrong the most was that he knew he would change none of it. He stood and brushed the pieces of straw that clung to his uniform. "I am going for some air," he announced to Captain Peterson.

"Is that wise? You, yourself, said that we should all be on alert. Foster and Wilkins are on guard. In the dark they could easily mistake you for the enemy and shoot you in error."

"What? Shoot their officer?"

"I am sure it has happened."

"You had better tell me the password, then. Surely you've set a password and they will challenge me to say it before they shoot me?"

"I haven't set a password. I didn't think we would need one."

"Well, I will set one. It can be Rodenkirchen. That seems appropriate. Will you inform Foster and Wilkins, and that I am out there - no, don't bother. I will do it all myself!"

The night was like pitch under a moon and star-less sky, and the fine drizzle settled on Michael's face and hair. Gradually his eyes became accustomed to the darkness and he started to make out the imprecise, darker than dark, shapes of trees and the outbuildings.

"You really should not be out here doing this," hissed Peterson who had followed him

for a few paces. "Anyone could be out here, or there could be mines or booby traps or goodness knows what."

"If there are and I find them, you will be the second to know, and you will be in command. Go back in."

"What was the password?"

"Rodenkirchen," said Michael. Despite his show of bravura, he did, on reflection, think it would be stupid to step on a mine. He might have concluded that his life had been meaningless up until then, but if he did survive there was always time to attempt to make amends, to seek redemption. And there was the inescapable fact that whatever he went home to, his father would not be there. He would be alone, independent, able to make his own way, entirely. In many ways that was something he had always yearned for; something, now he thought about it, he should find uplifting and motivating. There was a tiny glow of enthusiasm. Perhaps Captain Peterson was right. This variant on Russian roulette was foolish.

He stopped before the wall of a low building. He guessed it might have been a stable or milking parlour although the animals that once occupied it appeared to have long departed. Sadness once again en-cloaked him as he imagined it before the War, bright and sunny, with pretty German milkmaids in their smocks and with their plaited blond hair. Where were they now? In the darkness Michael could just make out a large irregular hole in the end wall where a shell had entered. He was about to turn back when a rustling sound from beyond made him stop, listen intently, and stare into the black void. Although he subsequently often thought about it, Michael was never entirely certain what happened next. Events seemed to move so quickly, yet when he came to act, Time seemed to have been suspended.

The two men who had been on guard came running, oblivious of, or disregarding, the risk of mines or booby traps. Captain Peterson was not far behind. "What happened?" he yelled. "Major Bernstein - are you all right? Bring some lights, quickly!"

"Over here," said Michael, panting. "In there. I heard a noise and someone spoke in German. I did not understand what he said but I saw the faintest of glints in the darkness, so I fired and killed him."

"Killed him?" said Peterson, peering into the darkness. "Where are those lights?"

"Coming, Captain," called a distant voice from the direction of the barn.

"Killed him, eh? You challenged him, of course, with the password? Branson, Wilkins - you heard the Major challenge the German, didn't you?"

"Yes, Captain," they replied, almost in unison.

"There wasn't time," said Michael weakly and feeling faint. "I just saw something glint and thought it was a knife or gun. I think I then I simply took out my revolver and fired. I don't think I spoke. I might have fired twice. I can remember a groan and a thud as he fell to the floor. That is all."

"The Major is confused, Branson," said Peterson. "Come on with those lights!"

Michael turned and, still with the revolver grasped firmly, started unsteadily back towards what now seemed to be the relative comfort of the barn. He had done it. God had presented him with his test, his opportunity, just at the point when he thought there was, maybe, something to live for and some means by which he could earn Redemption. And he had reacted weakly, unprepared, unwilling to lay down his life for that of his enemy. He had joined the Damned.

"He is still alive," he heard someone call from behind him.

"Come on," said Peterson. "Let's get him out of here and into the barn. Where is he wounded?"

"I can fix that," said another. "Someone take his legs."

Michael went and sat on his blanket. He knew what Father Thomas would have said. Yes, he had been tested, as indeed, Father Thomas had been tested. And he had failed, as had Father Thomas. It was the thought that damned him, not the fact that the man, whoever he was, was still alive. But God clearly had work still for them both. He was being given a second chance and for that he was grateful. "How is the prisoner?" he asked a little later.

"One of your shots apparently missed. It cannot be easy to shoot someone in the dark. The second went through his left thigh. He'll recover and be back on his feet in a few weeks.

You were lucky.”

“Me, lucky?” Yes, he was, because God had intervened and deflected his aim, but Captain Peterson was not to know that. “Surely he is the lucky one in that my aim was so bad.”

“You were lucky that he was not armed and didn't shoot you first. You would have presented a clear target silhouetted against the night sky.”

“He wasn't armed? Not at all?”

“No.”

“What on earth did I see, then?”

“This,” said Captain Peterson holding it out. “Keep it as a memento. We found it on the ground in the shed. It could be gold. Oh, and he understands English.”

“Does he?” said Michael, taking the cigarette case. “Perhaps I should interrogate him, then? That is if our MO will permit it?”

There was a brief round of laughter then a great deal of talk. The men were excited, he could see that. They had captured their first German, probably their only German. As he crossed to the place where they had placed the prisoner he opened the case and tried to read the inscription. It needed better light and when he brought a torch close enough to read it, he had to read it over and over again before he could fully digest or believe what it said. “Can I talk to him?”, he asked anxiously.

“Of course, Major,” said Foster. “The bullet went in about here,” he said, indicating a spot on his own leg. “I guess it was deflected outwards by the pelvis. He is a very lucky Fritz. A couple of inches or so to the right and it might have ruined his matrimonial chances.”

“Where did you get this?” demanded Michael, kneeling beside the prisoner.

The German opened his eyes and stared fixedly into Michael's. “It is mine,” he said, slowly. “I would be pleased to have it back. It was a present from my mother and her sister.”

“I don't believe you,” said Michael forcibly. “Where did you get it?”

The German sighed. “Of course you do,” he said, clenching his teeth. “Do you not believe your own eyes?”

“You are - you are not - Kurt? Felicity's nephew?”

“Ja, ja. I am Kurt, the son also of Count Ludwig von Cerny. And see what it has done for me!”

Herr von Cerny, the architect, the man who married Angela, my wife's sister, was your father?”

“Ja, ja,” the prisoner said, wearily.

Michael stood. He did not know what to think or say as a tidal wave of memories overwhelmed his senses. It all fitted together now. Quite suddenly a missing piece of the jigsaw fell into place, rendering Michael speechless as he came to terms with the significance. He had never thought about it before. He had never made the connection. There was no reason why he should, none at all. He never dreamt that this was Angela's stepson.

“What happened to you father and stepmother?” he asked suddenly.

“My father, they executed. He was implicated in a failed plot to assassinate the Fuhrer. My stepmother was sent to a labour camp. I do not know what became of her. And I went into hiding. I have been waiting for the Allies to reach here to give myself up.”

Michael returned slowly to his blanket and left the routine interrogation to Captain Peterson. So, the circle was now complete. Of the two men he had encountered in his life who he had felt like killing, he had nearly killed one and the other was dead. He could summon up no animosity towards Kurt now. In a way their positions were remarkably similar. They had both lost their fathers and, as Michael had little doubt that Angela was dead, stepmothers. They were in similar positions, except Michael had something to go home to, whereas Kurt might not. That had something to do with being on the side that was victorious.

“He is hoping eventually to get back to Austria where his father had some property which he thinks was not confiscated.”

“Aren't the Russians in Austria?”

“Very likely.”

“He will need to be lucky, then.”

“Anyway, we've been on the radio. They are sending over a detachment for him tomorrow. We've patched him up in the meantime. You know him?”

“Yes. He is an Austrian, actually. We are connected by marriage. My wife's sister married his father. He says she went to a labour camp.” Michael did not say that he had once wanted to marry the prisoner's aunt. That would have made matters too complicated. They were complicated enough as it was. Captain Peterson did not comment, but shrugged his shoulders and walked away. Perhaps he felt shocked by the news that his Major had German connections? Perhaps he thought he was no longer a person to be trusted? Michael did not worry. Suddenly he felt as if he did not have a care in the world. Still holding the cigarette case, he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

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