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ABOUT THE BOOK

Like all children Stefan lives in a world of his own—a carefree world of his own fantasies. But Stefan is the son of a Jewish lawyer in pre-World War II Germany . .. Why were those men in brown uniforms chasing that lad? Why did he deny being a Jew when he was so ashamed of himself afterwards? When such questions intrude the quiet security of his world is shattered. Doubts, fear, the first stirring of young love-new emotions enter Stefan's world and take possession of him. He learns the meaning and the force of fear, what it means to be a Jew in Hitler's Germany ... to see his friends disappear, his father taken away; and finally he too takes leave of home and country. In this collection of reminiscences the author captures with delicate simplicity the mood of childhood and of growing up in a time of fear.

The Simple Things

Georg is still my friend. This may seem strange, for Georg is nowhere I can hold my hand out to him. He is half my lifetime away from me. He may be dead. He is still my friend—symbolically.

I remember when I was a boy, when I was eleven, Georg would wait for me on the corner of our street. He would not come to our home. Was it pride that prevented him, shyness or fear of trespassing into an alien world? I do not know that. I only know that I went out to Georg, leaving behind me this:

Our house with the winding stone stairs to the front door; by that door an electric bell ringing clearly through the hall, summoning Kate, the maid; Kate hurrying along passages, softly over carpets, swinging back glass doors that caused a noise like air sucked from a shaft, and then opening the front door, admitting callers into the restrained stillness of the house—into the study, or into father's spacious library that revealed his severe sense of order, or—if the guest be mother's—into the light and airy morning room upstairs, where water-colour landscapes in simple frames reflected the sunlight which fell through the french windows overlooking the garden; the china collection sparkled in the sunlight, the glass case sparkled, and the polished grand piano stood in black contrast to the slender yellow chairs around the slender yellow table.

I leapt down the stone stairs, flinging the front door shut behind me, and the sound echoed through the passage. Running along the street to the corner I sprang on Georg, breathless.

"Hallo," I said. "I knew you'd come."

"D'you like chestnuts?" Georg said.

He searched his pockets and produced large brown chestnuts, playing them from hand to hand.

"Fine," I said. "Let's go roast them."

"Sure."

Then we trotted off, Georg thrusting his hands in his pockets to keep the chestnuts from spilling, his dark hair unruly, his cotton shirt open across his chest despite the wind. Side by side we clattered along the pavements with

our socks falling around our ankles, and we headed toward the forest.

Remembering Georg now, recalling those distant days of my youth, I form a pattern from many memories that are like lantern slides in the repository of my mind. And from that pattern emerges our friendship, acquiring a new meaning.

Squatting by a small fire we had built in an open space in the forest, the two of us watched the chestnuts roasting and turning colour, the shells cracking in the heat. We did not speak. There were trees all about us, oaks and elms and birch trees with patches of clear sky between and sun- rays stabbing through the leaves. Georg fed the fire with dry twigs and I turned the chestnuts over and over in the heat.

At length, Georg broke the silence. "Listen," he said, "father won't let me join the Hitler Youth, no matter what happens."

"Does that bother you?" I asked. "You know that I can't."

"That's different. You're a few."

"Even if I wasn't, I wouldn't go."

"Why?"

"Uniforms, marching, drums and noise—and being ordered around." I shook my head. "I don't like that."

"Me neither."

"Why talk about it then?"

"You get picked on at school if you're not in it." "Can't you take it, Georg?" I demanded. "Damn you, Stefan, you are dense!"

He drew a chestnut from the fire with a twig; when it had cooled, he began peeling it sullenly, then broke off a piece and chewed it.

"Why do the Nazis hate the Jews?" he suddenly asked as though he had pondered the problem all the while.

The question shocked me, alerted me: I knew the Nazis hated us, but the reasons had never been explained to me and now, not knowing, I felt pilloried before Georg.

“I don’t know. I simply don’t know.”

For an instant Georg scrutinized me. Then, shoving a chestnut across to me, he said: “Forget it, just you forget it. If they hate you, I’ll have no part of them. We’re pals, aren’t we?” And then with more emphasis: “Aren’t we!”

Writing this now, a world and half my life stand between me and Georg, between me and the chaos of war-torn Germany. Am I too late writing this way? I do not know. Am I not just in time to say, truly as I feel it, Georg is still my friend and the people who raised Georg, working people, they too are my friends.

There are some things you learn when you are small and they stay inside of you and grow with the years. And always they are the simple things. Recurring, they link together and become meaningful—a sustaining chain from youth to maturity.

“Mother, this is Stefan.”

“Good day,” I said, standing before Georg’s mother with my arms stiffly by my side, bowing politely.

She ceased weeding and regarded me from where she was kneeling in the vegetable plot, searchingly for an instant, then kindly and invitingly. “So you are Georg’s pal,” she said and smiled. “That’s fine. He’s often talked about you.”

With the back of one toil-worn hand she brushed aside a strand of greying hair and straightened her shoulders wearily. “Take Stefan inside,” she said, pointing to the door of the Laube—a small cottage of timber amid berry bushes. “And put the kettle on. I’ll be with you presently.” With that, she resumed weeding the plot, moving forward slowly on her knees, a thin woman in a faded cotton dress. She looked younger now that I could not see her face which was partly hidden by a strand of hair.

And it is this which has stayed alive inside of me, unconsciously, until I began to capture that moment of encounter, concentrating as I tell of it—this:

The quiet assurance of Georg’s mother, her pride that was in Georg too, her scrutiny of me and then her unquestioning acceptance, her readiness to

include me and have 7ne share all they owned. Here then, my social status counted for nothing, nor my origin, nor my religion. From the first I knew that I would be tested as a friend, as Georg's pal. That was all. It made me feel good.

November, nineteen thirty-eight, the city of D. in the Rhineland:

Our house with the winding stone stairs to the front door—the lock busted, the door broken and swinging loosely on its hinges; by the door an electric bell torn from its socket, dangling on wires. Kate no longer with us—dismissed by law two years before. The swinging glass doors in the passage—smashed, the glass littering the carpets crunching underfoot. Father s study and library— a fierce tumble of mutilated furniture: the bookcase with the glass partitions upset, volumes on law and his collection of literature strewn about the floor: The Magic Mountain, War and Peace, German Justice cast in a corner with their covers torn. Mother's morning room—likewise mutilated, smashed, upset: the china collection strewn across the floor, the water-colour landscapes slashed with bayonets.

Below, in the garden, the grand piano was lying upside down like a huge and helpless tortoise. The french windows gaped like jagged holes in the wall.

I am writing this as if recalling a bad dream, without passion now, depicting the pogrom as it came over our home, suddenly, by order, unprovoked and with such ferocity that all the time it seemed unreal. And yet, despite those years of rising hatred, unleashed on that day, I have hope.

Storm Troopers bursting into a home, trampling underfoot, wrecking, arresting, smashing— that is an order we are destroying. Yes, we are destroying it, in our hearts, in our minds, each one of us individually, destroying it in the way we live, the way we act and think.

And my hope is destroying it too. You see, my hope was born on that very day, on that November day. I have nursed that hope and it has grown.

That was a long day. It was a fierce and a brutal day. Our people, the Jewish people, bled, were mutilated, beaten and dispersed in Germany.

The night was long in coming.

With us, at home, there were no tears. Perhaps we were too stunned for tears, perhaps too proud. Mainly our thoughts were with father, arrested in the morning, and for him we prayed.

In the night then, there came a man to our house. He walked through the devastated rooms, and he saw, and was silent for a long time.

He placed an arm about my shoulders and said: “Don’t be afraid. All this can be repaired. Piece by piece, will repair it all.”

He was a carpenter.

To mother he said: “I am deeply sorry. And I am ashamed.”

He carried a broken table from the house, and two broken chairs, and he placed them on a handcart which he pulled along the street, in the night.

The man was Georg’s father.

Curiosity

The pillar box by the tram stop beyond the square aroused Stefan's curiosity. "What's inside it?" he asked. His father, a lawyer with a predilection for meticulous detail, launched into a lengthy explanation. But before he could finish, Stefan's interest had shifted to the *Litfasssäule*. "Look father, a huge round box wrapped in coloured paper."

"That's no box," his father replied. "It's solid. It is made of a hard substance called concrete."

Stefan considered this information a while, then tossed it aside to make room for more. And so, by the time their short outing had come to an end, he had discovered that there was liquid in the red fire extinguishers on the bus, sand in the tram brake boxes and coins in the small, shiny machines the conductors carried.

At home too, there was always a great deal to investigate—what was inside those jars, what in those tins? On and on his questions flowed: he asked his mother, asked Kate, the maid, even the dustmen had to serve as informants, the laundry- man, the plumber, and the beggars who knocked on the door. His curiosity was boundless.

As he grew older, his curiosity changed: he developed a passionate interest in the source of sound. What caused the doorbell to ring, the radio to talk, the piano and the gramophone to emit music? His search to find the answers led him to take objects apart. Soon everything that rang, squeaked or whistled had fallen prey to his busy fingers. He broke the porcelain bell in his mother's collection of curios, ruined the coffee grinder, the whistle on the steam kettle, the cuckoo clock—and no punishment availed against his quest; someday he would find the tiny gnome that made all the noises!

His parents upbraided him, threatened him, pleaded with him. He promised to mend his ways—in vain; the trail of broken toys he left behind him included a small violin, a drum, a tiny accordion. And in consequence of that, he was given only fruit and clothes when his birthday came, things which to him were no presents at all.

Why would no one understand, no one believe that he had destroyed all those things only to find the tiny gnome? The gnome existed, had to exist! He had been punished unfairly! He had not meant to tear and bend and cut and smash —but what other ways were there to reveal the secret?