Voices in the storm

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Voices in the Storm

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For Barbara

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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

A sad and longing strain drifting through the trees arrested them.

They listened:

Am Brunnen vor dem Tore da steht ein Lindenbaum …

It seemed as though the melody had risen from the earth and was borne by the wind which swept the rainclouds across the sky and swayed the forest. Autumn leaves were falling, danced in the air and tumbled along the ground.

The girl began to sing quietly, gazing at the boy who was with her. She had long dark hair which swept cleanly from her forehead. Her body was slender, her movements had the unstudied grace of youth; but in her eyes was buried a strange maturity that went beyond her years.

The boy turned away toward the sound. He was small for his seven years. From the back he seemed frail, as though he had been ill; but his smooth olive skin, which appeared as though burnt by the sun, belied a long sickness which had kept him indoors. His hair was softer than hers and as dark as his eyes.

I dreamed in the shade of the linden tree

Many a sweet dream … the girl was singing to the chorus that was fading now as though the singers had moved away. But it was only the wind which had stilled as it does before the fall of rain. The forest whispered under a sombre sky, the sparse leaves began to tremble in the branches.

“Rain,” said the boy.

She glanced upward and when the first drops began to fall hesitantly she nodded to the boy and both began to hurry along the path toward the forest shelter.

Soon a torrent streamed in a glistening sheet down the sloping roof. The boy stood in the entrance and gazed into the fascinating rain. His hair clung to his face and he shivered. The girl put her arm about him. In the darkness behind them some men were sitting on the wooden seats. Suddenly a deep voice called from inside: “Hello, Hilde,” and a lean, fair man, whose bony face was covered with a blond stubble, strode toward her. The girl started. “Gerhart, what are you doing here?” she asked.

Left to himself, the boy began to study the stranger, who was poorly dressed in a coat much too small for him, so that his sleeves were inches above his wrists. Blond hair sprouted over his collarless shirt and, facing the girl, he slowly fastened the top button to hide it. His clothes were clean, but his trousers were frayed at the bottom from constant rubbing against rough leather boots. His hair, parted on the side, was long and straight.

The boy felt himself unobserved and continued watching the other with undisguised wonder. He noticed the man’s sunken cheeks and his hard protruding bones, his grey eyes which softened when he smiled and the burnt spot in the corner of his mouth where cigarette stubs had marked his lips. His fingers were so stained with nicotine that when he placed a hand on the girl’s shoulder they stood out against her cream jumper like brown sticks. He stood looking earnestly at her, keeping his head very still, not wasting his slow movements; watched her combing her hair, raising her thin white arms above her shoulders.

Still the rain was falling steadily and a fine spray of water drifted over her. He noticed this, and slowly and deliberately took off his coat, which he placed about her shoulders, saying in his deep voice: “Come on, sit here in the back with us till the rain stops. Take the boy. The lad’s cold.”

She gave him a grateful glance, then moved into the darkness with the boy and sat down among the men who had moved to make room for them both. A low murmur filled the shelter, and cigarettes glowed in the darkness.

"What time might it be?" someone asked.

"About four," answered another.

"Think that rain'll stop at all?"

"It's got to stop some time."

"We'll be here all afternoon, by the looks of it."

"What of it? You haven't got anywhere to go, have you?"

"No," came with a bitter laugh, "you're right there. I haven't got anywhere to go."

The boy moved closer to the girl and whispered: "Hilde, who are these men?"

"Just men."

"What men?"

"Men out of work, unemployed."

He nodded slowly. From past association this cast a shadow on them. He withdrew into himself.

Then, quietly, Gerhart's voice began to rise above the sound of the slowing rain. He had remained in the doorway and the song drifted through the mist into the forest. The girl motioned to the boy to listen.

Ich weiss nicht, was soli es bedeuten, dass ich so traurig bin …

It seemed as though the melody were sung for her alone. None of the others had joined in the words, but were humming the simple tune in bass or tenor voices,

Ein Maerchen aus alien Zeiten das kommt mir nicht aus dem Sinn.

Before the song was finished the rain had stopped. A patch of blue showed in the sky. The water dripped more slowly from the roof then ceased and only single pearls of drops fell to the earth.

The men, who had sat quietly, began to stir, one by one, as if waking from sleep. Looking about him, the boy saw their dim faces, their lips moving as they hummed the song, their stubbly chins, scarves hiding the absence of shirts, naked feet in shoes that needed mending, bulging coat pockets from which stuck newspapers, a mouthorgan or a sausage or a thermos flask; saw their caps and battered hats, pale bloodless skins over bony faces.

Their voices blended beautifully, and their glances stayed shy of the girl who was looking at Gerhart.

…und das hat mit ihrem Singen die Lorelei getan.

The song ended. The girl slipped the coat from her shoulders and, turning to the boy, said: ‘‘Come, David, we must get home.”

“I like it here,” the boy said quietly.

“Still we must get you home, or you’ll be ill again. Thanks for the coat,” she said to Gerhart. "Goodbye.”

“I’ll walk with you,” the man answered. Turning to the others, he called: “Till tomorrow, then,” and walked beside her with a long, swinging stride.

The sun had come out and its rays stabbed through the trees, the water glistened in the branches and a fine steam was rising from the undergrowth. For a time no word was spoken. A crow cawed, winging through the treetops.

Then Gerhart said: “You know I still love you, Hilde. Don’t you?” He did not seem to mind the boy; he had eyes only for her. She kept silent and walked without slackening her pace, though her cheeks colored. “I know,” he added after a pause, “that these are not the times to ask for anything. I

can’t remember them worse. Everyone I know is out of work, and I’m no exception. But I want you to marry me, Hilde, I’m not frightened that we can’t make a go of it together— that’s if you still love me. I have a trade and I’ll keep trying till I find a job. Two are better than one. We can clean up that dump of mine and live there till we find a better place. Why should we let the lack of money keep us apart? Things won’t get much better for a long time. What do you say? I’ve sold my bike and got forty marks for it; that’ll start us off. I’ve kept that money for us.”

He hesitated a moment and regarded her fixedly. “You still love me,” he asked at length, “don’t you? Or did you only love me when I won those cycle races a year ago, and was able to get a job anywhere in town on the strength of that?”

He hesitated and watched the girl closely. But she did not turn her head to him nor did she answer. Their footsteps were noiseless on the soft ground, and the air was rich with the clean, sharp scent of the forest. Then he spoke once more after a short silence, but now he sounded almost uninterested, as though aware that anything he said woulld be of little use.

"Hilde, it could be that they’ll accept my patent for the new bike frame. I’ve talked to someone and he thinks that they should. We’ll have money then; it’s worth a try.” His last words faded away and he was beginning to feel that if she accepted him he would no longer want her.

The girl thought of her brother Helmuth, who was also out of work. What sort of life had it been when he did work? He would come home from the plant half dead, too tired to move, while she and her mother peeled off his clothes, which were sticky with oil and great flakes of soot. He would sit on a stool in the kitchen, too exhausted to walk to the bath which she and mother kept filling with kettles of hot water. Five or ten times they had to call him before he'd

move, while he sat there smoking a cigarette, unconscious of his nakedness, face, neck, hands, ears grey from fragments of burning coke which had kept falling on him and clung to his face like a mask. The rest of his body had been white and thin from constant sweating. And his hearing had suffered because of the frightful noise the air made as it hissed through the generators …

And then she thought of her employer’s home, the large garden, and the bath where the water ran steaming hot, and her small attic room with its cream walls which the sun played on, the soft bed, the carpets and the central heating, the good food and money to buy necessities with. She liked the Ruben family and she was still young, only seventeen. Always her father was saying, “You’re well off where you are, Hilde, you stick there.” She couldn’t go against his word now, for father was out of work too, she had nearly forgotten. He needed the little money she could give him. “No,” she decided. “No, Gerhart.”

Without meaning to, she had spoken aloud; it startled her. Before she could say any more she heard his voice beside her: “That’s all right, Hilde. I don’t blame you.”

She turned and said gently: “Gerhart, I’m sorry. You know I like you very much, you do know that—but there are so many reasons why I can’t leave the Rubens now. Besides I’m too young to be married yet. Everything is so awfully uncertain … I just can’t, I don’t dare to leave.”

They came to a sloping road which led from the forest into the street, and there Gerhart left her. He raised his hand and actuallv smiled. “Good luck,” he said, and began to walk away. The shabby overcoat which hung about his shoulders did not even reach his knees.

In the streets the rain was drying, leaving uneven patches of black and grey on the asphalt. The sky was stormy and ragged clouds were driven across it by the October winds.

It was the year 1931, a year of depression in which this minor tragedy of life was a commonplace. Nearly five million men were seeking work in Germany that very day. And Gerhart Winkel’s home town, an industrial city on the Ruhr, had its share of those neither employed nor receiving relief of any kind.

He had been walking regardless of time. It was cool now and blustery. The sun was fading and slowly dusk enveloped the streets. A powerful limousine was rolling into the kerb along the avenue. He heard the car door open and shut, saw a man walk up the drive of his home with the careless pride of possession common to men of means. Everywhere expensive cars were parked in the drives and festive lights were gleaming behind the windows of large mansions. Under a lantern over the corner gate where he stood, a white enamel plate glared out: “No begging.” He read the lettering dispassionately and shrugged his shoulders.

He was beginning to feel the hollow emptiness of hunger. It was no good standing about here; he’d make for home and see what he could find to eat. He tried to roll a cigarette with some remnants of tobacco to still his craving for food, but managed to have only a few draw's before the paper began to burn his lips. He spat the stub into the gutter disgustedly and walked away.

In the last hour he had not thought very much about Hilde. He did not feel bitter about her. What else could she do? What did he have to offer her? He was almost glad that she had not accepted him, for he had convinced himself that his proposal was only an impulse. And it was true what she said: she was too young to marry anyone.

Walking through the shopping centre he stopped before a tobacco shop and looked at the display. He remained there for a long time, squeezing his eyelids together until the

printing on the tobacco packets became blurred and swam before his eyes, and finally he was not sure whether he was actually smelling the aroma of a cigarette or was only imagining the sensation.

"Have a smoke," a voice said beside him, and, turning, he saw' an outstretched hand holding a packet of cigarettes. He let his glance wander up the stranger's arm and into his face, which was lit from the light in the shop window. The man was grinning. He was dressed in the brown uniform of the Nazi S.A. (S.A. = Sturm Abteilung. Storm Detachment.)

"Go on, take one," he repeated.

"Thanks," said Gerhart complying slowly, though he did not see how he could avoid a conversation with the Nazi now. "What the hell," he thought, lighting his cigarette, "here goes. Anything you'll say won't change me. Your smoke's welcome, that's all—you never earned the money you bought them with, anyhow. Have your say and move on." He waited, watching the brownshirt.

"Out of work?" the Nazi was saying, more by way of a statement than of question. Gerhart nodded.

"Take my advice and wake up to yourself, brother; you won't get anywhere till you join up with us. The National-Socialist German Workers' Party will put you back on your feet and get you a job."

"You might be right," said Gerhart.

"I know I'm right," the Nazi persisted. "I was like yourself and look at me now. I've got clothes, food, money. I'm set."

Gerhart was beginning to feel uncomfortable. How much more? When was he going to dry up? He was paying a price for that lousy cigarette. One thing he had learned when he had a job: no matter what these fellows spouted, they always finished up on the boss's side. He began to walk away, but the S.A. man held him by the shoulder and said:

“If you know what’s good for you, you’ll take yourself down to Schlageterhalle at eight, say you know me, Willi Kuntz, and they’ll give you a job and a uniform, same as I got.”

“I’ll think about it,” said Gerhart, unwilling to become involved, and strolled on.

"You do that,” the S.A. man shouted, "and you won’t look back.”

Gerhart turned into Moltkestrasse, where he butted the halfsmoked cigarette and put it carefully into his match-box. He was not far from home now. Shadowy forms of workers walked on the footpaths. The lights of the few street lamps hardly pierced the smoky atmosphere. He breathed the pungent smell of the gas works, on the walls of which political slogans were crudely painted.

Entering the dingy hall of the boarding-house, he had to feel his way toward the stairs. A smell of food made him conscious of his own hunger. Wearily he climbed the creaking staircase.

On the first landing, where the gas-ring stood, he heard someone swear in the darkness. Recognising the voice, he tried to slip past to his room. But the man stopped him.

“Is that you, Gerhart?”

"Yes; what’s the trouble?”

“The gas has run out; you got a copper?”

He fished in his pockets for a coin and handed it to the outstretched hand in the darkness. "Thanks,” the voice said, then added, “It’s only right. I put in the last lot; it isn’t my turn.”

Gerhart’s room was narrow and very short. An iron double bed nearly filled it, leaving enough space for a rickety wardrobe, a chair and a fly-wire safe where his food was kept. The small window looked straight on to a brick wall. A

broken mirror leaned in its frame. He looked at his gaunt face and stubbly chin, and suddenly thought of Hilde again.

“A fine sight to propose to a girl,” he said softly. He hardly felt his ■hunger now, only a dull sickness pressing in his stomach. In the safe he found a bit of bread, a tin of syrup and some crumpled-up paper, which he fingered carefully. There was no sausage left. There were only a few grains of coffee in a pickle-jar, not enough to brew a cup.

He flung the metal door shut, and the noise shot through the room; then he sat down on the bed. The soft springs gave with his weight, he sank into the centre of it. He rested his head on his arms and closed his eyes. He was sure of one tiling, he wasn’t going to eat that bread and syrup. The thought of the treacly stuff on dry bread revolted him. He sat quite still. The yellowish lamplight shone on the back of his head and his shoulders.

He might walk over and see one or two of his mates. They’d help him out. Then he remembered them, how they had sat in the shelter this afternoon in the rain, looking haggard and wasted and more tattered than himself. They were probably a darned sight hungrier. Did they come running to him? Another plan struck his mind. He knew that lately quite a few of the unemployed men had tried it. He could walk out, pick up a brick, stand in front of Lerner’s tobacco shop in the light of the window, and swing it. There’d be that big shiny glass window and the loads of tobacco, all stacked neatly behind it, and he’d know just as soon as a policeman would stroll down his beat, that window would crash. Wonderful! He, Gerhart Winkel, would just stand there and wait. The policeman would blow his whistle and run over to him and put his hand on his shoulder and say: “Sie sind verhaftet.” Yes, just that! “You are under arrest.” He’d turn round and say: “Jawohl, certainly, officer,” and be taken away. A roof over his head and meals for the next seven days lor sure.

Some lousy turnip soup, no doubt, but at least it would be hot.

The plan was beginning to give him some amusement. But as he laughed, he knew that he wouldn’t do that either. He’d see the fellows in the forest to-morrow, as always, and he might be hungry, but at least he’d be free. He stopped laughing.

Wearily he opened the safe again, took out the bread, began to break it up into small pieces, and started to chew it. When he had finished he felt sick and dry in his throat. He got up, shut off the light, and lay back on the bed. In the darkness he thought about Hilde again, his own words slowly coming back to him: "We can clean up that dump of mine and live there till we find a better place …I’ve sold my bike and I got forty marks for it …That’ll start us off …”

He sat up and opened the wardrobe with a violent movement. His suit jacket, the only piece of clothing there, dangled on a hanger. He threw the coat on the bed, ripped up the bottom lining and fumbled for the notes till he felt the crisp paper against the soft material.

“No need to hoard this now,” he thought, and stuffed the notes in his pocket and left the room hurriedly. Downstairs, the red lamp in the hall swayed for a while, its light moving back and forth on the ceiling.

"I’ll have soup, roast pork, cauliflower and potatoes,” he said.

It was past the regular time of eating, and the cafe was about to close. The waitress wiped down the table and eyed him suspiciously. She was used to derelicts coming in for a bowl of pea soup and putting the coins on the table to show they had the price. But this one was different; he picked the

most expensive course and sat there as though he were used to it.

“Fraeulein, I have the money,” he said. “You needn’t worry.”

"Oh, I wasn’t worrying,” she said, flustered, “only it’s late for dinner, but I’ll see what can be done.”

“Thank you,” he said quietly. “Before you go, would you see whether you can find me a packet of cigarettes?”

His desire for a big meal had almost gone. Now that the food was within his grasp, the prospect was not so attractive. For all his hunger, the knowledge that he was eating up the money he had kept for Hilde and himself persisted. If only he had got someone to come with him, anyone, any broken-down mate of his, to share his meal, he’d feel better about it.

The girl came back from the counter and put a packet of cigarettes on the table. “Here you are,” she said.

He looked at her as if he had not heard her. Then he groped for the packet without a word.

“Will you pay for these now or after?”

“Huh?”

“Now or after?”

“I’ll pay for them,” he said, “don’t worry.”

She shrugged her shoulders and walked away through the empty cafe to the kitchen.

Outside it was dark; a wind whistled along the street past the open door, and occasionally dry autumn leaves tumbled over the threshold. Now and then the swing-doors of the pub opposite, the Blind Cow, opened and someone walked unsteadily into the beam of light that fell from the doorway on to the road. Faint scraps of a tune played on **a** harmonica beat into the darkness and, as the door closed, died again.

He lit a cigarette and inhaled the smoke greedily. The strong tobacco upon his empty stomach made his head spin. The waitress placed a bowl of soup before him, and clacked the spoon down hard on the table. The steam rose with a pleasant smell and awakened his need for food. He butted his half-smoked cigarette and left it in the ash-tray, then spooned down his soup hastily, feeling the hot liquid sink to his rumbling stomach. When he had done, he sat up and watched the traffic in the dark street. Again the swing-doors of the pub opened and a familiar figure emerged. It was Otto, the fellow from the boarding-house who had asked him for a copper for the gas. Gerhart rose, ran from the cafe across the street and grabbed the man by the arm.

"Otto," he said.

"All right, here's your copper back," the man said impatiently, "leave go of my arm."

"Copper ... to hell with it, keep your copper."

"All right," Otto freed himself and walked on.

"Otto," Gerhart said, "have you eaten?"

"Sure, you saw me."

"Can you eat some more?"

"No, what for?"

"I'll pay, come over and have a real feed."

"You won the lottery or something?"

"No, nothing like that."

"Well, keep your money; you may need it."

"Otto," Gerhart said, "don't knock back a decent meal. "Come over."

The other man weakened. The beer inside him had aroused his appetite and he was quite ready to have another meal, even though he thought the whole thing queer.

“All right,” he said, and allowed himself to be dragged across the street into the café.

Although Gerhart was quite sober, his behaviour was like that of a drunken man.

“Sit down,” he said, “good old Otto.”

But Otto had never been a friend of his. For one thing, he was much older; for another, he was a shifty, selfish man, a worker now on the dole who nevertheless managed to earn a few extra marks by an unspecified way of “using his head”. But to Gerhart, in his present mood, it did not matter who shared his meal so long as it was someone he knew.

The waitress was waiting anxiously, the plate of pork in her hand. She feared that Gerhart had left without paying and was relieved that he was back again. She put the food before him.

"My friend will have the same,” said Gerhart.

“It’s too late; we’re closing up.”

"No matter,” Otto said, “I’ll have a cup of coffee.”

“No, you won’t.” Gerhart turned back to the waitress: “Fraeulein, I’ll make it worth your while.”

The waitress was now convinced that Gerhart was drunk. “I’ll ask,” she said.

"I’ll make it worth your while,” Gerhart repeated.

She came back. “It’s all right,” she said.

Gerhart did not touch the food that was slowly getting cold before him. “Eat up,” said Otto, "don’t wait for me.”

Gerhart took no notice. “We’ll have a smoke,” he said, opening his full packet of cigarettes. Otto took one, his eyes wide with surprise.

“What’s this? A celebration?”

"Yes,” said Gerhart.

"In aid of what?”

“Aid of me.”

They smoked together.

“It’s a shame to let your food go cold,” said Otto.

“Huh?”

"Your food.”

"Oh, yes.”

Again Gerhart butted his cigarette next to the other in the ashtray. Suddenly he started to laugh.

"What’s up?” the other asked.

"To think I nearly bashed in a window to have myself put in stir for a string of meals! Too damn silly.”

"There are better ways,” said Otto craftily.

"Yes, this is one.”

“You asked me in here.”

“Sure, no offence.”

When the waitress served Otto, he began to eat with relish, saying nothing until the plate was wiped clean. “That was good," he said when he had finished. He looked up, and saw that Gerhart was not eating, though half his food was still on the plate.

“What’s up? You finished?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“You’re a queer one.”

They rose together. Gerhart, paid the waitress at the counter.

With the cigarettes it came to eight marks. He handed the girl a ten-mark note.

“That’s right,” he said.

“Oh thanks, thanks very much.”

After that the two men stood in the street uncertainly. The wind blew in Gerhart’s blond hair. Otto pulled the collar of his coat up to his neck. The girl let the iron grating of the cafe door gently down behind them and switched off the lights.

“Let me buy you a drink,” Otto said.

“Not in the Blind Cow!”

“Why not?”

“Not as long as that rat Peltz, that pimp, is barman there.”

“Didn’t you hear about Peltz?”

"No. What about him?”

"He's dead.”

“Go on! Good riddance.”

“He was shot.”

“No!”

“Yes, they say the Communists shot him.”

“Whoever shot him, good riddance.”

“What sort of talk is that?”

“You know yourself how many fellows he got sacked from the Schlinke works by reporting what they said in the pub.”

“Well, that’s one thing you can’t be sure of.” Otto said carefully.

“I never put it past him.”

"The Nazis have laid him out in the Schlageterhalle; to them he’s a hero.”

“Is he? A fine hero.”

“Well, do you still want a drink?”

“No, I think I’ll take a look.”

“All right, please yourself.”

“So long, Otto.”

"So long. Thanks for the meal.”

"Forget it.”

Gerhart walked away with long strides and was soon lost in the crowd.

A short while later he found himself close to Schlageterhalle, where he stopped by a tree-trunk, watching the entrance of the hall across the street. In the darkness he could be seen only when he drew on his cigarette and the glow lit the contours of his face. Presently he shrugged his shoulders, thinking: "What a circus, what a damned circus.”

The staircase was lit by floodlights and over the top of the marble stairs gleamed a large golden swastika in a wreath of gilded oak leaves. On the top step, on either side of open glass doors stood two uniformed men, rigid, carbines at their sides.

A continuous stream of people passed in and out of the building while the S.A. guards looked stolidly on. Those leaving seemed in a hurry to be gone and looked furtively about them as though in fear of recognition. There were many women who tip-toed down the stairs, looking overwhelmed. But as soon as darkness covered them they walked away briskly as if in flight.

To the left on the pavement a queue of nervously chatting people stretched away up the street. Among them were more women, but also many young men, some in the brown uniform of the S.A., others in civilian clothes.

On Gerhart’s side, somewhat further down under a street lamp, stood a group of workers, their backs turned on the

hall. Occasionally, one would look round and watch the queue, then turn back to his fellows.

“They certainly make a lot of propaganda out of Peltz,” Gerhart heard one of them say. “It’s a regular recruiting drive.”

“They do that, and no mistake.”

“Yes, and the point is that we can’t even take the credit for bumping off the pimp, though of course they blame us for it.”

“That's a fact. I hear one of his own pals put a bullet in him over a girl and then blamed us.”

“Well, what d’you expect? Peltz did enough raving against the Communists to please Krupp, Hindenburg and Hitler put together.”

"To hide his ratting and labor spying.”

"Well, now he’s a hero.”

"Yes, a dead hero and no loss to the world.”

"By rights we should have put him out.”

“Go easy, just go easy.” This last in a deep voice from the oldest worker there.

“Hah, he made me sick. I loathed his guts, the swine. He wasn’t even an honest Nazi, just noisy and fidl of rackets.”

"Don’t worry, the fight’s not over.”

Quietly Gerhart walked away and crossed the street. For an instant he felt one of the workers swing round to him. But nothing was said. He had heard enough. He was satisfied about his own reactions to Peltz’s death. He too felt it was a pity that the Communists had not killed him, for no one in the district had raved more violently against them than Peltz. He well remembered him shrieking that they ought to hang a Communist on every lamp-post, just because some

fellow had said something about there being no unemployment in the Soviet Union.

He decided to join the queue merely to satisfy his curiosity. He was more shabbily dressed than anyone, and drew suspicious glances everywhere, but he disregarded them and stood defiantly in the queue, smoking in silence. He heard a young lad ahead of him ask a storm trooper: “Who’s in that hall?” The Nazi answered: “One of Adolf Hitler’s fighters, lad. A real man.”

Gerhart grinned. This stuff was all right for those who clidn t know any better.

Further ahead some housewives were chatting in a gossipy yet subdued way.

“Hermann Peltz was his name. D’you know him?”

“No, did you?”

"I only know about him. My Herb says he was barman at the Blind Cow.”

‘‘He was a barman, that’s right,” another joined in. "My Ernst says he used to listen to what the Schlinke workers talked about and then run and pimp on them.”

Gerhart could see the first two women turn abruptly and leave the intruder before a hostile audience. An old woman with a shawl over her head quietly walked up and said: "Sh …sh, are you quite mad? Don’t say such things.” She put a hand on the shoulder of the talkative one and earnestly whispered into her ear. But the other shook her head and shouted through the darkness: “I don’t care. This is a free country. I think he was a pimp.”

Gerhart studied her with interest. "You plucky girl,” he said to himself. At that moment, a man in a blue suit with a swastika button pointed threateningly and said: “There are Communists here.”

A commotion followed. Some uniformed men broke from the queue and strutted about. “Communists? Where?” they shouted.

Gerhart looked over the heads of the others, but it seemed that the young woman had vanished up the street and out of danger. Everyone calmed and the blue-suited man stepped back into the queue importantly. A youth shouted: “The Communists are murderers,” but no one took much notice of him, only Gerhart bent over him and said quietly: "Wipe your nose, lad.”

He felt isolated, walking in the floodlight up the marble steps and past the S.A. guards — even disgusted with himself — for there were none of his own kind here, not one of the men with whom he had sung in the forest in the afternoon, but in a way he was glad of that for he did not want to be recognised. He kept looking straight ahead with a blank expression.

At the hall door he hesitated. The large room lay in semi-darkness, bare of all trimming or furniture; only three shafts of light from spotlights over the door pierced the gloom, illuminating swastika flags which were stretched against the far wall. The crooked crosses stood out starkly against the white circles. Gerhart followed the file of people before him. Soon he saw the object of their pilgrimage: a coffin raised shoulder-high in the centre of the room, amid clusters of flowers, wreaths and swastika pennants, lit by a spotlight from the ceiling.

As the people moved forward he caught a glimpse of a brown- shirted figure stretched in a bed of flowers. A peaked cap sat squarely on his skull, and his coarse, heavy face shone waxen in the spotlight. Immobile, almost hidden in the darkness on either side of the coffin, stood two black-uniformed men of the S.S., skull and crossbones emblems on their collars and caps. Light gleamed faintly from their

carbines and buckles, and their presence gave the scene a force and power which awed the crowd, as it filed by slowly, staring at the coffin, and walked on. There were neither tears nor grief.

Looking at the corpse, Gerhart found it hard to link it with the Peltz he had known. Death and this strange setting had distorted Peltz's physical aspect so that Gerhart could not even feel a vague pity. It seemed as though a wax figure had been shamelessly decked out to resemble death. Had this man died a martyr, the people's grief would have elevated him, he would have come to life in their hearts. But here there was none of that. For all its sombre aspect the scene remained a frightening but unmoving spectacle.

Gerhart sensed this better than most. To him Peltz had never been a man and therefore his death meant nothing. This was a fantastic exhibition of a dead pimp. He walked slowly out of the room, reflecting on the way the Nazis were drumming up a show. "How does it get people in?" he asked himself, shaking his head.

In the passage there was a table draped with a swastika flag. An S.A. man stood beside it, challenging young men who passed him: "Join the ranks of the avengers. Become a National Socialist, for the good of Germany. Join the ranks of the avengers!"

Gerhart faced him silently, running a finger over the hollows in his cheeks as though he were considering something. The S.A. man paused and asked: "Will you join up?"

"No," Gerhart said slowly, "I was wondering what made you tick." He walked away. The Nazi was too disciplined to leave his place. "Scum," he shouted, but soon began calling his slogan. "Join the ranks of the avengers, become a National Socialist for Hitler and Germany."

Gerhart walked down the marble stairs, a cigarette in the corner of his mouth. As he left the building, another Nazi

stopped him: “Well,” he said, “you came all right.” Gerhart looked up quizzically.

“Ah, the fellow with the cigarettes.”

“Yes, that’s right. So you’ve taken my advice?”

“Yes.” Gerhart nodded.

“Did you tell them you know me, Willi Kuntz?”

"No, they didn’t ask me.”

“Ah, it doesn’t matter. I’m only glad you’ve seen the light. Now you know the way the wind blows.”

“I knew before this,” Gerhart answered, and walked slowly into the street.

CHAPTER TWO

The leaves of autumn had fallen and become one with the earth.

The trees were bare and bleak, and the flower beds lay like graves under covers of straw. It was early in the afternoon. The first cold of November sharpened the air. David Ruben gazed over the vacant allotment and saw smoke rising from a cave. The smoke fanned in the air and was carried away by the wind. He could hear a murmur of voices and wandered across the allotment between heaps of broken bricks, tins, bottles and jars, and peered into the cave.

Six boys were roasting potatoes around a wood fire. When one of them noticed David and shouted: “Hey, what are you doing there?” they all looked up, and soon a lad some two years older than David came out, inspected him and said: “What’s the matter, you frightened?”

“No,” said David.

“Where d’you come from?”

"Over there.” David pointed in the direction of his home, a stately villa in a garden beside the allotment.

"How long have you been living there?”

“Four months.”

“Haven’t seen you before.”

“I’ve been sick.”

A voice came from the cave: “Bring him in, Werner, I ask all the questions.”

"All right, come on,” the boy said to David, and a moment later, after crawling through a tunnel, he faced a boy of about fourteen who wore a blue shirt, with a woollen scarf about his neck. He was sitting on a packing case, carefully

peeling a potato with a pocketknife. “What’s your name?” he asked without looking up.

"David Ruben.”

“How old?”

"Seven.”

The boy peeled the potato to his satisfaction, put the knife away and looked up for the first time. “You’re not very big,” he said, “what can you do?”

The five others, who were of varying ages between nine and fourteen, inspected David with interest. One of them butted in: "Ask him what his father does.”

“That doesn’t interest me. What can you do? Can you run?” the lad on the packing case repeated.

"Yes.”

"How fast?”

“I don’t know how fast — fast enough.”

“We’ll find out. Climb out of here and wait on top.”

David obeyed. He heard only one question: “What’ll we do with the new one?” After that he was back in the allotment and their discussion was nothing more than a murmur. He gazed across to his home, which seemed a lonely place now, despite his budgerigars, goldfish, turtle and salamander. After a while the six boys emerged from the cave and split up in two groups.

“Cops and robbers,” said the blue-shirted leader. “All right, David, you are with the robbers. Show what you can do. You’ve got two minutes’ start. Hide anywhere between here and Moltkestrasse. Off you go. If you’re not caught within an hour, come back here.”

David ran across the allotment, feeling how the others were watching him. He climbed the timber fence, pulling himself

up by a post. His arms strained, the hard wood cut his hands. Fleetingly he saw six boys still standing in the field, then he let himself fall into Prinzenstrasse. He grazed his knee, blood began to come. He took no notice, but started to run faster than ever before in his life.

Soon he was dodging people blindly. He was near the end of his strength. Once or twice, glancing back, he thought he could see a boy pursuing him. He kept going until he reached a wooden fence which enclosed a factory in Moltkestrasse. Oversized faces on film posters seemed to mock him. He followed the fence to a gate which was fastened with a rusty chain and padlock and looked as though it had not been opened for a long time. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and eyes and looked about him desperately, ft was impossible to climb that barbed wire. Then he saw the drainpipe under the gate. Instantly he lay down and wound himself forward like a snake, emerging in the factory yard just as the stamp of running feet went by on the pavement outside.

The grey sky stretched like a sheet above the factory. A sooty chimney, on which “Bauer's Fruit Juice” was written in yellow letters, towered at the end of the narrow yard. Shadows flitted across from beneath the gate, the infrequent images ol passing feet. All was still. When David rose frightened sparrows flew up from a cart and from packing-cases stacked beside the factory walls where broken windows showed like jagged holes.

The boy forced back a sliding door and opened a space large enough to let him through. It was dark inside and a sickening smell rose from the dirt on the floor. He waited till his eyes got used to the darkness, and then slowly the room took depth and grew larger.

The wooden ceiling was supported by cross-beams and timber posts. A pulley dangled from a chain through a square opening which admitted a dull beam of light from the floor above. Cobwebs crisscrossed the hole, and spiders hung on silken threads. One sat like an outspread motionless hand in the centre of its web, which was full of insects. Underneath stood a narrow table that resembled a servery. The filthy wood crawled with galley worms and bluebacked beetles; the bellies of large wooden barrels half-filled with the shrivelled remains of orange and lemon peelings bulged into the darkness nearby. There was a rustle and a scratch and David leant forward, then screamed at the sight of a fat-bellied rat clawing its way to the rim of a barrel where it sat for an instant, its plump hindparts hanging downward, its front claws gripping the barrel; then it pulled itself up with sharp teeth and scurried into the darkness.

David fled from the building into the yard and stood trembling on the cobbles. He pushed the sliding door shut and felt his courage mounting. The town hall clock struck the half-hour. The sight of the rat began to evaporate like the vision of a nightmare.

He searched for a better hiding-place, peered through a broken window into an empty office of the building opposite, then climbed a wooden staircase which zig-zagged up the wall. On the second floor he reached a half-open door which led to a large and lofty storeroom. The daylight shone in shafts through small, broken windows, and dust began to dance and tremble as he walked inside.

Rows of soft-drink bottles glittered in racks; there were packing cases and piles of rubbish, and a trap-door in the floor which he lifted with difficulty, raising much dust. Now he could see into a workshop below, from which the smell of sawdust and shavings was rising. There were stacks of cut timber and a large saw-bench. He fished a marble from his

pocket, dropped it, heard it roll away followed by a scurry of mice. Then he walked to a window and looked out over the roof-tops, past church spires and chimneys, and the nearby town hall tower, and waited for the clock to strike the hour.

Suddenly he saw a shock of black hair push through the drainpipe under the gate. The head was followed by a pair of skinny shoulders clad in a flannel shirt. Then the rest of the body slid through, and a bare-footed boy stood in the yard glancing about him, as alert as a wildcat.

The stranger was of David's own age and size. His black trousers were turned up at the bottom and fastened about his waist by a rope; his arms were thin and his face small, bony and pale; his unkempt hair curled over his collar. He crossed the yard swiftly and skirted along the wall, his shoulderblades playing beneath his shirt as he bounded out of sight. Soon a board creaked on the landing below, a door scraped, quick bare feet padded the wooden floor, then for a moment there was silence.

David shifted noiselessly from the window and crept to the trapdoor. Below the boy was tiptoeing to a stack of timber, measuring its height, then pulling himself up in an agile, feline way. Presently he began to slide the planks almost noiselessly off the stack, then leapt to the floor, cushioning the impact cleverly. A small cry escaped him, he raised a foot and nursed it. Then he picked up the marble on to which he had jumped, examined it and put it in his pocket.

“That's mine,” David called. The sound of his voice echoed through the factory. Instantly the boy below jumped behind the stack like a frightened deer. “But you can keep it,” David added, "you needn't be frightened. You can come from behind that stack. I know you're there.”

Slowly the boy's face appeared, his dark eyes glanced all around the room, then found the trapdoor. Finally he emerged and studied David, who was looking down on him.